

"So much of what has been big in this community for decades has been directly attributable to him."

— U.S. District Judge Lacey Collier, about M.J. Menge

11/7/99  
Pensacola  
News Journal

# Menge leads life, legacy of service

Lawyer earns praise for desire, devotion toward a better city

By Ginny Graybiel  
News Journal staff writer

The names roll off M.J. Menge's tongue, names of dedicated community leaders who have helped shape Pensacola.

The name he doesn't bring up is his own.

But ask other community leaders why Pensacola is what it is, and virtually every one of them will talk about M.J. Menge.

"Everything I can say sounds like such a cliché," U.S. District Judge Lacey Collier said. "But he is truly a person who makes a difference. So much of what has been big in this community for decades has been directly attributable to him."

Menge, 62, is a postman's son who grew up in Pensacola, then graduated from Pensacola Junior College and the University of Florida. He came back to Pensacola for his lengthy career as one of the city's top lawyers and a volunteer for more than two dozen groups and boards.

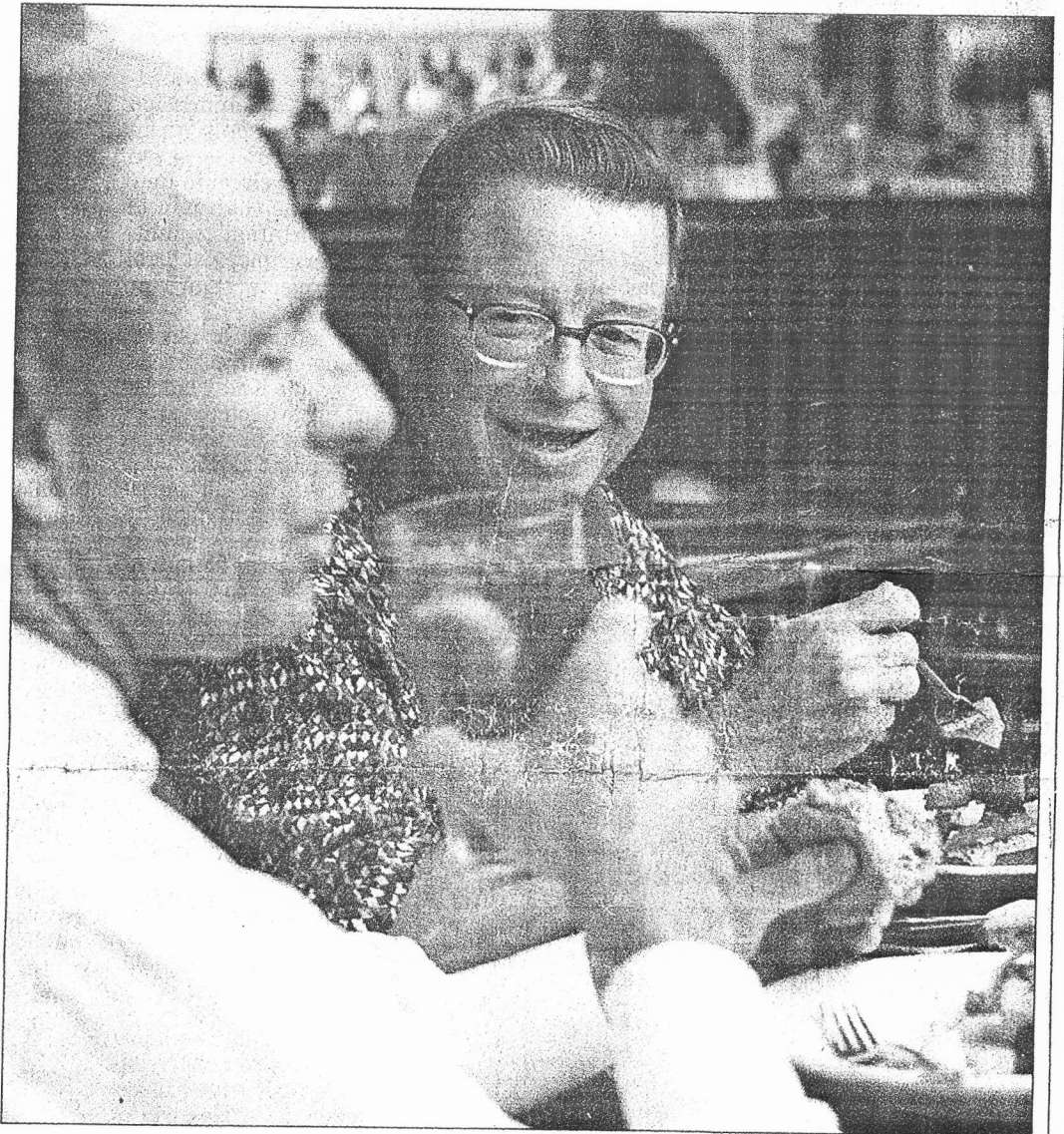
He recently was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, something he calls "a shot out of the blue."

