

Who Was Donald E. Hunter?

A Salute by Ernest E. Bleinberger

Don Hunter was a big man in every respect. He might have played football as an offensive lineman, back in the day, but he also had a big personality, a big enjoyment of life, and a big perspective on the interplay between planning and economics. His big professional footprint has left a beneficial mark on cities and towns throughout America. It was my privilege to be part of Don's world of applied economics, and it is my privilege to continue the traditions and techniques that he championed.



Donald E Hunter

I met Don for the first time in the summer of 1994, shortly after appearing unannounced at the door of his firm, Hunter Interests, Inc., near the City Dock in Annapolis, Maryland. I had returned to my hometown and had achieved a level of success in the thoroughbred racing industry as an official at various racetracks and as a consultant in the gaming industry. I was intrigued with a small business card ad in "Gaming and Wagering Business" magazine that offered Don's services in feasibility studies, market analysis, and other economic pursuits.

My initial meeting with Don sort of set the stage: He asked, "How good are you at keeping balls in the air?" I replied that I was pretty good at it, and we were off.

Initially, I worked on projects where states, Native American tribes, the private sector, and other players were seeking to study, and otherwise expand, legalized gambling. One day, Don said, "We're getting ready to start a downtown revitalization strategy for Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Would you be interested in getting involved in something like that?" I replied that I certainly would, although I had no real experience in downtown redevelopment or urban economics. This offer from Don initiated a 10-year professional relationship that began with a de facto apprenticeship in which I served in a concentrated fashion for two years.

On that first trip to Winston-Salem, we flew in late at night, and before heading to the hotel, Don and I embarked on a two-hour tour of what can only be described as an enlightened experience of understanding how cities work. We drove round and round, back and forth, crisscrossing downtown Winston-Salem, with Don providing a running

commentary — a sharing of his genius — on how to interpret a wide range of factors. I'll never forget, and I'll always be grateful.

"How do you get in? How do you get out? Where do you park? How do the streets work? Where's the 100% corner? Where are the opportunity sites? Where are the problems? Where are the hard edges of development?" I was hooked. I had never looked at cities this way, and that evening's revelations became tools and treasures that I still use to this day.

Many years after our work in Winston-Salem, I was gratified to learn that most of the recommendations that emanated from our efforts there had become tangible results.

I will be forever grateful to Don for sharing his unique insights and brilliance in understanding how urban economies function, and how to affect measurable and important change. Don felt very strongly about economics leading the planning process and at the same time, he also valued good

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land planning, architectural design, engineering, public policy, and the value of understanding the communities in which we worked. The whole package. I employ the same concept of holistic economic development that Don helped me grasp. That understanding is rooted in my time spent as an apprentice to the Big Man.

As much as I appreciate the lessons learned, mentoring, and guidance that Don provided me over our 10-years of our collaboration working in cities and towns from coast to coast, I also want to share a little bit about Don, the man. He loved good food, good wine, and especially — good cigars. Our offices in Annapolis were next to a specialty tobacconist, and there always seemed to be a certain synergy in that. Don was an aficionado of sushi and other fine things. Among other good things, working and traveling with Don was appreciation of great food.

Don used to refer to me as his “re-treaded race tracker.” It was sort of a back-handed compliment, but when it came to Don, any compliment was cherished. He did not withhold compliments, but then he didn’t exactly spread them around either. He was generous, assuming you worked for it, magnanimous but tough. He earned my great respect, along with the respect of communities throughout the United States. I can only hope that I earned his. ■

—Ernest E. Bleinberger is Principal of Strategy 5 Consulting LLC, an urban economics consulting firm that provides professional services to a nationwide client base. During his 30 years in the urban economics discipline, Mr. Bleinberger has worked on large-scale projects in over 300 cities and towns throughout North America, including market, economic and financial feasibility analyses, funding and finance strategies, fiscal impacts, development programming, and other aspects of applied economics.



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