

Remembering
RONALD E. CARRIER

A candid conversation with Linwood H. Rose

It has been said that James Madison University has always had the right president at the right time. Ronald E. Carrier arrived in 1971 with the vision and energy to propel a small teachers' college into a major university. Linwood H. Rose, who held positions in each of JMU's administrative divisions during Carrier's tenure and succeeded him as president in 1998, consolidated the incredible growth during his 14 years at the helm and put the university on solid operational footing. In this interview with Madison shortly after Carrier died in September, Rose reflects on what made "Uncle Ron" great.

Madison: In working for Carrier, when did it dawn on you that he was creating something unique in higher education?

Rose: It was in 1975 when I came to Madison hoping to be an entry-level student affairs professional. I actually interviewed with President Carrier, which was pretty unusual. I'd also interviewed for positions at the University of Tennessee and the University of Georgia, and I never met the presidents. Probably might never have met them at that level. So I think that really said that this guy has a plan, and he wants to know the people who are going to be on his team, which I found pretty impressive. And probably more than anything else, it made me want to be part of this place. I didn't hear anything specific about a vision that day that I recall. But I remember his enthusiasm and his energy, and he seemed bigger than the college.

Madison: People often talk about Carrier's big personality and forceful will. But they don't often talk about his intellect. He was also a scholar.

Rose: Right. What people didn't see is that he read all the time. And what he focused on was not academic journals on certain aspects of higher education, but the external forces outside education that he thought could apply to education. He was always tracking trends and applied that to what we were doing. I would call him extremely bright and intellectual. He just disguised it with his good-old-boy Tennessee charm. So you might not suspect his educational background, but in fact he was a Ph.D. of economics from the University of Illinois.

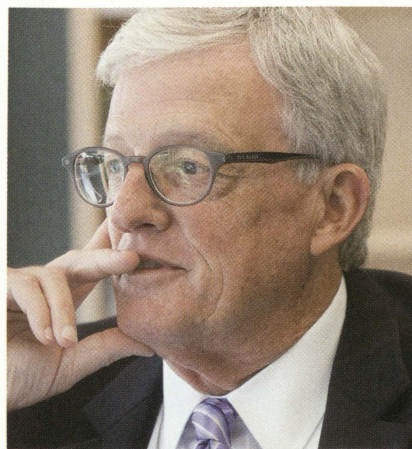
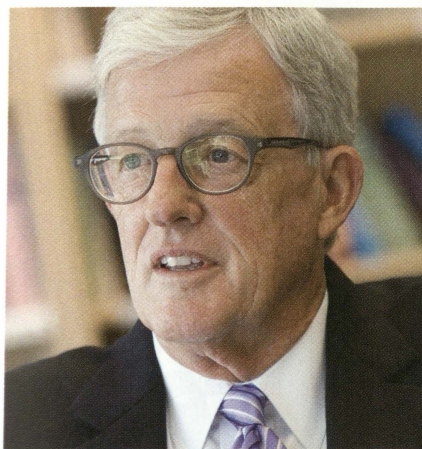
Madison: At what point did it become clear to you that Carrier's approach to paying attention to the entire student experience was going to be a big deal at Madison?

Rose: It was never announced one day that students are No. 1 at Madison. It may have been proclaimed later on. But it was never a packaged program. It's just how he felt from day one. So I think all of us began to appreciate over time how that approach singled this place out. And you could see it having

an effect on students and their parents. His emphasis on students conveyed that we were not going to take ourselves so seriously as a university that the organization, the enterprise, became more important than the people who we were serving.

Madison: Do you think it speaks to the enormity of his character that people feel something special immediately as they set foot on campus? It's really an extension of him, wouldn't you say?

Rose: Yes, I would. And I think that the physical campus is an extension of him. I used to joke about him that if one geranium was good, five would be better. When I look at this campus today, I can see changes that occurred that are extensions of him, but no one here really knows that anymore. Decisions are made now—two presidents after his service—that still reflect the commitment to students: they are still tested against the question, "How will this affect students?" I don't think that happens on a lot of college campuses. It's a legacy that obviously was successful



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in its implementation because it's reflected in the popularity of the institution. It's reflected in the applicant numbers. It's reflected in the high quality of the student who wants to attend JMU. There's plenty of evidence that he was right about those kinds of things, so it makes it easy to continue implementing along those lines because it's clearly the right thing to do.

Madison: You traveled with him a good bit, especially to Richmond. How did people respond to him?


Rose: One of my very first recollections of being with him in Richmond was when we were walking across the Capitol grounds and a legislator, I don't remember now who it was, yelled out, "Uncle Ron!" And Carrier looked at me and he said, "I don't have any idea who that guy is." But we walked across the lawn, and he stuck out his hand and he said, "Hello, my good friend!" People down there just loved him. We would go into the hallways in the General Assembly building and a crowd would always gather around him, and he always had a story. He was just a friendly character, but he was a respected character. They had a love for his personality, but also a real respect for what he was accomplishing at JMU.

Madison: Carrier was also known to be quite mercurial. What was it like to work for him when you often didn't know what to expect?

Rose: Apropos of the climate this summer, long before we had all these hurricanes, I used to call him a Cat-5 hurricane because sometimes that was the environment we felt like we were in. He just had such energy and ideas, he was like a whirling dervish at times. He could be pretty demanding. But at the end of the day, it's like a good workout, or like a coach really pushing you: You think it's miserable when you're going through it, but when it's over, you feel pretty good.

Madison: Speaking of hurricanes, would you retell that story about Hurricane Hugo in 1989?

Rose: Hurricane Hugo made landfall in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and was supposed to come up the Shenandoah Valley. I was executive vice president then, and I was the one who was responsible for making the call on the weather. So I called down to Blacksburg and the power was already out there, it was raining hard and windy. Then I called down

to Roanoke a little later and the storm had moved up there. Meanwhile it was blue skies and puffy clouds in Harrisonburg. So I went down to Dr. Carrier's office and said, "Dr. Carrier, I know it's nice out now, but I think we really need to close. We've got a lot of students living off campus, a lot students riding the bus now. We probably need to get people home now." I remember him spinning his chair around and looking outside and saying, "You've got to be kidding me." And I said, "I've called Blacksburg and I've called Roanoke. I've checked the weather forecast, and it's coming right up the valley." So we made the call to close the university. Not 15 minutes after the news had been posted, the storm veered off to West Virginia and never came up the valley. I guess it was 4 or 4:30 that afternoon and everybody had gone home. But I was still in my office and my assistant was still in the office. And the call came that I was expecting. She said, "Dr. Carrier's on the line." So I picked it up and he didn't say "hello" or "This is Ron" or anything. He just said, "I'm in the root cellar, can I come out now?" I said, "Yes sir, you can." That's just one of the many occasions when he used his sense of humor, but used it to make a point. 

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