

GSD Alumni Spotlight

In this edition of *The Communicator* we're excited to debut the first installment of a regular feature. Each month we'll profile a GSD alum who has exemplified the District's commitment to excellence. Grenada educators equip men and women to be bellwethers in life, architects in building a more just, thoughtful and humane world. We could easily fill each edition with examples of Charger graduates who have achieved extraordinary success. Students have carried the red and blue values into the boardroom, the marketplace, and into virtually every corner of public life, the defining moments in which men and women prove themselves worthy of the investment made in them by exceptionally qualified, personally committed educators and by the community that supports them. We trust you'll find the success journey of our first alum, Keith Mitchell, as inspiring as we have.

Grenada native Keith Mitchell has used sportsmanship as a template for business success

Grenada Financial Professional Keith Mitchell wears it well. After serving 33 years in the financial business, the Grenada High School graduate has moved into the chair of North Mississippi Area President at Regions Bank. Any whisper of pride Mitchell allows to creep into his voice when speaking of his success he directs solely at his colleagues and the company as a whole, but the 54-year-old is one of the key executives overseeing some \$3 billion in total assets, the largest market share in North Mississippi, along with 360 associates, working in 50 branch locations.

Despite the immensity of his responsibilities, Mitchell carries himself with sincere humility. His executive demeanor is confident, yet not arrogant, gracious, yet not chummy, poised and engaging. Upon meeting him, you instantly realize that there's something else. He has just the right amount of masculine confidence that certain other men recognize. Its subtle, but it seems to say, in man-speak, "This guy has felt the ear-ringing, almost humiliating ferocity of a well-executed crack-back block," or, "He knows that tuning fork in the soul feeling of catching a waist-high, inner-third-of-the-plate fastball right on the sweet spot of the bat, and the pitch-perfect, impossible to reproduce sound of aluminum - or, whatever moon rock bats are made of these days - when the ball leaps off the barrel and you can tell its headed for the left-center gap and won't stop until it thumps up against that sign for the local insurance guy you're always aiming for."

All that makes perfect sense because, as Mitchell will tell you, many of the character traits that have served him well in the financial industry he learned under the Friday night lights of Charger football games and by catching fly balls off a fungo bat until he knew how to account for every whisper of wind, angle of the sun, and air density that might help him turn a game-winning, deep fly to center into just another long, breath-holding out.

"Welcome man! Good to see you," Mitchell said, immediately walking around from behind the desk in his spacious, reservedly appointed office. He took a

seat at a round table, a piece of furniture that removed any position of authority. Mitchell's administrative assistant materialized with cold bottles of water, ice and cups, and, as she quietly withdrew, Mitchell whispered, "Thank you," a small courtesy one guesses he never fails to extend to employees.

To use a horse racing metaphor, Mitchell never really pulled away from the field in high school academics, he said. He wasn't a poor student, exactly, but there was no reason to pick him out the chorus and say, "That's our star." "I had fine, dedicated teachers and for that I'll always be grateful," Mitchell said. If he had to point to one moment when he first realized that he wanted to work in finance, Mitchell said, it was penning an essay in Helen Lamar's ninth-grade English class about career aspirations. Mitchell admits that, for him, the allure of banking wasn't based solely on the prospect of handling money. One clue is in Mitchell's comportment and sense of style. He favors crisp, neatly appointed, tastefully reserved business attire, modeled after watching his uncle, a revered financial man, move through life with a masculine grace as rare and charming today as a gentleman's handkerchief.

Mitchell earned a scholarship to play football and baseball at Delta State University after graduating from Grenada High School in 1979. Life lessons and the ability to throw a good two-seam fastball weren't the only things he took away from GSD. It was there Mitchell met the love of his life and soul mate, Beth Pinnix. They have been married for 33 years. They have a son, Matt, who is studying physical therapy at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. Mitchell started playing both baseball and football for the Fighting Okra, but as even the parents of Pee-Wee football players today know, there really is no off-season. As coaches have done since the dawn of organized competition, jealous for every second they can squeeze out of life to prepare and condition their athletes, Mitchell's football coach soon persuaded the two-sport athlete to hang up his glove and spikes and devote himself completely to the gridiron. It paid off, though, because Mitchell was an important part of the Delta State team that won the 1983 Conference Championship. Mitchell left DSU clutching his bachelor's diploma in finance and, with the confidence of a defensive back who's studied game film, set out to make a career in the banking world.

Mitchell began his career on the production side, filling various and sundry roles in places like Water Valley and Calhoun City, before returning to Grenada in 1988. Three months ago, after having done boots-on-the-ground work in most every aspect of the business, he was chosen to follow Jimmy Brown as North Mississippi Area President. "This is a relationship-based business," said Mitchell. "The most gratifying part of my work is being in a position to help people achieve their financial goals and to have some part in improving quality of life in this community that has given me so much," said Mitchell.

Banking is certainly changing, like most every aspect of life, Mitchell said, speaking with the credibility that only a man whose first jobs in banking required him to have Stone Age implements like a good ink pen and plenty of paper forms. Part of the challenge he and those like him, who have lived long enough and worked hard enough to reach leadership positions, he said, is



to understand and adapt to a banking world in which foot traffic in the building is dwindling to a trickle and online finance is the norm. He takes comfort in his belief that personal service, and fundamental virtues like honesty, integrity and fairness, that were drilled into him while he sweated and bled alongside his teammates, will never become irrelevant and always, no matter how fancy the gadgetry, form the basis of good business.

The lessons that teammates learn together, Mitchell said, like humility in victory and graciousness in defeat, and the wisdom to use sport as a unique opportunity to honor the community in which one was raised, along with the virtues by which its people live, define not only sportsmanship, but are the cornerstones of building a reputation as hardworking, fair and good man in business as well. "I learned to be a good teammate," Mitchell said. "I've been blessed in so many ways, with a fine upbringing and education, a wonderful wife and son, and opportunities to express my gratitude through using my gifts in service of the community, including the school district, that has been so good to me." Mitchell let his eyes wander for a moment, breaking his usual intent but not intensive gaze. Then, he smiled. "Being in a position to help this community grow, to help good people realize their dreams, is a tremendous responsibility," Mitchell said. "I take that very seriously."

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www.grenadak12.com

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