He has parceled out his clients to others but still goes to his office to assist with those cases. He's getting chemotherapy and, most of the time, feeling well. He and his family are hoping for the best.

He has, above all, peace of mind.

"I'm truly comfortable where I am," he said during a conversation in his Cordova Park home.

Menge's friends and associates marvel at the number of activities he crams into a week. The real cliché is that he's a part-time lawyer practicing 60 hours a week and tending to volunteer endeavors 40 hours a week.



Bruce Graner/News Journal

M.J. Menge, right, sharing a laugh here with Cal Moore, has earned a reputation as a dedicated volunteer and an ethical lawyer in his lifetime of service to Pensacola and its citizens.

## SUNDAY PROFILE

This is the third in a series of occasional profiles of local newsmakers.

But it's pretty much true. Menge claims he has said no to organizations wanting him to volunteer. His wife, Sandy, herself a longtime volunteer, isn't so sure.

"There are a lot more things he came home with than I knew he was going to," she said.

Pensacola lawyer Ed Moore,

who graduated from the University of Florida law school with Menge in 1964, said he doesn't know of anyone who has given to the community more unselfishly.



Moore

"I think the thing that sets M.J. apart is that he hasn't done it for any financial or political gain," he said. "You see a lot of people who do a lot of good things, but most of the

time you can trace it back to bettering their business or promoting themselves somehow or other. He does these things just because he loves the community."

The Shell, Fleming, Davis & Menge law firm is an oddity.

In an age in which law firms frequently break up and partners come and go, this firm has remained basically intact: T.A. Shell and Rollin Davis founded the firm in 1956. Fletcher Fleming came on board in 1959, and Menge

See MENGE, 4A

"You see a lot of people who do a lot of good things, but most of the time you can trace it back to bettering their business or promoting themselves somehow or other. He does these things just because he loves the community."

— Pensacola lawyer Ed Moore, about M.J. Menge

## Menge works toward a better Pensacola every day, friends say

FROM 1A

joined right out of law school in 1964.

The firm is an extremely active one. But it works with no glitz, glamour or sophisticated advertising campaigns, relying instead on its solid reputation and referrals from clients.

In contrast to the typical firm where only the partners are in control, the 14 lawyers who work there have an equal vote, including the newest associate from the first day on the job.

They consider themselves a family, whether working or socializing. Among the 11 partners and associates who are married, there has never been a divorce.

Menge doesn't mention himself when talking about the firm's success.

"I really think we've tried to stand for a professional firm that puts ethics and service at the forefront," he said.

Shell, he said, was the one who set the standard.

