

TABLE TALK WITH CHUCK HARRIS '69 AND JIM ROGERS '63 | by Laura Chisholm

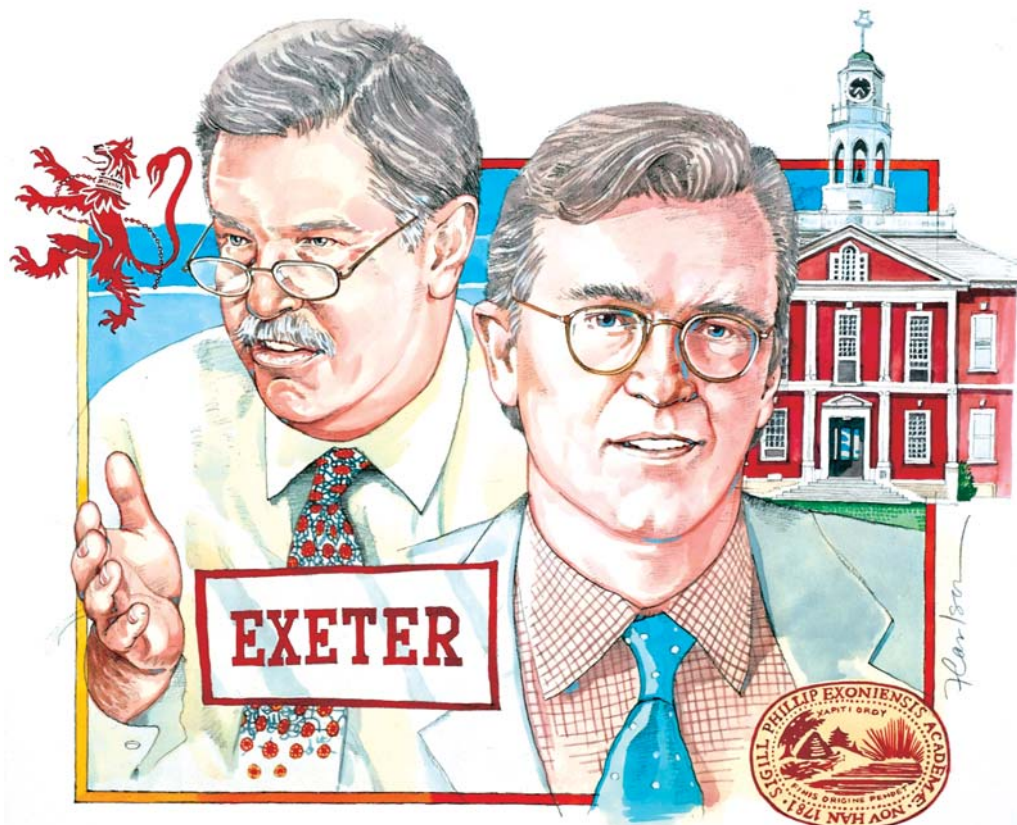


ILLUSTRATION BY FRED CARLSON

Trustees Jim Rogers '63; P'05 (left) and Chuck Harris '69 (right) made their respective ways to Exeter in different eras and under different circumstances. Rogers, a principal of Butler Rogers Baskett Architects in South Norwalk, CT, is president of the trustees and has been a trustee at Exeter for 14 years. Harris, retired from the New York investment-banking firm Goldman Sachs, has been a trustee since 1999 and is currently serving as chair of The Exeter Initiatives, Exeter's recently launched comprehensive fund-raising campaign. The two men share an awareness of having been shaped in some way by Exeter and a commitment to the future of the school, and each brings distinctive interests and experience to his trustee role.

Harris, a scholarship student from North Carolina, came to the Academy knowing little more about Exeter than what he had gleaned from a few photographs of the school. At first, he was behind many of his peers academically and felt somewhat self-conscious about "talking and dressing funny," but Harris also recalls feeling immediately accepted by other students and faculty, and finding a good outlet in football. "I made a rapid adaptation to a foreign system that I liked very much from the start," he says. He made lifelong friends and learned that he had what it took to excel.

Harris then took a detour, leaving Harvard to adopt the life of a rock musician and tour the country. "I don't think I saw the early morning for years in a row," he says, and Exeter was not much on his mind. Years later, having changed careers and started a family, Harris began thinking about reconnecting with his earlier life. When Exeter approached him about making a gift in support of financial aid, the idea resonated with him, and so began his investment of time, resources and expertise at the Academy.

