

GSRA MOURNS LOSS OF GSRA COFOUNDER AND FIRST PRESIDENT

By cofounders and GSRA Former President BJ Bennett, Vice President Chuck Freedman,
Treasurer Ronnie Mesimer, and Board Member Art Finley.



With great sorrow, we report that GSRA cofounder and first president Claude Vickers has died. Claude's contributions to state government operations were manifold. He was a supreme leader, trusted colleague, sage advisor, and great friend during his long and distinguished career in state government and retirement. He was a visionary, always looking for ways to make things better for the State. He was among the first to perceive the need for an organization to advocate for retired state employees.

Claude was a member of the ERS Board for many years both as State Treasurer and State Auditor. His service on many other boards as well as the ERS board gave him the perspective that the ERS retirees did not have the adequate representation that members of other retirement systems enjoyed for their boards. He recognized the need for retired and active employees to have access to the state gubernatorial and legislative leadership and other organizations' managements. That access was to provide feedback and advice about their decisions on the personal and financial effects on employees and retirees. He believed these voids needed to be addressed, and with several other retired state leaders, was instrumental in creating and organizing the Georgia State Retirees Association.

Claude accepted the role of GSRA's first President, serving during its birth and formative years. Claude took the lead in establishing GSRA as an organization, shaping it, and moving it forward. GSRA's initiatives under his watch included establishing by-laws and an organizational framework including the creation of local chapters, conducting annual meetings, recruiting new members, publishing newsletters, creating and maintaining a web page, and many others.



Although personally easy-going and gracious, Claude was an ardent, vocal advocate for maintaining retiree benefits in the face of gubernatorial and legislative efforts to cut back or potentially eliminate our benefits. A sample of his forthright advocacy is printed elsewhere in this newsletter.

As an active employee, Claude was widely recognized for his leadership abilities. Three different governors appointed Claude to head three different state agencies, where he served as State Treasurer, State Auditor, and Executive Director of Georgia Public Television respectively.

While State Auditor, Claude was instrumental in getting the State of Georgia's bond rating increased to AAA, the highest rating possible. Only 6 other States had a AAA rating. In doing so, he organized meetings with the various rating companies and responsible state agencies to explain how the State of Georgia operated and pulled its financial statements together. The AAA rating has saved the State of Georgia a tremendous amount of money over the years in lower interest costs on the sale of its bonds.

Claude was also the first to bring automated audit software into practice, which made the auditing process and producing reports much more efficient and uniform. He was not afraid to try new ways or methods of getting things done.

Claude was a great people person. He treated his staff the way he expected to be treated. He always found time to visit with his employees to let them know he cared about them. He was always more than fair in his decisions concerning pay raises and promotions. Claude also found time to socialize with other state colleagues, including epic Friday nights at Manuel's, a well-known gathering spot in Atlanta. He was a great friend who will be missed by many. His memory will be a blessing.

TYPICAL EXAMPLE OF CLAUDE'S ADVOCACY FOR RETIREES

In November 2008, even while ERS was still awarding COLAs, the predisposition of the Sonny Purdue administration to restrict if not eliminate COLAs and to abolish our defined benefit pension was clear. We present here one of Claude's many efforts to stem that tide, a letter he wrote to the ERS board.

You may be aware of the recent decision of the Teachers Retirement System (TRS) Board to abandon the change in COLA regulations as requested by Governor Perdue. Active and retired educators are to be congratulated for their successful efforts to thwart this attempt to reduce their pension benefits. Their actions that led to the Board of Trustees abandoning the proposed change demonstrated what can happen when a large group gets behind a cause.



Newsletter

Vol. 17, Number 8

www.MyGSRA.com

August 2023

One revelation that came from the Board's proposal was that Attorney General Thurbert Baker's office apparently advised the TRS Board that any attempt to eliminate the COLA would break an "implied contract" between the state and educators and that the state would likely lose any subsequent lawsuit. Such advice seems to support my statement to the COLA Study Committee in October that thirty years of a practice of awarding COLAs to the ERS retirees certainly borders on the creation of a guarantee.

