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Eric Robert (pronounced row-bear) is a swashbuckling figure in downtown Greensboro who has been challenging the status quo for years. He is a robust man with broad shoulders and a wide back. He has long black hair that he wears in a ponytail and a bristling beard to match.

He bought a century old mill on South Elm Street in 2006, working relentlessly to transform it into a showplace. His hard work enticed Duck Head Apparel to place its corporate office in the building. “The city was trying to give Duck Head money to settle somewhere, but they decided to move into the mill instead. Cool sells itself,” Robert said.

Greensboro Mayor Nancy Vaughan said, “Eric has taken a 100 year old condemned mill and turned it into a castle. He is extremely creative and talented. He is able to see things through an international lens and we need to embrace his talents so we don’t miss out on opportunities to capitalize on them.”

At the time Robert bought the mill, Greensboro was promoting a new plan to develop roughly 10 acres of land on South Elm Street. The city’s plan consisted of a grocery store on the corner of Elm and Lee streets, as well as creating residential units in The Mill.

Robert bought the mill while city staff was telling everyone about their redevelopment plan. This resulted in a huge battle between the city and Robert that lasted for years. The city wanted the mill and Robert wasn’t selling it.

First, Robert received eminent domain letters from the city for about two years.

“I would get letters sometimes daily. They wanted me to sell them the mill so they could give it to another developer who would be more connected but not as capable,” Robert said.

After the city was unable to pry the mill out of Robert’s hands, it seemed things became more difficult for him. Robert said, “I faced unreasonable parking restrictions. I was constantly

denied permits. I faced permanent permit denial. Andy Scott even hand delivered condemnation and/or usage restriction letters for contamination near the Mill.”

The contamination issue was resolved after city staff alerted the Guilford County Health Department in order to assign responsibility to Robert, but GCH actually decided it was the city’s property that the contamination was on and that the cleanup was the city’s responsibility.

“Once the county made their decision on the contamination and the city learned it was their responsibility, the contamination magically went away,” Robert added. “I was fortunate enough to have great knowledgeable people on my side, and the whole situation may have ended up differently if it wasn’t for the great work of Joe Best of Best Geological.”

During the spring of 2012, Robert made an appearance at the Greensboro City Council Meeting to explain his frustrations to the council after dealing with the obstacles they presented him. He spoke of the eminent domain letters, the parking requirements and the attempted condemnation due to the city’s contamination. After he spoke, not one council member challenged him, congratulated him or thanked him. They all just sat silent.

The mill wasn’t Robert’s first rehabilitation project. He first bought a building that had been abandoned for 25 years on Lewis Street. This is where he located his advertising/design firm, Qub Studios. At the time, Robert bought his Lewis Street property the area looked like a ghost town. Robert turned his property into a showroom of sorts and improved it tremendously. Now, it’s the home of Lotus Lounge, a popular downtown nightclub, and Ink Photography productions. Robert still owns the property.

Robert speaks with a thick French accent but he is as American as it gets. He loves his friends and despises his enemies and both parties are fully aware of this. Just a quick scroll through his blog titled “Dang” reveals his disdain for Greensboro’s downtown in-crowd.

In a recent post on his blog, he wrote, “Cyndy Hayworthless of DGI, the interim President and CEO (even though she does not have the required education or competencies), is an even bigger snake that anyone thought ... even her friends!” In another post he described Hayworth as

someone that, "...embodies the deceit and mediocrity we grew accustomed to from DGI, and is, as unimaginative as her predecessors."

He was a member of Downtown Greensboro Inc. for one year before being voted off the board in January 2015. After being voted off, some of his fellow board members spoke out on his behalf. DGI board member Mark Hewett, who owns Area Modern Furniture on South Elm Street, told media outlets that Robert had been the most talented person on DGI's board. Obviously everyone did not see it that way.

Robert and his good friend Simone Ritchey McClinton, owner of M'Coul's Public House, both served on DGI's board and voiced their concerns loudly while doing so. That ruffled the feathers of some of the fellow board members and is considered the reason they were kicked off.

Robert did not ride off quietly into the sunset after being removed from DGI's Board. He has remained diligent in questioning the board's direction and leadership.

