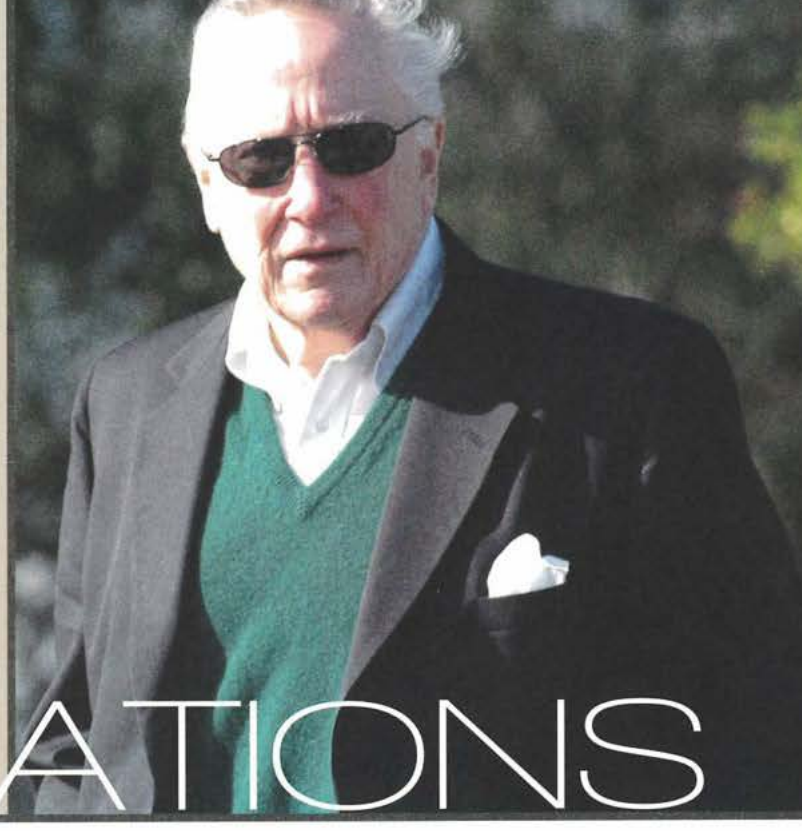




GENERATIONS

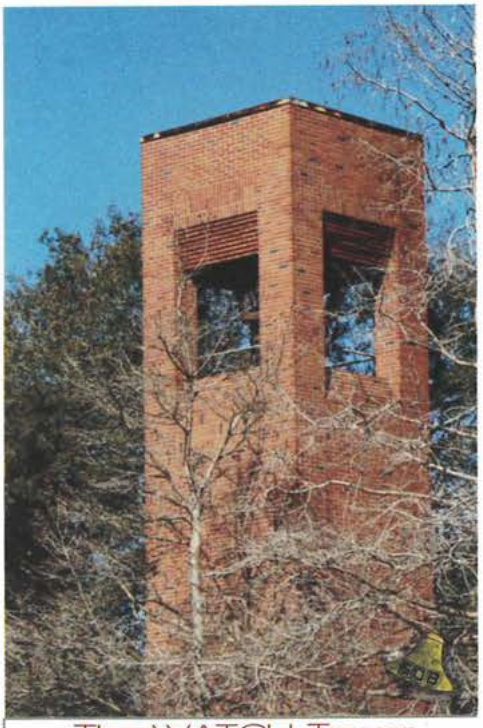
by BRINK NORTON | Director of Communications

When **John Upshaw Downs, Sr.,** entered **Porter Military Academy** in **1942,** he was a precocious 4th grader. Since his days at PMA, he has become a successful businessman and a champion for uniting Porter-Gaud alumni. He is responsible for returning the Porter Bell to campus. The **WATCH Tower** stands as a testament to his hard work. With two sons who graduated in the class of 1979, he is directly linked to two past generations of Cyclones, but his efforts will affect the future **GENERATIONS** of **Porter-Gaud students.**

When the WATCH Tower bell rings each morning to call students into Porter-Gaud, very little thought is given to the history that surrounds the bell and the personal mission by John Upshaw Downs, Sr., PMA '50. Downs found the bell and brought it back to campus in the 1970s. As a former Porter Military Academy cadet from 1942 through 1946, and a parent of two Porter-Gaud graduates, John Downs made it his mission to be a unifying force for alumni. Mr. Downs noticed a lack of cohesiveness among the alumni from the various institutions that joined to become Porter-Gaud, and he worked to change that. He decided to create an organization called the Society of the Bell. He hoped this organization would become the new united alumni association and replace those from PMA, Gaud, Watt, and PG.

Above: John Upshaw Downs, Sr., as a PMA cadet (left) and now (right)

Mr. Downs became president of the Porter-Gaud Alumni Association in 1973 and joined the board of trustees in 1975. During his tenure, he heard rumors of the fate of Dr. Porter's bell. He began a grassroots effort to find the bell and secure its return. After extensive research, he discovered that Dr. Porter donated the bell, cast in England ca. 1800, to the city of Summerville to serve as the city bell in 1895. It remained there until the belfry housing the bell burned in 1971, and the bell was moved to a storage room in a Summerville fire station.