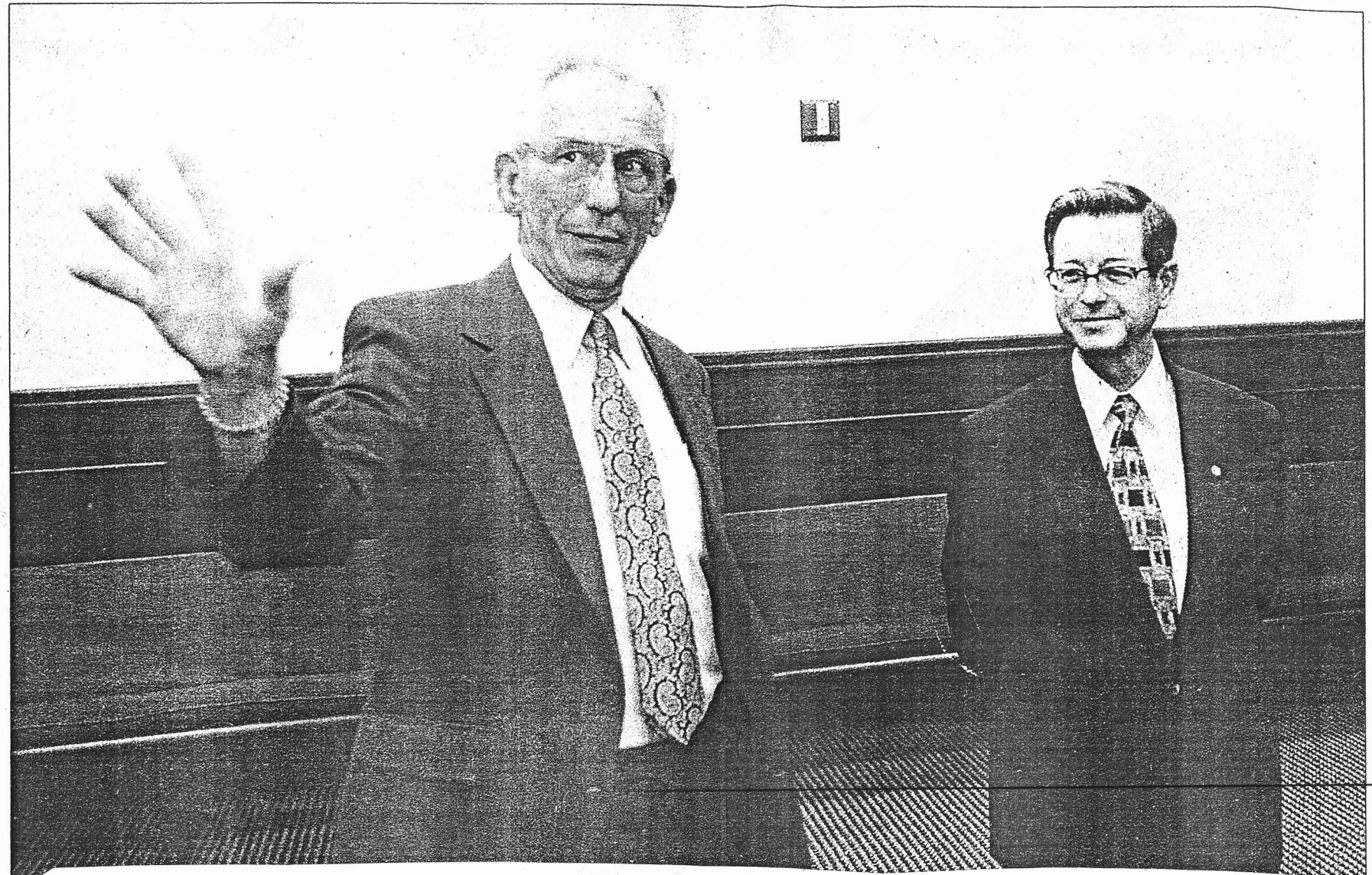
"He has always wanted to give more than receive," he said.

But Shell, who had cut back his work schedule to 2½ days a week before Menge's illness and is now back to five-plus days, said it's Menge who set the example.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone who was less concerned about money," he said. "The only arguments he ever has with his clients about money are when they say, 'M.J., you're not charging me enough.' And he says, 'I'm getting more than I deserve.'"

