

# Mayor Profile:

*Cary Magazine wanted to get to know the mayors of the Western Wake County towns on a more personal basis, not just as politicians. Who are they? What are their backgrounds? What have been their personal struggles and accomplishments? What is their vision for their respective towns?*

*We continue this series of personal profiles with John Byrne, Mayor of Fuquay-Varina.*



**CM:** You said earlier that you are a Wake County native, having grown up in Wake Forest. But it wasn't your typical small town lifestyle, was it?

**Byrne:** Well, not actually. It was an interesting childhood, since my father played professional baseball for the New York Yankees during the 1940s and '50s. He played with Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle and others. In fact, I wear his World Series ring today.

**CM:** Did you live in Wake Forest while your dad played baseball?

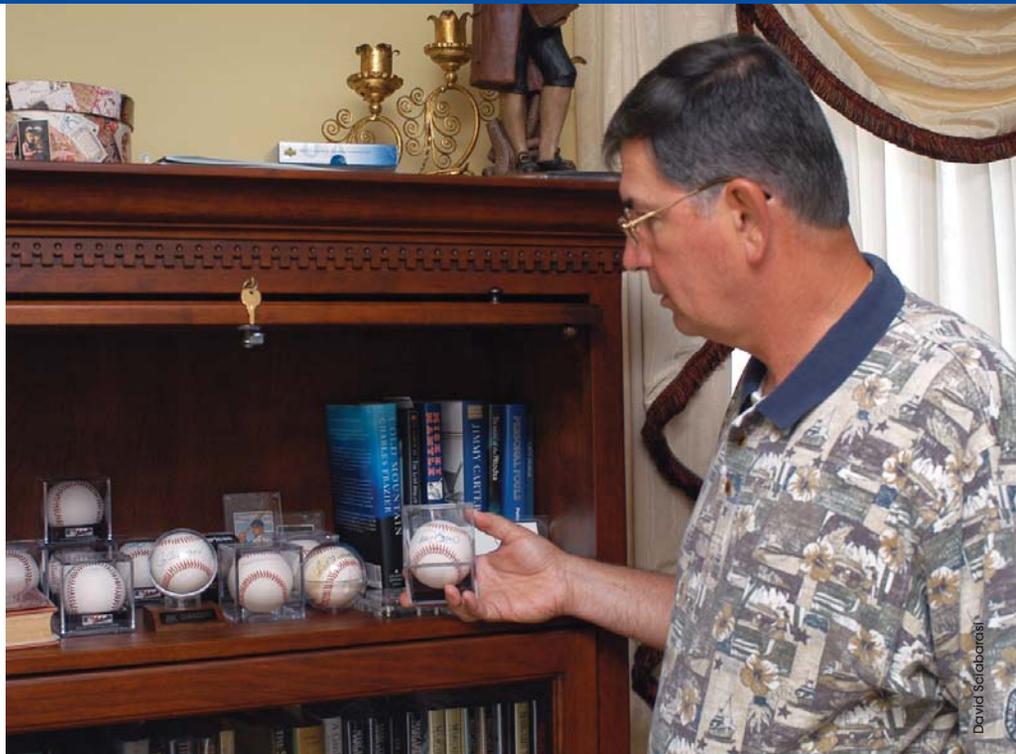
**Byrne:** We lived here during the off-season, but during the season when school was out, we would always go to New York. As a result, Yankee Stadium was pretty much my home during the summer.

**CM:** Did you travel with the team when it was on the road?

**Byrne:** We might have traveled some, but primarily during the summer months, our home was New York. I imagine that our life would be a childhood dream for many young

(opposite) Fuquay-Varina Mayor John Byrne with his wife, Patty, at their home, known as the Fuquay Mineral Springs Inn, with a portrait of John's late mother, Sue Nichols Byrne.

(right) As a child, Byrne was able to get autographed baseballs from Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle when his father played for the New York Yankees.



people growing up, but it was one that I happened to experience. To me, it was just the way we lived.

**CM:** Did you appreciate your lifestyle then?

**Byrne:** At the time it was the only lifestyle I knew ... it was the way I grew up. To some extent, I would have preferred to have been in Wake Forest during the summer and playing with my friends. But I thoroughly enjoyed New York and the people of New York. It is certainly a special place in the country.

**CM:** What position did your dad play?

**Byrne:** He was a pitcher, and he was in the major leagues for about 13 years. During that period of time, he made the All-Star Team in 1950, and in 1955, he led the American League in pitching (best won-loss percentage). Also, he was an extremely good hitter for a pitcher, and he was often used as a pinch hitter. I think when he retired he was seventh on the Yankees' all-time win list.

I think I had a wonderful childhood. How many other kids could get Mickey Mantle to sign their baseball cards? The children of the players didn't realize that other kids couldn't necessarily do what we did. For example, I remember we would go out to the stadium as kids and play before they limed the field.

