

A Tribute to Mr. William R. Ireland, Sr.

On March 5, 2009, Alabama and our country lost one of our greatest citizens, Mr. William R. Ireland. Or, as I affectionately referred to him, "Mr. Bill." As I attempt with a heavy heart to pay tribute to him, I find no words eloquent enough to describe this remarkable gentleman. Tributes across the state will certainly portray him as a brilliant businessman, a generous philanthropist, a man who served his family, his country, and his community. And they will all be correct.

In the beginning days of the Freshwater Land Trust, I met with Mr. Bill and requested his help in creating a President's Advisory Council for our organization. Our goal was to organize a group of remarkable community leaders who could provide wise counsel to our Board of Directors and help advance our mission of preserving lands in our community. Mr. Bill agreed to serve as Chair of our Advisory Council and organized a group of stellar community leaders who worked to transform our organization from a small non-profit to one of the most respected land trusts in the country.

Mr. Bill's name on our stationary gave instant credibility to what at that time was a little known organization. Over the years, I would often meet with Mr. Bill to seek his sage and wise advice in regard to our latest endeavor. A few of the projects Mr. Bill quietly worked with me to achieve include Red Mountain Park, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve and the Five Mile Creek Greenway. When I first met with Mr. Bill about the Freshwater Land Trust, we had only preserved under 200 acres of land. Today, that numbers stands at over 8,000 acres, and just last week, the Freshwater Land Trust became the first accredited land trust in Alabama and one of only 53 in the entire country.

Mr. Bill taught me many things, but perhaps the most important was how to live. Mr. Bill could brighten up a room just with his



Charles McCrary, Bill Ireland, and Steve Jones at the Freshwater Land Trust's Rendezvous on the River event in 2004.

presence. He always made you feel special and loved to tease and joke. My favorite Mr. Bill story happened several years ago. We were at a reception together and Mr. Bill knew about my love of fishing. He proceeded to tell me how he went fishing in his farm pond and how in thirty minutes he had caught three largemouth bass. One was seven pounds, the other was eight pounds and the third weighed in at close to ten pounds. My mouth fell open and I said, "Mr. Bill! What in the world were you using for bait?" He began to chuckle, leaned over to nudge me with his elbow and told me how he stocked that pond about a year ago with nothing but really big fish. While I laughed, he joked that when you get to his age, you just don't have time to wait for them to grow up.

Today, I realize the laughter and smiles that followed Mr. Bill wherever he went were our greatest gift. And in my mind I see him in heaven fishing in a crystal clear stream, landing a big fish with every cast while his warm chuckles echo softly through the mist. And I realize just how much all of us will miss the sound of his laughter. **Godspeed, Mr. Bill!**

Wendy Jackson
March 5, 2009