Sometimes it takes a little push, and Bill Fenstermaker got his in the early 1980s from a respected friend. Young Fenstermaker, you need to be involved in your community," the longtime friend urged.

It was the beginning of what has come to be a way of life for the Lafayette businessman, who is president and chief executive officer of the engineering firm Cliff Fenstermaker & Associates Inc.

It's not that he wasn't interested in community service before, Fenstermaker says. "Like a lot of people, I didn't know how.

Fenstermaker first became involved with USL, his alma mater, and then organizations like the United Way. After being invited to join Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce banquet by another good friend, the late John Toran, Fenstermaker began participating in chamber events and in five years rose through the ranks to become chairman of the board for the organization in 1994.

The chamber position was more time-consuming than he had anticipated, but well worth the effort, Fenstermaker says. "It was very rewarding because at the time we had government that was not working if you recall. Somewhere had to get something done.

As chairman, Fenstermaker, along with attorney Clay Alice, who at the time chaired the chamber's long-range planning division, brought attention to the importance of computer technology and electronic communication for local businesses. Specific emphasis was put on better communication between businesses and the university. "We started the education process. It was to start the mindset," he says. "I love technology. That was my alley. That was fun.

Fenstermaker also worked on the consolidation of city and parish governments and tackled the gambling issue, forming a Gambling Task Force to study the proposed expansion of gaming in Lafayette Parish. The task force studied the controversial topic, eventually famously opposing the expansion of gambling in the parish.

Fenstermaker also picked up the ball on the chamber's efforts to extend Interstate 49 south from Lafayette to New Orleans. Support of the project and ambiguous indication to not serve as chamber chairman ended has been most successful. With MillSouth Bank President Remy Choler, one of his constituents of the I-49 Regional Task Force, Fenstermaker pushed for funding for the project. Fenstermaker and Choler have managed to give the long-overdue project a higher profile than it had previously enjoyed.

The I-49 extension has been designated a "priority artery" by the federal government in the New Interstate Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. Additional federal dollars for Louisiana could be generated if highway improvements are invested, though the exact amount has yet to be determined by Congress. "We know now that it is on the state level, at least a portion of those monies are committed for I-49 South," Fenstermaker says. "It's down to legislative will.

The 49-year-old businessman, who now is vice chairman of the governor's I-49 South Task Force, is committed to seeing the project through and believes that will come to fruition in his lifetime. And unlike those who may not be able to get satisfaction until they actually see the completion, Fenstermaker says he has gained insight about every bit of progress, "It's hard to get discouraged," he says.

"I am so passionate that Bill's integrity honesty and hard work have added to the project," says Choler. He says Fenstermaker has grown to be a strong leader who has brought his message of the importance of the extension of I-49 to government officials and the general public on local, state, regional and national levels. Fenstermaker has argued that the project is crucial to hurricane evacuation, traffic safety and the health and economic development.

Choler says Fenstermaker has demonstrated an "incredible amount of perseverance on the project. "If you called him tomorrow to go to New Orleans and send him he'd be there. And he brings that same commitment to his business," Choler says.

Fenstermaker has effectively juggled his community efforts with running a growing company Cliff Fenstermaker & Associates is a surveying, mapping, engineering and environmental services firm which now employs about 135 people. Headquartered in Lafayette, the firm also operates in New Orleans and is expanding into Houston, where it is expected to employ an additional 10 people over the course of the next several years. The company, founded in 1950 by Fenstermaker's father, who is still chairman of the board, enjoyed a banner year in 1997, with revenues increasing by more than 30 percent over 1996.

Bill Fenstermaker may have needed audge from a good friend more than a decade ago, but he has spent a healthy portion of his 25-year marriage to wife Anna—and as father to four children—working to make this incredible what it is today. And he's not nearly done yet—he is now co-chairing USL's, investing in Our Future Campaign, a land raising effort to increase the university's global goals to $375 million by the year 2010, and Fenstermaker also says he has "a lot of work left in my life," on I-49.

"We just want to make a difference," Fenstermaker says. "I just want to make a difference."

By Leslie Turk

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