**CM:** So, you have actually played in Yankee Stadium!

**Byrne:** That's right! I've played in Yankee Stadium (laughter). I'm sure the kids (of players) today cannot even do that, but then was a special era.

**CM:** Did you get to know the players pretty well?

**Byrne:** I did. Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio babysat me. Some of the players were going to go out to eat and the group came by the house to pick up my parents. We didn't have a sitter, so DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe told my parents to go with the others and they would stay there with the children. That is how my little story gets told.

**CM:** Do you have siblings as well?

**Byrne:** I have two brothers and a sister.

**CM:** Was your father a Wake County native?

**Byrne:** No, he was born in Baltimore, and his lifetime dream was to pitch for the Yankees, just like his childhood hero, Babe Ruth, who was also from Baltimore, Md. And, the dream came true. In America, those sorts of things actually can come true. He worked unbelievably hard at his craft (pitching), and eventually he came to Wake Forest College (which was in the town of Wake Forest at that time) on a baseball

scholarship. He was offered scholarships from other schools, including Duke, but something really touched him about Wake Forest. And that is where he made his permanent home, since my mother was from Harnett County.

**CM:** How was it during the off-season when the entire family lived in Wake Forest? Did your friends treat you any differently?

**Byrne:** Of course, Wake Forest was a very small town back then, and you can imagine the excitement that would happen when some of my father's teammates came through (town). We would have some of the Yankees speak at the athletic banquet, and it would quickly sell out, but I took it all for granted because I didn't know any difference.

There was a celebrity sense about it, but all of the people in Wake Forest were down-to-earth people, just like the ones here in Fuquay-Varina. People treated my dad as a friend, and he could go to the corner store just like everyone else.

**CM:** You were also an athlete, were you not?

**Byrne:** That's right. I played all sports, but it became obvious in high school that basketball was my sport, not baseball. I focused more on basketball after my sophomore year.

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**CM:** Did your parents support your sports activities?

**Byrne:** Oh yes. My mother was a strong supporter who let her feelings be known from the stands. In fact, in her mind, I don't think she ever thought I committed a foul! (laughter) Dad was more reserved.

If Dad (and I) ever had any conversations about a game, it was usually around the kitchen table when we would be drinking a glass of milk and having a snack. He would then recap what I might have done better.

I will never forget this one night. It was the night I scored 60 points down in Benson, and I didn't even play the last quarter of the game. I was feeling pretty good about myself, but he brought me back down to earth when he said, "You know, you only made two shots with your left hand. We are going to have to work on that a little." (laughter) He had a way of letting you know that you had done well, but there was always room for improvement.

**CM:** Did you dream of playing professional basketball, much like your father played professional baseball? Or were sports a platform you used to build other relationships?

**Byrne:** I think my dream was to be the best I could be. Sports teach a person to be well-rounded ... not only how to be a graceful winner, but also a graceful loser. It prepares you well for the game of life, regardless of whether that is in professional sports or not.

I was fortunate enough to be able to excel, but sports teaches more than W's and L's, it teaches you about character ... about teamwork ... about working together to accomplish common goals. Even today, as mayor, I use much of what I learned on the basketball court ... getting the team ... the

town board and staff ... to work together to accomplish common goals.

**CM:** Did you play basketball in college?

**Byrne:** Yes. I went to the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Miss. I really liked the Deep South, and I felt a spe-

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cial closeness there. I went to school on a basketball scholarship.

I majored in business and recreation. I enjoyed sports, but more important I was also interested in how people spent their leisure time. On the business side, I was very interested in business because that is something that impacts all of us. Southern Miss was also very important because that is where I met my wife, Patty.

**CM:** What happened after college?

**Byrne:** After we finished school, I accepted a job with Fidelity Bank here in Fuquay-Varina, and Patty and I moved here to live. I worked with Fidelity Bank for about 25 years.

**CM:** So, banking was your career?

**Byrne:** Yes, that was my business background. It was a great place to work. I came here to work because of Robert Holding Jr. The

Holding family was very nice to me, as was Billy Woodard at the bank, Haywood Lane, Mike Whitley and others. All of those folks have really helped me a lot with my career.

**CM:** Did you ever consider playing professional basketball?

**Byrne:** I might could have played some in Europe, but I was getting married and was ready to get on with the rest of my life. I am very satisfied that I made the right career choice for me. I'm not huge by NBA standards, so I knew that long-term options were limited.

**CM:** What was the Town of Fuquay-Varina like when you came here, and what year was that?

**Byrne:** It was 1973, and the town was pretty much a tobacco farming community. I can remember that when the tobacco market opened, it was almost like the Fourth of July. There was a huge celebration in town. The town had a tobacco market for over 100 years, but it doesn't have one now. But then, that was when the money came in and everyone was excited.