Maureen Duignan, who joined Shell Fleming in 1988 and became the first female partner, is impressed that Menge always looks forward.

"M.J. has a very young attitude," she said. "He's young at heart, if you will. He's conservative, but he's always open to new ideas."



U.S. District Judge Lacey Collier, left, credits M.J. Menge for his legal career. "He explained to me ... that there was a middle ground and almost any case could be settled."

Tony Giberson/News Journal



## A 'lawyer-statesman'

Menge's wide-ranging practice includes government law, commercial law, real estate, probate and estate planning.

Moore said Menge is the type of lawyer who's getting rarer.

"In this day and time of great criticism of lawyers and the legal profession, he really stands out as what I call a lawyer-statesman," he said. "He's working for the bigger picture of improving the administration of justice and the public good."

Collier, who employs Menge as his personal lawyer, said he owes his legal career to Menge.

It was Menge who encouraged him to go to law school when he retired from the Navy. The two would sit for hours at the old Cranford's barbecue restaurant talking about the pros and cons.

Back then, Collier said, he assumed Menge was the screen-star lawyer who invariably won big in court. But he said Menge set him straight and taught him a valuable lesson about the law.

"I remember asking him, 'When was the last time you tried a case?'" Collier said. "He said, 'Oh, I haven't been in a courtroom in over three years.'"

"I was deflated. I wanted to be a lawyer, he was my hero and he didn't even go to court," the judge said. "Then he explained to me that he felt he had failed when he went to court, that there was a middle ground and almost any case could be settled."

Menge's volunteer duties haven't made him any less dedicated to his legal career. They've just put him in his office at unexpected hours.

"He might go to meetings all day, then he'll be in the office at 2 in the morning," Duignan said.

Menge, Moore and two others began a weekly Wednesday afternoon golf game about seven years ago.

"More times than not, we'd get to the 19th hole and enjoy it, and the rest of us would head home and M.J. would be heading to the office," Moore said. "He's always done tons of night work, tons of weekend work."

### PJC his top client

Among Menge's clients, one stands above the rest: Pensacola Junior College.

Menge's name is synonymous with the junior college, where he has been general counsel since 1968.

Last April, the college dedicated the M.J. Menge Bell Tower, an eight-story structure built to commemorate the college's 50th anniversary.

Menge recommended his associate, Tom Gilliam, to serve as the college's lawyer in the immediate future, and the PJC board approved the selection.

"PJC has meant more to my life than any other organization," Menge said. "I just believe so much in PJC and what it does in this community and what it does for the young people in this community."

He was once one of those young people.

After graduating from Pensacola



Bruce Graner/News Journal

His many activities keep M.J. Menge, left, busy often, but he makes sure to get in a round of golf with friends, such as Ed Moore, every Wednesday.

High School in 1954, he went to college at PJC, where he earned an associate's degree in 1956. In his last year there, he was president of the student body.

"We didn't have the funds to even consider going to college out of town," he said. "PJC just gave me a wonderful start."

Larry Bracken, PJC's longtime director of government relations, said Menge is part of the fabric of the college.

He has been on campus every Thursday and whenever he's needed in between.

"Not only does M.J. know the law, he knows higher education law," Bracken said. "On top of which, he brings with him practically the entire history of PJC. When an issue crops up, he can say, 'Yeah, remember back in '73 when we had this sort of problem?' That's an invaluable asset. That's irreplaceable."



Bracken

### Jaycees provided a start

Menge's civic stamina seems boundless.

The Pensacola Jaycees, a powerful group of about 220 members strong in the late '60s and early '70s, provided his training ground for community involvement.

When he was president in 1968, he got a great lesson in juggling a lot of balls. The group worked on 152 projects that year, and he dashed from meeting to meeting on each.

The Jaycees also were the vehicle for what is certainly one of Menge's most lasting contributions to the area.

It was 1967, Shell was city attorney, and Menge frequently attended City Council meetings. Those meetings often ended with the members settling their disputes in the parking lot.

