

# The polarization of Orange County

As Kenny Dotson sees it, the problem is the polarization of this geographically long, narrow and socially stratified county. "I'm talking two counties in one; no growth, pro growth." He also says, "Sometimes it can be the haves and the have nots," as well as the come-to's versus the here-befores.



File photo

**Dotson's Titan Construction improved the intersection at Route 20 and Route 601 as part of the new school project.**

Nothing new about that; it's been like this in Orange County for years.

"We're so polarized. Ninety percent of us agree on what we want this county to be. We want it to be an attractive place to come to, a place to stay, but we don't agree sometimes on how we're going to get there. We've become so polarized on maybe 10 percent of the issues that we never talk about the 90 percent we agree on, so we never get there. It's sad, because we're not moving forward. We're not doing what's in the best interests of the citizens."

As he sees it, the economic engine that could drive Orange County is the Rt. 3 corridor, not Route 20. "We're lacking medical facilities; we're lacking

professional facilities. There's a great need. And these people, right now, because we're not fulfilling those needs, are going to Fredericksburg to get it. So we're losing all that commerce. We're not keeping the tax base in the county."

Dotson has attended more board of supervisors meetings than some of the

Wal-Mart is between Lake of the Woods and 3 and 20," says Dotson flatly. "Why would that be? Because more population is coming out of Lake of the Woods and turning right and going towards Fredericksburg than it is left, going towards Culpeper, where they're proposing to put it. So, what happens is you're trying to create something to happen that naturally doesn't want to happen. And so the unintended consequences are sprawl, because once you put something where it doesn't belong, then it feeds its way where it wants to go; it crawls its way." Dotson pauses to make his point. "Then you've got 3 looking like 3 in Spotsylvania County, and those are the unintended consequences, when you could put it in a planned development, screen it, buffer it and make it where it's more conducive."

He points to subdivisions like Fawn Lake, Fox Chase and Lake Wilderness. "Those people would actually come and shop in Orange (County) and go back home. But the thing is you move it too far, they're going to go into Fredericksburg." He compares it to lighting a fire. "You put it in the right place, it starts burning good. You put it in the wrong place, it snuffs itself out. So you need the match in the right place to create the fire which is this energy to create economic development in this county. And it needs to be planned."

Kenny Dotson says he will not seek elected office. "There's too much that I want to do, and it would look like it was a conflict of interest," he explains. He sees himself, instead as a liaison. "I've tried to be the olive branch and reach out to the PEC (Piedmont Environmental Council), reach out to the Civil War Preservation Trust, the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield and see what is it that we can all live with? We've got to have this communication. If not, we're so polarized, we never talk about it. We never get there. It's sad, because the county needs to move forward. We need to

be self sufficient."

He does some quick math in his head: 330 graduating seniors from OCHS this past June cost the county \$33 million to educate K through 12. "What have we got to show for that investment?" he challenges. "We're letting them go somewhere else. There's nothing here for them... We've educated them to go to work in Reston and Tysons and Maryland or Alabama or California and we've got nothing here. So we've got to create some type of environment when they graduate. Shouldn't they enjoy what we enjoy and have what we've had and be able to live, work and play in the same area?" As he sees it, just like the convenience store, if you don't move forward, you stagnate and die.

Kenny Dotson would rather be called an entrepreneur or a businessman instead of a developer. "I wear many hats in a rural area. You've got to wear many hats to survive in a rural area. So entrepreneur, business person is probably more general than just a developer." Besides, he adds, with a grin, "'Developer' puts an X on your back."

He points to the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), which he calls "a great organization with a good policy, but sometimes it gets derailed...What happens is you've got this polarization, and perception becomes reality in a lot of people's mind. They perceive 'he's a developer, he just wants to develop,' which to them is rape and pillage. And that's not the case."

The point is this: Kenny Dotson wakes up every morning in Orange County. He doesn't come in from Fredericksburg or northern Virginia to, as some developers would, love us and leave us like a sailor on a three-day pass. "I live and breathe Orange. I hope to die in Orange. My life is invested in Orange. All my savings are invested in Orange, and I want my children to be able to come back here, to have an opportunity."



**Kenny and Lora Dotson both had good paying jobs in northern Virginia when they decided to open up a convenience store in the small building in the background. That was 25 years ago. Since then, they have developed Locust Grove Town Center.**

"I grew up in a single-wide trailer down in Burr Hill, about a mile off the state road," blurts Kenny Dotson, as we sit down for lunch in Robinson's Tavern in Locust Grove Town Center. He owns this building, but right now, his memories are taking him back to when he would carry an extra

## Never give up

pair of shoes to the school bus stop. "I'd wear one and carry one, so when I got to the bus stop, I could change the shoes to get on the bus because the shoes were so muddy."