Harris' interest in education didn't spring out of nowhere. He has a long affiliation with and serves on the board of publishing company Scholastic's national recognition program for high-school-aged artists and writers. Exonians are frequently among the recipients. The awards are important, says Harris, because "they are about education, but they are also about recognizing kids for what their passions are." Harris became an investor and board member of College Summit, a Washington, D.C.-based organization dedicated to improving the college enrollment rates of low-income, academically mid-tier students, after working as a writing coach at the program's residential workshop one summer. Harris says his three passions—Exeter, Scholastic and College Summit—are extremely com-

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—Jim Rogers ’63

plementary and have broadened his vista on education. “They are all about advocating for young people and creating opportunities that I hope will be as empowering for them as they have been for me.”

Jim Rogers was steered toward Exeter by a former elementary-school teacher and coach who believed the Academy was without peer. “He said I ought to take advantage of the opportunity to go to the best school there is,” says Rogers. “So I did.” Although Rogers played three varsity sports at Exeter, his most vivid memories have to do with being around the Harkness table in a variety of settings. Was the oval table speaking to the architect in him? “I think my success as an architect has more to do with my ability to communicate than with anything else. I think that skill, and the ability to think creatively—to challenge things in ways other than the obvious and resist being critical if it leads nowhere—come largely from having spent three years in Harkness classrooms,” he says.

Over the past 25 years, Rogers has developed a practice that specializes in working with private schools and other organizations governed by volunteers who tend to have little or no experience in major capital building projects. “In our practice, I put a great deal of emphasis on the fact that we not only know how to do the project, but also know how to educate our clients about being good clients,” says Rogers. “That is as important as designing what a building will look like.” Rogers brought that expertise back to Exeter. During his tenure, Exeter has commissioned new music and science buildings, renovated several dormitories and begun construction on a new campus center. Rogers has been the “professional backstop” in architect interviews, which has allowed other members of the Exeter committee to focus on their intuition without worrying about asking the right technical questions. “Every time I do something for Exeter, it benefits me professionally,” says Rogers. “Being a trustee has made me a much better architect, and being an architect has made me a more valuable trustee for Exeter.”

Rogers is also a PEA parent. “My appreciation for Exeter was at a pretty high level before my son became a student there,” he says. “Now I find that sense of the school being reinforced in even stronger terms. The amount of energy, care and interest that adults in the community have for my son

is astounding to me. We learn about all this as trustees, but to see it at work is incredible.”

As trustees, Rogers and Harris are charged with helping ensure Exeter continues to serve its chosen population well, and both have helped to shape The Exeter Initiatives. “One interesting thing about private schools,” says Rogers, “is that we measure our success by constantly getting better. At Exeter, it’s built in to the way we function and how trustees think about the school. A big part of the Initiatives has focused on determining the fundamental areas in which we can improve. A second theme is part of the culture and ethos of Exeter, that is, concern for affordability and accessibility.” Harris says he has found the process of developing institutional objectives compelling. “I have vivid memories of the first trustee meeting in which the faculty presented their list of potential improvements. It was a comprehensive look at the school that was self-critical but optimistic,” he says. “The Initiatives grew out of dreaming about how we could make this really wonderful school even better. It felt very different from a dry, trustee-driven list of things to focus on.” He adds, “Of course financial aid resonates personally and it’s part of Exeter’s heritage, but I think all the components that address opportunities for interpersonal connections are especially exciting.”

For Harris and Rogers, connecting with others around key values is part of what makes being a trustee fulfilling. “I had a wonderful business career and met a lot of terrific, exciting people,” says Harris. “At this stage of my life, to be spending time with people who are dedicated to furthering educational opportunity—I find that very compelling.” “Of all the schools I have worked with—and there are many,” says Rogers, “Exeter is one of the very few that does exactly what it says it does and values exactly what it says it values. One thing that has intrigued me in recent years is the number of references during normal trustee discussions to the concepts of *non sibi*, and goodness and knowledge. These ideas are at the core of the discussion, deliberation and planning that we do. It seems to me you can’t ask for more of an institution.” ●