"I got disgusted with the spectacle," Menge said. "Things just were not conducted with the greatest of

decorum."

Menge and a few Jaycee friends formed a group called Citizens for Good Government, got out the city directory, figured out who lived in what district and identified eight people they thought would make good council members.

"We went and knocked on their doors and said, 'It's your turn to sacrifice,'" he said.

Menge's group organized their campaigns, provided financial support and got the eight in office, including Harold Rose, Albert Klein, Porky Paulk, John Schill and Lindley Camp.

"That single act transformed the City Council to what it is today," Collier said. "They put a majority of quality people in."

With a more professional council in office, Menge said, "we decided we'd take on the County Commission."

He said that effort ended with some good new leaders, including Henry Lane, Jack Kinney and Sherman Barnes.

Menge said he has never been tempted to run for public office.

He knows the reality of politics: "If you make decisions for the betterment of the community, sometimes you're not going to be around for too long."

### Navy a second career

Menge, who served as a destroyer officer on the USS Sarsfield for three years, has taken on the Navy as almost a second career.

He said the Pensacola-Navy partnership is a key to making this community work.

"I credit the military as being primarily responsible for making us the open community we are," he said. "We're not aristocratic. If you move here, you work hard and you're honest, you can open any door."

Again and again, Menge has fought to protect what the Navy already has here and to bring in more military operations.

For years, he's volunteer vice

chairman of the Pensacola Area Chamber of Commerce Military Affairs Council.

He was a key player in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties' successful effort to protect the local area in the face of base closures and realignments across the country in 1995.

Menge said the area can't afford to let down its guard.

"We're going to be vulnerable," he said. "I don't know how it's going to play out because it's so political. I'd say the biggest thing we've got going for us is Jeb Bush if George (W. Bush) is elected."

Retired Rear Adm. Jimmie Taylor, the chamber's former vice president of the armed services department, said Menge is to a great extent responsible for the military's strength locally.



Taylor

Since 1994, when the Naval Aviation Depot shut down and took 3,000 jobs with it, local Department of Defense and military personnel have grown from 16,000 to 27,000. The Naval Air Technical Training Center and other military projects also brought \$400 million in new construction.

"After we lost NADEP, it was incumbent on us to set up a more concentrated effort in the community to protect ourselves," Taylor said. "M.J. was an integral part of building the architecture for that effort."

Behind the scenes, Menge was extremely effective, especially in wielding valuable influence with Gov. Lawton Chiles and Sen. Bob Graham, Taylor said.

J. Earle Bowden, editor emeritus of the News Journal, said he repeatedly saw Menge negotiate in Tallahassee and Washington to keep the military strong here.



Bowden

In particular, he recalled a local delegation calling on former Gov. Bob Martinez when the Democratic Legislature had appropriated \$12 million to dredge the Pensacola Pass to accommodate the USS Forrestal and the Republican governor was holding the appropriation up.

Tempers were flaring, Bowden said. But then Menge, a lifelong Democrat, stood up.

"M.J. just talked a very civil and reasoned way and got assurances from the governor he'd go along with it," Bowden said.

### Helping other people

The list of Menge's other endeavors goes on and on, with one thing leading to another over the years. Many of the endeavors he's proudest of involve organizations that help other people.

Menge has volunteered for the United Way for years. Two years ago, he helped set up the United Way Foundation, which encourages people to make sizable gifts for an endowment fund for community needs.

"There's no way to meet all the

needs of the community," he said. "But the United Way is the best way to do it."

Menge also was the chairman of a group that started the YMCA's Northeast Branch on Langley Avenue in 1970. He has worked hard for the March of Dimes year after year.

Menge also has been steadfast in his devotion to Trinity Presbyterian Church.

The Rev. Frank Beall, Trinity's former pastor, said the church, like the community, has depended on Menge.



Beall

Menge was chairman of the board of deacons when Beall arrived in 1971. Since then, he has been an elder, a building committee member and an adviser to a youth group.