Governor Perdue's Office agreed with the Board's decision not to go forward with their proposal to change the teachers' COLAs because of the probable legal problems. The Governor's Office defended their attempt to reduce or eliminate TRS COLAs by claiming that they were trying to help secure the long-term future of the TRS fund. "This (the COLA) is a commitment that is only going to grow over time. What a COLA like this does is it doesn't give the state the ability to manage the amount of tax money going into the fund," according to the Governor's Office. That's a curious statement, since the TRS Board has the responsibility of deciding the contribution rates based on the benefits established in legislation. The real message that has consistently come from this Governor's office is, "We don't believe in COLAs for retirees."

The funds going into the State's Retirement Systems come from three sources: (1) Employee contributions, (2) Employer contributions, and (3) Earnings from investment activities. The employee contributions are fixed by law. The earnings from investments are a function of stock and bond market performance and investment expertise. The only variable over which the various boards have control is the employer contributions. For the last thirty-five years, the boards of all state retirement systems have exercised their fiduciary responsibility without undue influence. Attempting to achieve or maintain a desired funding level, they have responsibly raised or lowered the contribution rate based on the needs as reflected by actuarial analyses.

From 1982 through 1990, the TRS employer contribution was raised, generally in small increments, to a high of 13.63%. Beginning in 1991, as both the ERS and TRS funding levels approached one hundred percent, the TRS employer contribution were lowered, again in small increments to 11.995% in 1998 and to 9.24% in 2001. At the same time the ERS employer contribution rate was reduced by one-third to 10.41% (5.66% employer plus 4.75% employee share 'pick-up' in lieu of a pay increase). The TRS employer contribution rate continues at just above the 9.24% level through FY 2009 because the Board of Trustees correctly chose to exercise its fiduciary responsibility to maintain the appropriate funding level. But, in 2001 the ERS Board reduced the employer contribution rate by one-third to 10.41% (5.66% plus 4.75% employee pick-up) where it remains today. The Governor's Office is trying to rationalize this manipulation of the employer contribution rate by claiming that they need "the ability to manage the amount of money going into the fund." For the past 6 years the Governor's office has kept the ERS Board from exercising its fiduciary responsibility. The Governor attempted to put the same curbs on the TRS Board. Fortunately, the TRS Board has more independent membership than the ERS Board.

Actions by the educators serve as an example of why our organization must grow in numbers. We need the unified support of numbers to carry our cause for all the retirement systems in the same way as was done in TRS.

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Have Some Fun in Columbus

By Kip Mann and Allan Hill

When making plans for attending the GSRA Annual Meeting in Columbus, consider making a long weekend vacation of it. Come down Friday night or early Saturday and stay through the meeting. Columbus has much to offer as a short staycation.

Over the past two decades, Columbus has developed a thriving downtown area with lots to do. The Chattahoochee River Walk is a fifteen-mile linear trail that hugs the banks of the Chattahoochee River, with a pedestrian bridge linking to legendary Phenix City. One can also take to the river with the Chattahoochee Paddle Company, featuring kayaks and canoes, or on rafts with the Whitewater Express. Rent a bike from Ride on Bikes on Broadway. Visit museums, like the Bo Bartlett Center of Columbus State University, the Coca-Cola Space Science Center, the Springer Opera House or the Columbus Museum, featuring American art and regional history. Downtown also has a variety of restaurants, from fine dining to neighborhood taverns. There is something for everyone (although several of them are closed on Monday).

Nearby it offers many other attractions for visitors, including the National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center, the Columbus Botanical Gardens, The National Civil War Naval Museum, Callaway Gardens, and FDR's Little White House in Warm Springs.

So please join us on October 9-10, 2023, for this year's Annual Meeting. We will gather in Columbus, GA at the Historic Iron Works in the Columbus Convention Center. Our host hotel is the Columbus Marriott, which is directly across the street from the Convention Center. There are also a number of other hotels in Columbus in all price ranges and within easy driving distance.

Registration starts Monday October 9th at 9:00 a.m. Members attending should eat lunch at one of the fine restaurants in Columbus or at the Café cart immediately adjacent to registration in the Columbus Iron Works. The Annual Meeting will begin promptly at 12:30 in the Ballroom, immediately past our event partners, sponsors and exhibitors that you could visit with after registering for the meeting or during breaks during both days.

