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## Jon Levingston

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Chamber of Commerce



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# COVER STORY





# Jon Levingston

## New Director of the Clarksdale-Coahoma Chamber of Commerce

By BECKY GILLETTE • Photography by Timothy Ivy

**J**on Levingston brings both the experience of a native son who loves his community combined with knowledge of the broader world to his new position as the new executive director of the Clarksdale-Coahoma Chamber of Commerce. Levingston grew up in Cleveland where he credits his parents for setting high standards, including a work ethic honed by starting work at age twelve in the family's furniture store warehouse. While he has lived in Clarksdale for thirty-five years, he also has lived in Rome, Ga., Athens, Ga., Atlanta, Ga., Richmond, Va.,

and New York City.

"Those are great American cities, but I find that Clarksdale offers a very special combination of small town friendliness and big town sophistication," Levingston says. "It is a safe and clean town, perfect to raise a family or spend one's retirement, or just spend a few weeks visiting."

His first boss was warehouse manager Thad Jackson.

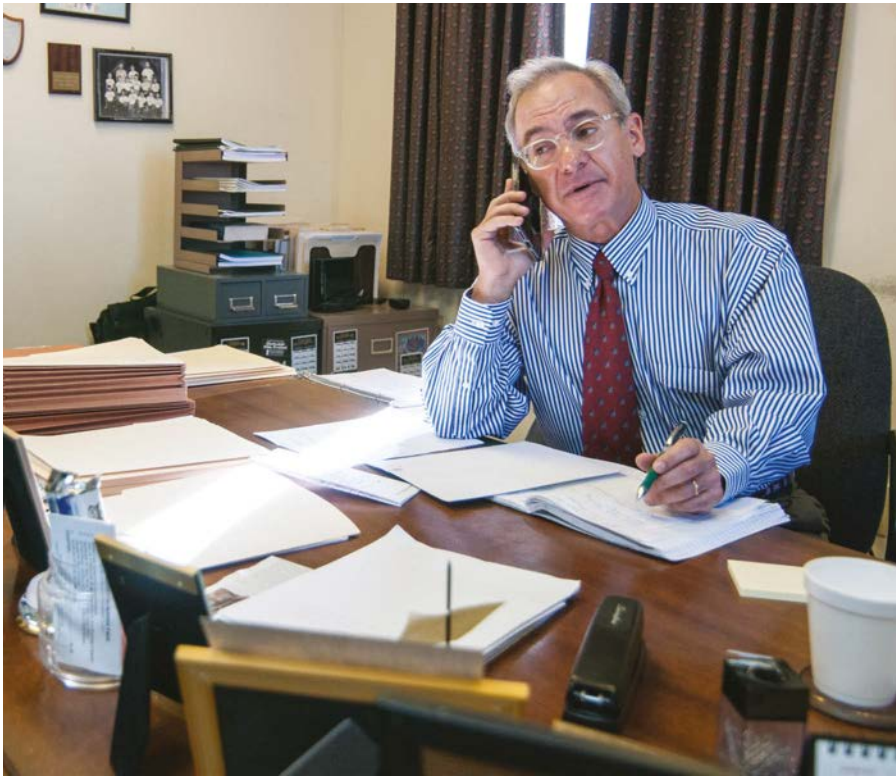
"My grandfather hired him in the late 1930s," Levingston said. "Even though he was in his mid-60s at the time I began working for him, he was the hardest

working man I ever met. He treated me respectfully, but expected me to work hard. I tried to never disappoint him."

That was true even in times when he was helping deliver furniture that weighed more than he did.

Later, working with his father, Douglas, in the family business was a revelation.

"I observed a level of commitment and dedication that has been an inspiration to me ever since," he says. "While he could be very demanding of me, I witnessed his thoughtfulness and kindness to our employees. He was a superior teacher."



From an early age, he had a great interest in all the arts, but particularly the visual arts. His mother, Barbara Levingston, and a cousin, Stan Topol, introduced him to a variety of periods in American and European art.

His parents also appreciated different types of music. “Jazz from the 1940s and 50s, as well as 18th and 19th century classical music filled our home,” he said. “Many of the great teachers from the Delta State art department, such as Malcolm Norwood, Mary Ann Ross, and Terry Simmons, welcomed me and contributed to my education.”

Levingston lived outside the Delta for a number of years before returning to Clarksdale in 1983 to help his father with

business interests. After his father passed away a few years later, Levingston ran their businesses until 2012, when he sold them.

“I also had the opportunity to participate in a variety of appointed positions,” he said. “I was appointed to the Mississippi Arts Commission by Gov. Bill Allain, the Mississippi Development Bank Board and the State Personnel Board by Gov. Ray Mabus, and the Civil Rights Museum Commission by Gov. Haley Barbour.”

