

Mayer Mitchell

Mobile businessman Mayer Mitchell is known to quote a favorite proverb of his Jewish faith:

“When you give when you’re dead, it is lead; when you give when you are living, it is gold.”

For Mitchell, the saying is more than a proverb; it is a way of life. The Mitchell name has become synonymous with success in business, as well as with generous personal investment in community and faith that extends around the world.

Mayer Mitchell is an American success story. He was born in New Orleans in 1933 and grew up in Mobile. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Economics with Beta Gamma Sigma honors at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance in 1953. He then served as an Army first lieutenant in Korea, earning a commendation ribbon with medal pendant for meritorious service.

Returning home with young wife Arlene, Mitchell recruited his brother Abraham to join him in founding a residential and commercial real estate development firm, The Mitchell Company, in 1958. Their business acumen surfaced and the firm grew rapidly, becoming one of the largest in the Southeast. This success, according to Mitchell, hinged on trust, respect, and an understanding of the ever-changing harmony of residential and commercial real estate.

“We started the company from scratch,” Mitchell recalls. “We had a good management team, and we diversified by building shopping centers, single family homes and apartments.

“We knew that when single family homes were down, apartments would be up. Add the commercial side, and the company would stand on a three-legged tripod. We were able to truly participate in the Golden Age of Real Estate.”

Mitchell said the company’s management approach was critical to its rapid success and steady rise.

“We had three senior executives who had clear responsibilities,” Mitchell said. “My brother Abe oversaw construction, while our partner Bill Lubel handled the company’s administration. I focused on strategic planning, personnel, finance and land acquisition.”

After serving as chairman and CEO of the company for nearly three decades, Mitchell sold his interest in 1986. His brother did likewise. The firm’s final tally under their oversight was prodigious: 25,000 single family homes, 20,000 apartments, and 175 shopping centers, built throughout the Southeast.

“One of the things I’m most proud of is the development of excellent management teams within the company,” Mitchell said. “The company has continued to thrive long after we sold it.”

Indeed, the modern-day Mitchell Company that descended from a partnership of brothers remains the largest private firm in Mobile and among the top 40 in Alabama.

The staying power of the Mitchell business vision is illustrated by a 720-square-foot home that sits on Bragdon Avenue in Mobile. The first Mitchell project remains in use a half century after its construction.

Since selling his first entrepreneurial creation at age 53, Mitchell has spent the second half of his business life managing his investments through his current company, MBI L.L.C., and putting much of the return to work in support of his family, faith, and community.

Those who know Mitchell understand that his business success and philanthropic commitment draw on his intelligence, perseverance, and strong sense of purpose. To fully understand the Mayer Mitchell story, however, one must understand the full path of his life.

Just as his business was hitting full stride, the 36-year-old father of four was given dire news. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma and told he had, at best, six months to live. The year was 1969, and young Mayer Mitchell was advised to get his affairs in order. Never one to give up, Mitchell began a lengthy series of trips to Rochester, N.Y., to seek experimental treatment at a cancer research center at the University of Rochester.

After two years of painful treatments, Mitchell made a rare and remarkable recovery. This personal victory not only shaped his life, but shaped the future of the Mobile region as well. Mitchell gained an even keener sense of public purpose.

“I remember,” recounts wife Arlene, “when we got on the plane to go to New York for Mayer’s treatment, he told me, ‘If the Lord lets me live, I want to someday make sure there’s a cancer center in Mobile for those who are less fortunate.’”

This brings us back to the “give while you live” proverb.

Mitchell has been a tireless proponent of education and health care, serving more than 31 years on the University of South Alabama Board of Trustees, including a term as chairman. He has served on the President’s Cabinet at the University of Alabama and has supported UA through his philanthropy and service.

To date, the Mitchell family -- Mayer, Arlene and Abe -- has given more than \$36.6 million to the University of South Alabama. This includes a recent gift of \$22 million to support USA's cancer research institute, which is providing state-of-the-art care to people of the Gulf Coast region. USA's trustees recently named the "Mitchell Cancer Institute" in the family's honor. USA's Mitchell College of Business and Mitchell Center sports arena also bear the family name as testaments to their previous generosity.

In fact, the Mitchell family holds the distinction as having given more to a single public university than any other family in the history of the state of Alabama.

True to his faith, Mitchell has become an international leader in the protection of Israel, and has developed a personal relationship with every U.S. president and Israeli prime minister over the past quarter century. He has served as president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and has endowed Ramah Darom, a camp for Jewish youth from across the Southeast. He serves on the board of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, which awarded him an honorary doctorate.

His philanthropic and leadership service has included Alabama Power Company, Wright School, Bishop State Community College, Leukemia Society of America, USA Foundation, AmSouth Bank, Altus Bank, Mobile Area United Way, Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, Congregation Ahavas Chesed, Mobile Jewish Welfare Fund, Mobile Federation of Jewish Charities, Mobile County Real Estate Association, Archives of American Art, Anti-Defamation League, and The Banc Corporation.

Mitchell was given the USA National Alumni Association's Distinguished Service Award in 2005. Honors also include Outstanding Young Men of America; Jewish Welfare Fund Man of the Year; Prichard Honorary Citizen of the Year; Mobile County Realtor of the Year; and high honors from the Boy's Club of Mobile, Bishop State Community College, University of Rochester, New Orleans Chapter of Hadassah, Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind, Mobile Kiwanis Club, and the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association.

He is a member of The Country Club of Mobile, Bienville Club, Red Elephant Club, and Mobile Quarterback Club. His special interests are art, politics, and sports.

Mayer and Arlene Mitchell, who was the first woman ever chosen for the coveted "Mobilier of the Year" honor, have four children and eight grandchildren.

When asked his advice to young people regarding business and life, Mitchell -- known better as "Bubba" by friends, presidents and prime ministers -- offers a simple message.

"It's about ethics," he said. "It is very difficult to rebuild character, so never let yours be compromised."