Our keynote speaker on Monday afternoon will be Laretta Hannon, who was named the "Funniest Woman in Georgia" by Southern Living Magazine. Laretta is a storyteller, a teacher, and a "shameless promoter of Joy and Wonder." Check her out at www.laurettahannon.com.

As usual, we'll have speakers from ERS and SHBP to give us updates for the coming year, a variety of informative and fun workshops, and an opening night reception with drinks and appetizers. Take this opportunity to renew past friendships with former co-workers and to make new friendships with your fellow GSRA members.

Don't forget to register for the many door prizes that will be given away as the meeting progresses.

GSRA Merchandise Back

Also, back by popular demand, we will be taking orders at the annual meeting for GSRA caps, safari hats, and men's and women's polo shirts both long and short sleeve. A new men's and/or women's button down light blue dress shirt with GSRA's logo will also be available for ordering. So come prepared to dress for success and let people know who we are.



Here's How to Register

(Registration is \$50 before September 8, and \$65 thereafter.)

To register for the Annual Meeting online, click [here](#)

To register by mail, click [here](#)

To make reservations at the Columbus Marriott, click [here](#)

The Columbus Marriott is offering a special GSRA rate of \$169 (including breakfast) through September 8, so be sure to register and reserve early.

GSRA needs your support as we continue our fight for the benefits that were promised to us. A strong showing in Columbus is an important step in our ongoing struggle. Be there, get involved, voice your opinion, ask questions, and show your support!

Help enrich our voice and grow our support. Don't let those for whom we worked for so long continue to divide and fragment us, so our concerns go overlooked and appear unneeded of their attention.

Columbus Day in Columbus, GA! See you there!

ERS BOARD OPENS MEETINGS TO PUBLIC ATTENDANCE, MEETING IS ROUTINE.

By Chuck Freedman

The ERS board of trustees met as scheduled on August 17. For the first time in several years, the board permitted the public to attend in person in addition to being able to view the meeting on Zoom. Several GSRA members attended.

In short, the board approved the secretary's report (click [here](#)) and see the agency's amended FY '23 and FY '24 budget requests (not available at this time).

Additionally, Executive Director Jim Potvin reported that FY '23 returns on pension fund investments were about 11.3%. These were among the highest in the country and higher than the market's returns. With such high returns, ERS will lower its assumed rate of return another 0.1% to 7.1% in accordance with its policy to accelerate the full payment of the pension fund's liabilities (i.e., that the pension fund will more quickly have enough money to fully pay for all actuarial debts, almost exclusively benefits owed to retirees).

Mr. Potvin also said that the widely reported TRS data breach does NOT affect ERS or its members. Unlike TRS, ERS does not use the vendor which experienced the breach.

GSRA Board of Directors Nominees

Marlene Autry (Incumbent)



Marlene Autry, from Cartersville, Bartow County, graduated from Kennesaw State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology. She then went on to earn a Master's degree in Public Administration from KSU. After serving with DFACS for 30 years, she then joined the staff of DHS Office of the Inspector General, based in Gainesville, from which she retired in 2019 as Regional Manager.

Marlene has been a member of the Georgia Professional Human Services Association (GPHSA, formerly Georgia County Welfare Association) Board and Legislative Committee. She has served as an At-large Board member for GSRA since 2021. She is a great-grandmother, looking forward to welcoming her fifth great-grandchild in October. Marlene currently lives in Rydal, Bartow County, where she is active in community life.

Marlene is active in the Rome/Coosa Valley Chapter.

Lorr Becker Elias

A Florida native, Lorr grew up in the Tampa-St. Pete area, graduating from Florida Presbyterian College, later Eckerd College, in 1973. She earned a B.A in Psychology and first worked in Florida as a mental health counselor.