He was invited to join the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce where he learned a great deal about the community, including its need to recruit and retain industrial jobs.

“I realized more jobs meant more paying customers for my business, as well as those

of the other merchants in town,” he says. “I also understood that a strong and vibrant industrial base would create a stronger tax base and insure a more secure infrastructure for our community.”

One day, while on a buying trip for his company, he overheard the owner of a furniture manufacturing firm complaining about the community in which his factory was located. He told the owner that he should consider moving to Clarksdale. The owner was interested, and through the work of the late Walter Thompson, then president of the Clarksdale Chamber of Commerce, and Pete Johnson, a Clarksdale lawyer and banker who later was elected State Auditor, a visit was set up.

“They put together a wonderful team of dedicated men and women, and all of us worked to bring that manufacturing plant to our community,” Levingston says. “Porter Ferguson started with 50 employees and grew to almost 200. It was here for about twenty years.”

Now Levingston is in the position to work full-time to make good things happen for Clarksdale.

“After being on the job for a few weeks, I have really come to appreciate the varied responsibilities of a community economic developer,” he says. “Not only do we have to work hard at recruiting new industry, but we must work with equal concentration on the retention of existing industry and business. We must develop relationships with our colleagues in other communities, as well as regional and state agencies, such as Delta Council and the Mississippi Development Authority. In addition, working with our mayor and board of commissioners, our county board of supervisors and county administrator, local legislators and our congressional delegation is essential to achieving economic development success. We are very fortunate to have very fine elected and appointed officials with whom to work.”

He has also come to appreciate the extraordinary work of his predecessor, Ron Hudson.

“I am so fortunate to have the opportunity to work with him for several months and enjoy the wisdom that comes from a lifetime’s dedication to improving communities in the Mississippi Delta,” Levingston says. “I am equally lucky to have a great staff. Tana Vassel and Cecily Allen have done wonderful work on behalf of the Chamber and our community.”



Levingston feels all the major Delta towns are special, but that Clarksdale, in particular, has a lot going for it.

“It has a unique and historic place in the history of modern popular music,” he says. “So many talented musicians who contributed to the evolution of the blues genre either were born or spent a significant portion of their lives in Clarksdale. Many of the artifacts of their lives and careers remain here, which makes Clarksdale a place of pilgrimage for those who wish to visit the place that helped launch the progenitor of rock and roll. During almost any week of the year, one will find visitors to Clarksdale from as far away places as Europe, Asia, and Australia.

“Additionally, there is no other town in Mississippi that has a more vibrant musical scene than Clarksdale. Almost every night of every week of the year, one can find live music in a variety of venues. Many performers from around the world travel here to perform just to be able to say, ‘I played in Clarksdale, Mississippi!’”

Less well known is Clarksdale’s unique role in the history of twentieth century American theater. Young Tom Williams’ (later Tennessee Williams) uncle, Dakin Williams, was the rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church.

“As a boy, Tom spent several summers in Clarksdale,” Levingston says. “Several of the people he knew or observed inspired some of the most memorable characters in his plays.”

Levingston has also been involved in writing. He contributed to the books *Bright Fields: The Mastery of Marie Hull*, authored by his brother, Bruce, that was published by University Press, 2015. In a review for the *Clarion Ledger*, Milly West wrote, “And he (Bruce) could not have found a better contributor than his brother Jon Levingston whose two impressive essays, “Faces of the Depression” and “Abstract Lyricism,” show a sincere and learned understanding of Hull’s growth as an artist and of how she fell into place in 20th century art history.”

Levingston said a vibrant arts community is a vital component part of an economically healthy community and enhances immeasurably the quality of life of that community.

He also touts Clarksdale’s dynamic food scene, excellent and growing medical community, superb health care facilities and the educational opportunities provided by Coahoma Community College. He also



likes to say that Clarksdale is to hunters as Florence is to art lovers.

“Our section of the Delta offers superior deer, duck, and dove hunting,” he says.

Levingston has been a runner for more than 30 years competing in marathons, half marathons, 10k and 5k races.

“However, now I run only about 5k a day, primarily for fun and health,” he says. “I love the game of golf, which I came to late in life. I started playing in my 40s with my two eldest daughters.”

He and his wife, Jennifer, have married 24 years, and have three daughters.

“I am so proud of my girls,” Levingston

says. “Katherine is a junior in the Honors College and the Croft Institute for International Studies at the University of Mississippi. Madeleine is also a student in the Honors College and a Lott Scholar in the Lott Leadership Institute at Ole Miss. My youngest daughter, Sarah, is a ninth grade student at the Webb School in Bell Buckle, Tenn. Like other members of my family, she is a musician and has played at a variety of venues, such as the Juke Joint Festival, fundraisers at the Cutrer Mansion and the Bolivar County Library, as well as local restaurants such as Stone Pony and Levon’s.” **DBJ**