His mom worked at Jamesway in Culpeper; his dad laid tile in northern Virginia. On Saturdays, the only way he could get to Orange from Burr Hill was to ride with his mother to Culpeper, then take the Trailways bus to Orange so he could play baseball for Coach Woolfolk.

But he refuses to say they were poor; just broke. In his words, "poor is in the soul, broke is in the pocketbook." He remembers his mother saying, even though they had no money, "I taught you how to work." As long as you taught me how to work, that's all I need. And I never gave up. That's been instilled in me; you keep persevering, you never give up."

**"I never gave up. That's been instilled in me; you keep persevering, you never give up."**

Kenny Dotson's story reads like a 20th century version of a Victorian 'rags to riches,' novel. If you work hard enough, you...will...make...it. He and his wife Lora are living proof of that. You don't become a hugely successful entrepreneur and businessman without hard work, and... he will emphasize, a good education.

Rewind to 1981. Kenny Dotson has just graduated from Orange County High School. In fact he describes himself in the yearbook with just one word: "Student." No mention of sports or activities or clubs; just "student." Times were tough back then. Unemployment was higher than it is now. He had to turn down an invitation to attend VMI because he couldn't afford the tuition. Instead, he bought a pick up truck, enrolled in Germanna Community College and took a part-time job for \$6 an hour with his dad laying tile.

But last hired is first fired. He was laid off; got behind on his truck payments. Desperate, he approached dairyman, W.A. Taylor in True Blue. He vividly remembers that bright sunny day in March; can still smell the molasses on the silage. "Mr. Taylor, I don't even know how to drive a tractor," he remembers blurting. "Here I was 19 years old, grew up on a three-acre lot with a riding mower, didn't even know how to drive a tractor. But I said, 'I'm willing to learn. I really need a job.'" And Mr. Taylor turned to him and said, "If you're willing to learn, I'm willing to teach you. We can pay you \$2.90 an hour, which was minimum wage at the time. And I said 'I'll take it.'"

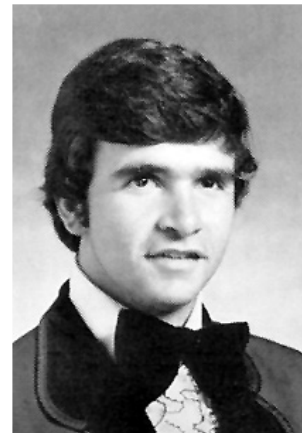
Talk about hard work and education, every day, Kenny Dotson was up at oh-dark-hundred to go milk. Then from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m. he attended classes at Germanna, where apparently, he must have turned a few noses because "you can't get that cow manure off you sometimes; that smell." And then he returned to the dairy farm and worked until 9 at night. He never gave up.

When another tile-laying job opened up, he

turned it down, reasoning, "I could go back to work up the road and get laid off in another two months. I can probably make as much in three months up the road as I could all year working on the farm, but I know I've got something here." So I stayed with the dairy farm for a whole other



Kenny Dotson's senior photo in the 1981 Golden Horseshoe Yearbook, and today. "Never give up," Dotson recently advised graduating Germanna Community College students.



Lora Hickman as a sophomore in the 1981 OCHS Yearbook and Lora Dotson today.



year."

During all of this, Kenny Dotson somehow found the time to court his high school sweetheart, Lora Hickman who lived all the way at the other end of the county in Eheart. They met in typing class when he was a senior and she a sophomore. After she graduated, they married, bought a single-wide and set it up next to his mom's. For water, they ran a garden hose from the pump house; for power, a drop cord. "You ran a blow dryer and the TV at the same time, you'd trip the breaker."

Kenny Dotson graduated from Germanna with

associate's degrees in business, science and general studies and was just one credit short of a fourth degree in education. He was also vice president of the student council. Today, his education shows. He is articulate, organized, focused and can do math in his head almost as fast as a calculator.

Back to 1983. By now, he was laying tile up in Tyson's Corner. "I was hungry. I was working Saturdays and Sundays, probably making \$30,000 a year," which, in those days, was darn good money. The only problem was this little voice in his ear that kept nagging, "I've got this education that I haven't been able to use and I'm on my hands and knees doing tile work."

So anyway, one day he's laying tile in an office building restroom when a suit pokes his head in the door. "Excuse me, are you hiring?" queries Kenny. "In my mind, I'm laying tile, I've got to do something better than this. I can't lay tile the rest of my life. I've got to apply my education." The suit referred him to the construction company president, who sure enough, poked his head in the same door a few minutes later. "Excuse me, are you hiring?" repeated Kenny.