After living in Middle Georgia and the Atlanta area, Lorr relocated to the Brunswick/St. Simons area to be near family. Influenced by her mother's experience of home invasion and physical attack, Lorr decided to become a police officer in 1980, becoming the second female officer ever hired as a "street cop." This work led her to the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). From her start as an entry level Juvenile Program Manager, she climbed the ranks to District Director, and finally as Regional Administrator over 44 counties. In this role she was responsible for the operation of Regional Youth Detention Centers and Youth Development Centers, as well as oversight of the comprehensive program of probation/parole, contract homes, day programs, court services, wilderness programs and other services.

Lorr earned her Master's degree in Public Administration from Georgia Southern University in 2002 while working for DJJ. She subsequently transferred to the Department of Behavioral Health and Development Disabilities, from which she retired as a Regional Administrator in 2012.

Lorr is active in the Savannah/Coastal GSRA Chapter.

William (Bill) W. Lucas

Bill, a native of Macon/Bibb County, is a member of a deeply rooted Macon family, known for its public and community service and engagement. Following graduation from high school, Bill studied at Fort Valley State College (now University) until his enlistment in the United States Air Force in 1970. His military service continued in the Georgia National Guard, and he went on to become an instructor in the U.S. Army Reserves School.

Bill's return to civilian life led him to a career in law enforcement, with the Bibb County Public Schools, and the Georgia Department of Corrections, from which he retired in 2006 as Director of Compliance and Policies. As a POST-Certified Instructor, Military Instructor, and Certified American Correctional Association (ACA) Auditor/Inspector, he has made significant contributions to adult correctional institutions, community-based residential services, county jails and military security operations.

Lucas's involvement in the Macon/Bibb community includes membership and leadership in the Macon Jaycees and Macon Downtown Rotary Club. He also serves or has served on the Board of the Booker T. Washington Community Center, Goodwill's Vocation Board, Bibb County Public Schools Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) Advisory Board, Leadership Macon Board, Middle Georgia Community Mediation Center Board and the Board of the Macon Food Bank.

Bill is the Vice President of the Macon Middle Georgia Chapter of GSRA and lives in Macon with his devoted partner of 52 years, Sylvia. They are the proud parents of three adult daughters.

Robert Riddle – 2023 President-elect/Candidate for President



Robert served his entire State career in the then Georgia Department of Human Resources (now Department of Human Services), starting as a ward attendant at Central State Hospital in Milledgeville in 1973. Upon graduating from Georgia College at Milledgeville in 1975, he then signed on as a Caseworker at Baldwin County DFCS. From casework, he then went to work in 1977 in a new DHR program called the Child Support Recovery Unit.

Robert served most of his work career in the Child Support Program, working through the ranks from Agent to Regional Supervisor (later Regional Manager.) In the late '90s, he took a detour into the DFCS Director's Office for a few years, serving under Doug Greenwell, Anne Plant and Michael Thurmond in various capacities.

With a change in the DHR Commissioner in 2000 he was appointed Director of the then Office of Child Support Enforcement. In that role, Robert worked closely with the Governor's Office and the state legislature on child support and human services issues. He served as Child Support Director of OCSE until April of 2006 when he retired.

After retiring from DHR, Robert entered the private sector, working part-time as a consultant on leadership development and professional services practice. Prior to consulting work, he served as a Director for First Data Corp and the Vice President of Business Development for Systems & Methods, Inc.

Robert earned his Bachelor of Arts in Public Administration from Georgia College and State University, from which he also received the Master of Science degree in Public Administration. Robert and his wife, Cindy, currently live in Carrollton/Carroll County. They have three children between them, as well as five grandchildren who know him as "Pop."

Local Chapter News

CSRA of Augusta Chapter

Chapter President Clara Brown welcomed and thanked everyone for attending. First time attendees introduced themselves. The meeting started with ten bingo numbers being called and then again between each agenda item through the end of the meeting. Bingo winners received prizes. Clara announced that the local DPH has agreed to let the CSRA Chapter continue to meet here for the remainder of 2023 at no cost.

After hearing the summary from the last meeting, Keith Watson provided the Treasurer's Report. The chapter's initial budget check for \$250 is in the mail. It will be used to purchase stamps for the postcard project. He also shared information in regard to meeting at Historic Augusta. At least ten members were needed to participate in the guided tour of the Woodrow Wilson Boyhood Home next door following the meeting in order for the meeting to take place at Historic Augusta at no cost. By a show of hands, 12 members committed to the tour which costs \$6.00 each. Two raffle tickets were pulled for two free admissions.

