

John Diffey '66 – A Leader and Contributor

Contributed by: Debbie Blumberg '96

Soon after graduating from Duke University in the 1970s, **John Diffey '66** found himself surrounded by hogs, corn and cotton in a 200 year-old farmhouse with no plumbing in the poorest county in North Carolina.

For \$5 a day, Diffey had been hired to supervise workers after the farm's owner fell ill. "I knew beans about farming," he says, "but they told me, 'we can teach you that; we need someone to lead the labor.'" At 21, Diffey led workers with a decisive, yet collaborative style that he credits to Kinkaid. It's an approach that he later used to create havens for senior citizens and to grow one of the country's largest non-profit development retirement communities from \$30 million to nearly \$300 million in annual revenue.



John Diffey '66

"Kinkaid gave me early opportunities to be in leadership roles," Diffey says, from the classroom to the basketball court. "I'm so grateful."

At Kinkaid, Diffey played point guard on the boys basketball team, served as baseball team captain and as student body president. He vividly recalls his basketball coach, **Jack Hanagriff**, who spent time helping him perfect his ball handling on Saturday mornings.

This year, Diffey retired from Kendal Corp., a system of not-for-profit communities for the elderly, where he has spent 24 years of his career. "The job of serving older adults has been deeply satisfying," he says.

Diffey was recruited to Kendal in 1992 after prior positions working at an Atlanta-based intermediate care facility and as an executive director at a Chapel Hill retirement community. He's also worked at a residential psychiatric treatment center and as a fundraiser. He earned his MBA from Emory.

Kendal, which is founded upon Quaker principles, has expanded steadily under Diffey's watch, from just two communities in two states to facilities in eight. "There is a deep respect for every individual in Quakerism," he says, and a unique way of working together. "When we meet to make a decision, we don't vote, we reach unity."

Meetings, however, have to be well led for each voice to be heard, and that's where Diffey lends his expertise. Kendal also prides itself on inclusion among staff and residents; the organization was early in extending benefits to same sex partners.

Two of the happiest days of his life, says Diffey, were when two gay men, one in New York and one in Ohio, approached him after presentations to say they were living more openly and comfortably at Kendal than they had anywhere else in their lives.

Diffey says residents inspire him every day. They've lived through the Great Depression and world wars, survived the Holocaust, won the Pulitzer Prize and served as college and university presidents. "They're extraordinary, and continue to be vital long past their full-time working careers."

With Kendal now under new leadership, Diffey plans to consult, work on his golf game and spend more time with his daughter and son, in Colorado and London.

He advises alums at the start of their careers, and current Kinkaidians, to decide how they want to contribute, but also be open to discovery. "You really can find a place in this world to make a difference," Diffey says.