Robert spoke from the floor at both of the city council meetings this month to voice his concerns about DGI. His first speech made to the council was delivered on April 7. Robert said, "I'm here because I'm tired and quite honestly, I've had enough. I'm tired of the mediocrity and I'm tired of the political correctness. I'm tired of the absurdity that now embodies DGI and its current leadership. And I'm tired of you guys allowing it to take place over and over, year after year. I'm tired of people moving downtown in between two nightclubs and then complaining about noise. I'm tired of people moving downtown and then complaining that there are too many black people. I'm tired of paying DGI's outrageous salaries and operating expenses. Quite honestly, I don't think downtown Greensboro is getting much in return." Not one councilperson responded after he spoke.

Robert returned to the council chambers to speak from the floor during the April 20 city council meeting. This time, Robert reminded the council that the city gave DGI over \$1 million from last year's budget and he wanted the council to tell him what DGI accomplishment they were most proud of? Mayor Nancy Vaughan's answered Robert by saying, "I agree that their performance over the last years have been lack luster and when you say point to an

accomplishment I really can't point to an accomplishment. I think that downtown has been very successful but it's kind of been successful in spite of DGI not because of DGI."

Robbie Efird, who owns Greene Street (a nightclub downtown), agrees with Robert about DGI. "We essentially have to pay a corporation that wants to shut us down," Efird said.

For years, Robert has seen DGI operate in a way that he believes is unethical and nonsensical and he has written volumes about it on his blog. He has numerous alleged unethical moves.

He reported that DGI Board Member Dawn Chaney is ineligible to continue as a board member due to term limit restrictions imposed on the board by the city council.

As of December 2013, DGI's bylaws were changed to allow members to serve no more than two three-year terms. However, according to DGI documents, Dawn Chaney has been a board member since 2006. DGI Interim President and CEO Cyndy Hayworth repeatedly denied commenting on the issue.

When asked about his battles with certain Greensboro cliques, Robert's wife Adrienne said, "He goes after them in a way that they are not accustomed to. He loses all of his charm and diplomacy after he is pushed."

Robert was born in Lyon, France. Lyon is universally respected for its historical and architectural landmarks, and that is where Robert said he got his love for building restoration.

His wife said, "He will always have a project. That makes him happy. I find it beautiful to watch him work."

Robert spent his childhood in France before his family moved to Port Gentil Gabon in Africa. Robert's father and role model grew tired of living in France and longed to return to Africa, where he was born. To accomplish this, Robert said his father sold his interest in the exclusive Jantzen license (apparel industry) and went into the business of shipping construction materials. Robert attended high school at Lycée d'état de Port Gentil and worked for his father's

business shipping construction materials on barges up and down the West Coast of Africa. Robert said that his life in Gabon allowed him to live in a place that is surrounded by water and he loved that.

After completing school in Africa, Robert came to the United States and began living in Washington, D.C. Robert came to the United States to attend college despite not being able to speak English fluently.

“My concentration in High school was economics and it was my father’s dream for me to come to America and get an MBA. I came to the United States not knowing that I would need to complete my undergraduate degree before getting a masters degree so my education didn’t happen quite like I thought it would have,” Robert said.

Robert enrolled at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland in 1983 and began assisting one of the French teachers at Churchill High School in Maryland. Robert says that it was during this time that he began to learn English by watching HBO. After attending Montgomery College for almost 2 years, Robert moved to St. Augustine, Florida, and enrolled at Flagler College in 1985.

Robert said he lived in a \$300-per-month shack on the beach and worked as a DJ in nightclubs while attending Flagler College. He admits that coming to America not knowing English or understanding the university and college systems prolonged his education.

However, once Robert began to speak English fluently and got a better understanding of how the higher education world operates, he was accepted to UNC-G, and graduated in 1988.

Soon after moving to Greensboro, Robert says he developed relationships with many local artists that lived around UNC-G’s campus and began to want to make Greensboro his home. “The artist community and scene in Greensboro was one of the best one in the country. So much talent, so much, so many good individuals,” Robert said.

After graduating from UNC-G Robert continued to work to achieve his dream of getting his MBA. Robert applied to go to graduate school at Elon College and was accepted.

Robert was accepted to graduate school but he had no job.

