

NAMES IN BUSINESS: Horizon: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN METRO ATLANTA

Islands' investor mixes work, family, hope

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Driving out to Lake Lanier Islands, road signs leading to the entrance of the Islands say it all: "Changes Underway."

Bulldozers and construction crews line the roads, creating "round-abouts," bicycle trails, golf paths and new landscaping. There are new villas, a luxury spa building and a refurbished hotel that has been transformed into a four-star lodge from a two-star hotel.

It has been three years since Gwinnett businessman Virgil Williams and his family acquired the long-term (more than 50 years) leasehold interests of Lake Lanier Islands. Since then, they have invested about \$43 million in upgrading the Islands and making the site an attractive destination for metro Atlanta.

But, more importantly, the venture has brought the Williams family closer together.

"This gives me an opportunity to teach my children what I have learned, give them the benefit of my experiences and enjoy seeing them grow up and succeed on their own," Williams said.

Williams and his wife, Sara, have four children — Virgil Jr., Mike Williams, Brad Williams and Mendy Williams Bowling. The other family members who are involved include Mendy's husband, David Bowling, who is in the construction business with Brad; and Mike's wife, DeAnna, who is handling the retail for the project.

"I'm at a point in my career where I don't need any more money. That's why Sara and I only own 12.5 percent of this enterprise. The children own 87.5 percent," Williams said. "I don't draw a salary. I donate my energy into this to help them succeed."

These past three years have given Williams, who turned 69 on Thursday, an opportunity to reflect back on his life and his priorities.

In October 2005 (only two months after buying his interest in Lake Lanier Islands), Williams was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had surgery and most of one of his lungs was removed. He had to undergo nearly a year of treatment.

Then, in February 2007, Sara was diagnosed with breast cancer. She also had surgery and underwent treatment for the better part of last year.

"We are both doing great now," Williams said. "We lost a little time, but now we are really blowing and growing."

Virgil Williams and two of the children — Mike and Mendy — took me on a tour to see some of the progress occurring at the Islands. Mike is the only one of the four children working on the project full time. Mendy has been working on interior design and decorating.

One of the spots where her work is highly visible is the new Legacy Lodge and Conference Center, formerly the Emerald Pointe Hotel. The decor reflects the style of great lodges and resorts of America. The BullFrogs Bar & Grille has been totally renovated, complete with large artistic metallic frogs that Mendy commissioned for the restaurant.

Virgil Williams made sure we saw the stonework around one of the tunnels built to separate automobile traffic from golf carts and bicycles. He pointed to several of the pedestrian paths that are under construction.

"There were zero sidewalks and trails on this island," Williams said. "We'll have 26 miles of 10-foot-wide trails."

The Williams family also has expanded its investment. The original leasehold interest was for 1,100 acres. Now, the family has acquired an additional 450 acres from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In the past year, Lake Lanier has experienced severe drought, which has caused some confusion in the region. None of the public activities on the islands has been impacted by the drought, including the water park.

"If it had to happen, it happened at a good time," Williams said. "This drought coincidentally occurred when we were going to have a lot of the Islands out of service any way. The good Lord is looking after us."

Williams also has been in talks with all the federal and state agencies involved with Lake Lanier to see if the water level of the lake could improve. Currently, the lake is down by about 15 feet. "I'm optimistic with my dealings that a solution is in the offing," Williams said.

Much of the work being done should be completed by spring. Williams plans to build an "iconic" bridge between the first two islands. The gate also will be moved, offering the public free access to the first island.

Ultimately, the Williams family is planning to build a new water park. But, in the meantime, the family is making improvements on the existing water park so the development can meet a certain standard.

"We are spending money on things that we know won't give us a good return, but we know are necessary for the kind of environment we're trying to create," Williams said. "The beauty of this legacy is the idea that we are not here for a quick buck."

Williams doesn't expect the investment in the Islands to start showing a return for another three to five years. Eventually, Williams believes the development will be quite lucrative for the family.

And that's what this project is all about — family.

That point really hit home when both Sara and Virgil Williams struggled with cancer. "It was a wake-up call for everybody about how delicate life is," Mike said.

The opportunity to invest in Lake Lanier Islands came shortly after Virgil Williams decided to sell and retire from his varied business interests — banking, engineering, real estate, media and sports teams.

Throughout his career, Williams didn't make the mistake that some executives make — working too hard at his family's expense. "I have no regrets, and there's no guilt," he said.

"We all get along," Mendy said. "My father has been able to keep harmony in the family. He puts his family first."

Having cancer just "validated" what Virgil Williams was already doing — working with his children and passing on his legacy.

"We don't have any fear of death whatsoever," Williams said of himself and Sara. "We are very optimistic that we can achieve our goal of working as a family, spending time as a family and enjoying seeing them succeed. We are going to do that as long as we are able. This probably is going to make us live longer."

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