But one of the nicest things about Menge, Beall said, is that he's somehow never in a rush.

"He always gives the impression that 'I have time for you,'" he said.

### Focused, even in illness

Menge's illness isn't going to slow him down anymore than it absolutely has to.

He's still focused on what's best for the community.

In particular, he emphasizes the need for a careful balance between development and the environment.

Menge has always worked to create high-paying jobs here so young people will return to work.

If not for Menge, Pensacola might not have Ellyson Industrial Park, a bastion of industry, manufacturing and high-tech jobs.

In 1981, he negotiated an agreement with the General Services Administration to convey to the Pensacola-Escambia Development Commission the then-surplus military land on which the park now sits.

But, as an outdoorsman who loves boating and hunting, he's always cognizant that the area can't afford to give up what it naturally has.

"I don't think anyone wants to see our pristine environment sacrificed," he said.

His suggestions for the future:

- Build the Escambia Expressway, extending Interstate 110 north to Nine Mile Road because "the need is not going to go away."

- Move the Main Street wastewater treatment plant.

"It will be hard and it will be expensive, but that's prime waterfront. If we don't start planning, it's never going to get done."

- Protect Scenic Highway from future development.

"Scenic Highway is a treasure. Once you lose it, you lose it."

- Develop an overall plan for waterfront development.

Menge said it's going to take the community working together, the old guard as well as new leaders, to get the difficult things done.

He's optimistic that will happen.

"We have got more people that do more things in this community than you can shake a stick at," he said. "This is just a very giving community."

## M.J. Menge

**Birthplace:** Glendale.

**Age:** 62.

**Family:** Wife, Sandy. Children, Vivian Gallo, 32, attorney in Philadelphia, and Randy Menge, 29, marine salesman in Pensacola.

**Education:** Pensacola High School, 1954; Pensacola Junior College, 1956; University of Florida, B.A. in 1958, J.D. in 1964.

**Military:** Navy Officer Candidate School, Newport, R.I., 1959; Naval gunnery officer on USS Sarsfield, 1959-1962.

**Professional career:** Attorney in private practice with the law firm of Shell, Fleming, Davis & Menge.

**Professional activities:**

Attorney for PJC and the University of West Florida; served on board of governors of Young Lawyers Section of The Florida Bar; served on First Judicial Circuit Nominating Committee for selection of circuit judges; served on Federal Judicial Nominating Commission.

**Church:** Trinity Presbyterian Church.

**What he has been president or chairman of:** PJC Alumni Association, Pensacola SAE Alumni Association, Pensacola Jaycees, Downtown Toastmasters, Northeast Branch YMCA, Metropolitan YMCA, PJC Foundation, Escambia County chapter of the March of Dimes, Pensacola Area Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of Commerce Military Affairs Council.

**What he has been vice president of:** United Way of Escambia County, Legal Aid Society.

**What he has been on the board of:** Baptist Hospital, UWF Council of Advisors, Pensacola Sports Association, Fiesta of Five Flags, Florida Junior Miss Pageant, Pensacola Housing Authority, Pensacola-Escambia Development Commission, Escambia County Commission on Charter Government

**Other membership:** Downtown Rotary.

**Honors:** Pensacola Jaycees Distinguished Service Award, 1969; one of Florida's Five Outstanding Young Men, presented by Florida Jaycees, 1969; Community Leader of the Year, presented by Pensacola News Journal and Pensacola Area Chamber of Commerce, 1979; selected as Foundation Fellow by PJC, 1993; presented medallion by city of Pensacola and Escambia County for community service, 1992; Pensacola Kiwanis Civic Award, 1993; Distinguished Community Service Award, presented by United Way of Escambia County, 1994; Arthritis Foundation, 1996 "Bastee"; M.J. Menge Bell Tower dedicated at PJC, 1996; Spirit of Pensacola award, presented by Chamber of Commerce and Leadership Pensacola, 1997.

**Hobbies:** Golf and hunting.