Mrs. Francis Yelton of the CSRA Council of Aging was the Education/Information Speaker for this meeting. She informed the group of the services and resources that the agency provides. She also left brochures that can be shared at future meetings.

Clara followed by sharing that volunteers are still needed for the postcard project. Sue Ash, Fredericka Murray and Sondra Williams volunteered to help and stayed over after the meeting for additional information.

Clara also mentioned the annual meeting and suggested that attendees check out the link in the monthly newsletter for more information. She informed the group that as of 8/10/23, 101 members had registered and re-emphasized that each chapter is expected to provide/contribute to door prizes for the annual meeting.

Additionally, Clara covered ongoing news such as vacant chapter positions, of which two were filled during this meeting: Special events: Merle McFadden and Patricia Dickerson. Membership committee assistant: Sondra Williams. Vacant positions include an Education Committee person to line up speakers and a Communication Committee person to work on free newspapers, a possible newsletter and pictures from meetings. Clara assured the group that it will all come together, and the positions will be filled. That portion of the agenda ended with thanking those such as Sue Ash for volunteering to help wherever she is needed.

Membership Chair Sandra Schumann covered marketing membership, social media presence, our logo and a possible future meeting location at Bathe Gardens as well as volunteer opportunities there.

Clara closed the meeting by sharing that the next meeting (the 3rd Tuesday monthly) will be held on September 19 at 1pm at the Office of Historic Augusta, 415 7th Street, Augusta, GA 30901, and to bring a friend and to share the social media posts.



Members of the Augusta/CSRA Chapter at the August meeting

Coosa Valley Chapter

The Coosa Valley Chapter met August 15 in Rome with twelve members in attendance. We were entertained by Jennifer Patch, licensed fitness trainer. She shared information on how we can all keep moving and active as we age. Several members asked specific questions and got good information from Ms. Patch.

The group was encouraged to attend the annual meeting this October in Columbus. If anyone is interested in running for a Board Member position, they should let Dinah know and she will pass their name on to Beverly Littlefield.

The chapter sends Get Well Wishes to chapter Treasurer, Steve Moore, who is recuperating from knee replacement surgery.

The next meeting is planned for Tuesday, November 14, at 10:00. The meeting will be held in the conference room of the Floyd County DFCS office, 450 Riverside Parkway in Rome. Attendees should park in the employee parking lot and look for the door with the balloons.

Tri-County Chapter

The Tri-County Chapter held its third quarter meeting on August 29th in the “Party Room” at Doodlum’s Barbecue & Fruit Stand in Woodbury with twenty-six members in attendance. The meeting began at 11:30 AM with an opening prayer. Everyone enjoyed a delicious lunch and fellowship. Updates were provided on the upcoming GSRA Annual Meeting set for October 9th & 10th in Columbus, the annual SHBP Open Enrollment Period, and recent Employee Retirement System news. Other Chapter business included volunteers for Chapter officers for 2024 and meeting times and locations. The next chapter meeting is tentatively planned for Tuesday, October 24th back at Doodlum’s Barbecue Restaurant in Woodbury.



Tri-County Chapter members in attendance at the August meeting

Welcome new members!

JULY				
Name	County		Name	County
Lisa Boone	Baldwin		Tereon Mattox	Clayton
Sandra Bostwick	Lowndes		Rose Maxey	DeKalb
Dona Cucich	DeKalb		Gregory Moor	Cobb
Joseph Dobson	Chatham		Cynthia Price	Barrow
Ruby Franklin	Baldwin		Benjamin Rabun	Coweta
Larry Hudson	Grady		Ann Shirra	DeKalb
Joy Knighton	Dougherty		Otis Stanton	Henry
Cynthia Kucela	Columbia		Hilda Tompkins	DeKalb
Daniel Langston	Baldwin		Flosie White	Chatham
Bessie Martin-Jackson	Gwinnett		Sondra Williams	Richmond
			Mark Woody	Columbia



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