"We might be," came the guarded reply. He was told to show up for an interview with the project manager with his resume in hand the next morning. Kenny Dotson didn't have a resume. So, that evening, he bought a typewriter at Sears and he and Lora stayed up most of the night putting that typewriting class at OCHS to work.

The next morning, his heart sank when he was reassigned to a different job site. He shoved the resume into his tool bucket. And there it sat for two weeks, until he returned to the original job site to lay brick pavers. "Are you Kenny Dotson?" the project manager called from a window. "You got your resume?"

Dotson says, "I looked down in my bucket and it was all tattered and torn from where I'd been carrying it around for two weeks." That didn't seem to bother the project manager, who stuffed

it unread into his pocket, saying "Tell me about yourself." Kenny, who has never had a problem finding enough words, obliged.

Kenny landed a job, albeit for less pay, but a more promising future. He worked his way up to assistant project manager. "Loved it! Loved the job," he exclaims. And then he was lured away to another company by a head hunter. "I didn't even know what a head hunter was; I was so naïve." Then he went into business for himself laying ceramic tile, and Lora had a good job with the Department of the Army, and they were doing the commuting thing every day to northern Virginia, and ....

They got to thinking. "We both had good jobs, good benefits, but we weren't happy running up and down the road; couldn't raise a family." He purses his lips. "So we both quit our jobs, bought this little country store across the street."

He jerks his thumb over his shoulder to the one-story and now abandoned building on the southwest corner of Rt. 20 and Rt. 611. Only now does he take the first bite of his sandwich which has been growing cold on his plate. Then, he launches back into his story.

"We worked the whole first year 16 hours a day. It was worse than dairy farming. You've got to open it and close it seven days a week." Their first employee was his own mother, because "she worked cheap, or reasonable, I should say."

But within a few years, they had 12 employees. And then they grew the business to the point that "by '92 or '93, we couldn't sell no more gas; we couldn't sell no more groceries. We'd outgrown that store."

Kenny says the widow of the owner of the historic Robinson's Tavern building across the street approached them. They worked out an owner financing deal and, "that's how we were

able to really get our start." They picked up the historic building and moved it up Rt. 611. In its place they built what he calls "the red awning building," a 6,400- square-foot convenience store they named BJ's after their kids, Brooke and Josh. They went from 12 employees to 26. Locust Grove Town Center was off and running.

That all started to happen in 1994. It took another 10 years for that building to become fully leased. Currently, it houses Tiger Fuel Exxon and an expanded Mama's Pizza, among other businesses. In 2006, they built the second building, which includes the new Robinson's Tavern. All told, there are 20 tenants here.



For the past 25 years, Kenny and Lora Dotson have worked side by side, sometimes seven days a week. They are both equally comfortable at the controls of front end loaders, backhoes and bull dozers.

Kenny Dotson takes the second bite out of his sandwich, and says, "I know what it takes for these businesses to be in business...I feel like I'm an incubator trying to grow these businesses; you know, hatch the eggs, grow the businesses and help them." Today he's proud that "in this economy, we're 100 percent leased."

He envisions Locust Grove Town Center as a

neighborhood village. "If you look what Robinson's Tavern was back in the Civil War, that was a place of commerce. I mean this was the crossroads back then. I guess we've really re-created it in modern times."

Currently, Kenny Dotson is involved in numerous projects. He brokered the new Locust Grove Post Office, negotiated a we'll-do-the-work-and-provide-the-equipment-if-you-supply-the-materials deal with VDOT to improve the Locust Grove intersection. He also did the work improving the Rt. 601 intersection, making Route 20, which he calls "a death trap," safer. He has an excavation company, a construction company, 300 acres in timber, among other things. Currently he and

Lora are building a spec house on Rt. 20 that will become a rental property if it doesn't sell.

This past spring, Kenny Dotson delivered the commencement address at Germanna Community College. "My philosophy has always been 'Never Give Up,' " he told the graduating class. He confirmed his basic message by concluding with a poem that hangs on his wall. It is entitled, "Don't Quit."

Asked what he's most proud of, he unhesitatingly names Lora, who by the way, is perfectly at home at the controls of a backhoe, bulldozer or front end loader. "She's my right hand and left hand. She picks up the slack for me. We've worked together since we've been self-employed for 25 years, and we work seven days a week."

His personal goal is to "continue working till the day I die. I don't think I'll ever retire. I enjoy working...I feel like I have been blessed. I've been fortunate to be able to live here. I've felt like I've always belonged here...It's a great place to live, to raise a family. What I don't like is the polarization that we sometimes come up with as a community."