The WATCH Tower

His inaugural effort as PGAA president was to return the bell that Dr. Porter rang many years before to its rightful place on the Porter-Gaud campus. He also began the campaign to build a tower to house the bell bearing Dr. Porter's famous acronym WATCH. In 1974, he addressed the Summerville City Council, which agreed to entrust the bell to the Alumni Association. He then led the campaign to raise the necessary funds necessary to build the tower. This effort would lead to the formation of the Society of the Bell. The school broke ground on the WATCH tower in August 1975, and Mr. Downs made a promise to the Class of 1976 that the bell would toll at their graduation, a promise he kept on June 6, 1976.

> "..send not to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for THEE"
> —John Donne

One of the many reasons the bell rang was in celebration of athletic victory. When John Downs, Sr., went to ring the bell after his sons' football team returned victorious over Winyah in the fall of 1976, the story almost took a tragic turn. As Mr. Downs pulled the rope to ring the victory bell in total darkness, he felt a sharp pain in his leg. The clapper had disengaged from the bell and had fallen on his leg, avoiding a fatal blow to his head by inches. The bell he worked so hard to acquire ironically almost killed him, leaving a scar on both his leg and the floor of the WATCH tower.

Throughout the process to acquire the bell and build the tower, his two sons, John Downs, Jr., '79 and Jamie Downs '79, admired their father's efforts. Both were students at Porter-Gaud from the first through the twelfth grades and understood the significance of his work. They each have fond memories of their time at PG and attribute much of who they are today to values Porter-Gaud instilled in them as students. John Jr. had to work particularly hard to overcome his dyslexia. Porter-Gaud is a rigorous place academically, but especially so for a student with learning difficulties. His brother, Jamie, was admittedly the more studious of the two.

They were both active in athletics on the football and cross-country teams and loved the culture of Porter-Gaud. They had their father's passion for Dr. Porter's WATCH—Words, Actions, Thoughts, Character, Habits. This system of beliefs continues to guide them today.

When John, Jr., and Jamie graduated from Porter-Gaud, they both attended the University of Georgia. John majored in sociology and psychology, while Jamie studied medicine. After college, John joined his father's insurance business in North Carolina, where he worked for 20 years. He later took a job in the auto glass industry as a liaison with insurance companies. In 2002, he moved back to Charleston and opened Charleston Auto Glass, which he still owns today. "Porter-Gaud prepared me to own my own business," he says. "I learned my 'people skills' preparing for presentations in Mr. Hazzard's class. I learned to write and communicate in Mrs. Chanson's class. Great teachers like Wayne Murrah and Beverly Oswald made such a difference in my life." He also cites his own personal struggles as reasons for his success. "Because of my dyslexia and hearing problems, many thought I could not make

it at Porter-Gaud, but these challenges taught me how to work hard. I proved them all wrong." John says that being a PG alumnus opens a wealth of contacts as a business owner. "PG alums stick together," John says. "It opens doors in the business world and has helped me tremendously." John lives in Charleston with his wife, Margaret, and their children John III, and Charlotte.

Jamie Downs went to UGA to study biochemistry and French. He also credits his Porter-Gaud education for much of his success. He says that teachers like Mr. Frampton, Mr. Nordlund, Mr. Quarterman, and Dr. Mowry all shared an interest in their students beyond the curriculum. "Everything was at such a high level at Porter-Gaud. That allowed me to exempt several college courses, letting me focus my efforts on the courses in my major," he says. Jamie graduated cum laude from UGA and later earned his Doctor of Medicine from MUSC. He has an extensive career in anatomical pathology that has taken him around the nation serving in various capacities. He currently serves as the Coastal Regional Medical Examiner for the Georgia Bureau of Investigations in Savannah. He served as lead pathologist for the investigation into the sinking of the Civil War submarine *H.L. Hunley*, discovered in the Charleston Harbor. Jamie examined the remains of the eight crew members to determine the exact cause of death. His specialty is anatomic pathology, and he is one of the foremost experts in the field, heading several national boards and testifying in state and federal court cases. He has even testified before the United States Congress.



Jamie Downs (left) and John Downs, Jr (right) work together on the H.L. Hunley investigation.

Jamie is currently writing a book on ethics, a subject that he says was ingrained in him at PG. "I still live by the WATCH principle today," Jamie says. "As a student at Porter-Gaud, I learned to work hard and be confident. Following the example of my teachers, and even watching William Washington and the amazing job he did in the cafeteria taught us all about doing a job well, even when it is a thankless job. Athletics taught us dedication and leadership. I would not be where I am today without that foundation."

"We had some interesting times at PG," the self-proclaimed 'Downs Boys' say. Both brothers are avid fans of the band Kiss. They recall the time they performed as Kiss in full make up for the Upper School talent show, when their smoke machines triggered the sprinkler system in the Gwynette Auditorium, dousing the audience.

"I try to make it back to campus when I am in town," Jamie says. "I take a run through the area and visit the WATCH Tower and the tree planted for our classmate, Beth Rosen." "It makes us proud to see the tower and remember the work our father put in to make it happen." John Downs, Sr., is suffering from stage 4 pancreatic cancer, and both of the "Downs Boys" want his Porter-Gaud Family to remember his legacy. "He fought a battle to get that bell back to where it belonged." The daily ringing of the bell should serve as a reminder of the deep history Porter-Gaud enjoys. One of John Jr.'s favorite passages helps him remember his father's efforts. "*Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.*"– John Donne

Does your family have multiple generations of alumni? Let us tell your story in GENERATIONS for the Winter/Spring 2011 magazine. Send your information to bnorton@portergaud.edu.