“The only job I could find was working construction at UNC-G. I would work in the daytime with the construction crew that was building the cafeteria at UNC-G and go to graduate school at night.”

Robert says his time working on a construction crew at the university he just graduated from was a very humbling experience and it motivated him to aggressively pursue his master’s degree while attending Elon. “I basically lived in the library at night writing my papers and then I would go to UNC-G to work on the construction crew when the sun came up. I drove a Toyota Corona and it broke down all the time. I was also broke. I was broke as broke can get, but yet we never lacked anything,” Robert said.

Robert overcame the language barriers, the lack of understanding of the university system and the lack of money and still accomplished his dream. He is Greensboro’s version of Rocky. It is very appropriate that he is married to a beautiful woman named Adrienne.

Robert graduated with his MBA in 1990.

“Right when I got my masters, my Toyota completely died. I had no car and no money so I had to buy a moped. My mode of transportation went from lame to lamer,” Robert said. He also became a father that year when his son, Quentin, was born.

Robert and his moped began a quest for gainful employment and the first job he landed after getting his masters degree was dressing mannequins at Belk’s in Four Seasons Mall. While working at Belk’s, Robert’s sense of style began to get noticed, and it wasn’t long before he was getting contacted from headhunters for potential openings in parallel positions. He soon found himself interviewing for the assistant manager of retail presentation at the VF Corporation.

VF is one of the biggest names in the apparel industry, and on Robert’s first day on the job he got a promotion and a raise. The person who hired Robert quit before his starting date and he

was given a chance to do their job. Robert's work for VF involved traveling the country and the world opening retail stores.

"I was lucky to end up there because I had the opportunity to work with young people with superstar visions," Robert said. "I learned a lot. It was the hardest I had ever worked but the most fun I ever had. We were part of something great. We helped build a brand from \$25 million to \$250 million in less than five years."

Robert was recruited from VF to Guess Inc. in 1994 as the Corporate Visual Director.

"It was a very exciting time in my life. I was 29 years old and I was on top of the world, career-wise. While working in Los Angeles, (Guess Inc.) Put me up at the Nikko Hotel and I just happened to be there during the Northridge earthquake. I was basically stuck in this hotel for two days with LL Cool J, Jamie Foxx and many others. It was really cool and surreal at the same time because we had this obvious tragedy happen, but we became this little community that lived in the hotel lobby together with the surrounding neighbors," Robert said.

Robert continued to work at Guess and ultimately helped the company rebrand themselves from cactuses and lassoes to "Americana industrial." However, the big job at Guess was taking a toll on his family life and Robert made a decision to leave Guess in 1996 so he could spend more time with his 6-year-old son.

Once again, Robert found himself in Greensboro without a job and a child to support.

He found employment at Cone Mills doing marketing work, and then became the Creative Director for Sara Lee Hosiery, ultimately redesigning the L'eggs egg, until 2001. He left Sara Lee after seeing an opportunity to partner with a long time friend from DC and open his own boutique advertising and marketing firm in New York.

"We renovated an old sweat shop on Broadway in Chinatown near Canal Street," Robert said. The biggest problem Robert faced was that 9/11 happened ten blocks from his office right around the time he was getting things going.

“In the summer of 2002, we were really about to close shop. We had come to the conclusion that we gave it our best shot. But we weren’t able to continue to pay our staff if we didn’t make more money.” Right when Robert and his partner had decided to throw in the towel, they got a phone call from one of Eric’s old co-workers at Sara Lee.

That phone call ended with Robert’s company getting enough business to stay afloat. “We really were saved by that opportunity at the very last minute and then we flourished growing our company to 27 employees. We then opened another agency representing Fashion Designers as celebrities called Designers Management Agency. Our two biggest clients were in North Carolina, so we then opened an office in downtown Greensboro. In 2005, I decided to sell my interest in the companies to my partner and I moved back to Greensboro to open a smaller design firm called Qub Studios. I used my proceeds to further invest in downtown real estate in 2006,” Robert said.

Robert plans to continue to develop the mill to its fullest potential. Former city council member Jim Kee said, “Eric is an entrepreneur with vision and tenacity. He won’t quit until the job is done.”