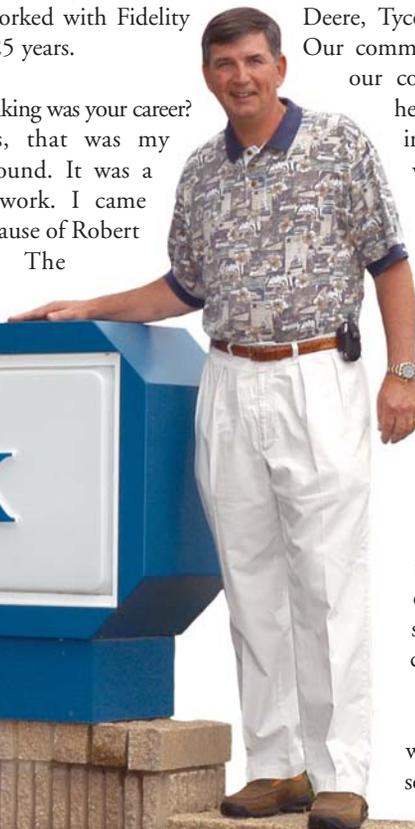
**CM:** How have you seen the town change over the past 30 years?

**Byrne:** It is amazing how it has changed. We are a lot more industrial and commercial today compared to when I first came to town. We have plants like John Deere, Tycos, Guilford Fibers and others. Our community is providing jobs within our community. When I first came here, people were either in farming, in a farming-related job or went somewhere else to work.

**CM:** You have witnessed the town mature.

**Byrne:** I have, and the reason is because over the past 30 years, the town has had great leadership. People have seen the value of planning for the water and sewer systems, to have them in place. That now allows our town to be all it can be. I have to give the credit to former town leaders for helping to put that infrastructure in place so that we could grow.

**CM:** When you first went to work at Fidelity Bank, what were some of your responsibilities?



Mayor Byrne spent 25 years working for Fidelity Bank in Fuquay-Varina after he graduated from college.

**Byrne:** I was in the management training program, and the bank in Fuquay was the biggest bank in the system. I was fortunate in that I was able to work with different people who were very, very knowledgeable ... not only of the customer base ... but knowledgeable of their jobs as well. All of these folks really helped me to understand banking and to understand the goal of a hometown bank.

The core of a hometown bank is relationships. You really have to enjoy people, and you have to understand the community's needs. And, you have to have fun.

**CM:** You stayed with the bank for 25 years and then retired. How did this transition into the bed and breakfast business you're now involved with?

**Byrne:** Well, I have rental property around (town), and I remember thinking when I was at the bank that I would look at the downtown area and see how I could help it. I felt like a good, upscale bed and breakfast would be something that would be positive for the community.

**CM:** Was there a bed and breakfast here at that time?

**Byrne:** No, there wasn't. When Patty and I decided to do it, our goal – and I think we are accomplishing the goal – was to do one of the finest bed and breakfasts in the state. You certainly don't do it in one day. You have to steadily be about it. You have to have the commitment.

Whether it is banking or the bed and breakfast business, you have to do a good job at it. You have to like what you are doing ... you have to enjoy it. This past year, I was asked to be a panel speaker at the state bed and breakfast association's annual convention. Patty and I are pleased that the hard work we have been doing is being recognized across the state.

**CM:** Were you a fan of bed and breakfasts before starting your own?

**Byrne:** Patty and I would do that, and we enjoyed it. Most of the people who come here – we even have people come here from Cary – are looking for a little getaway. What I am selling is not so much this building, but the whole community. We have some great restaurants here in

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town: Cooley's, the Gold Leaf Tea Room. We have attractions like Bostic & Wilson Antiques, which draws people from all over the country. I enjoy just going there and looking at things like old signs, like the old Pepsi signs. There's also the Lazy Lion New & Used Book Shop and Enchanting Moments, which is one of the nicest bridal shops in the Southeast, and young brides come to North Carolina from all over the country to shop.

Our downtown area has a real welcoming story here. The bed and breakfast just lends to that. It fits into the atmosphere of the town.

**CM:** When did you make the decision to acquire the property for a bed and breakfast, and how long did it take for you to get it ready?

**Byrne:** Well, this was not the first property that we acquired in downtown. I started first acquiring property in the

late '80s, early '90s, and one of the first parcels we acquired was the old hotel building next door. That is now an apartment building.

I bought this building in 1998, and it took about two years to restore it to the standard you can see today. We added four and one-half bathrooms, for instance. It is kind of a neat spot.

**CM:** Has it been well received?

**Byrne:** I think so. For example, we do about 35 weddings here a year, and it is a neat little retreat for people. Like I said, we have a large number of people coming here who actually live in Wake County.

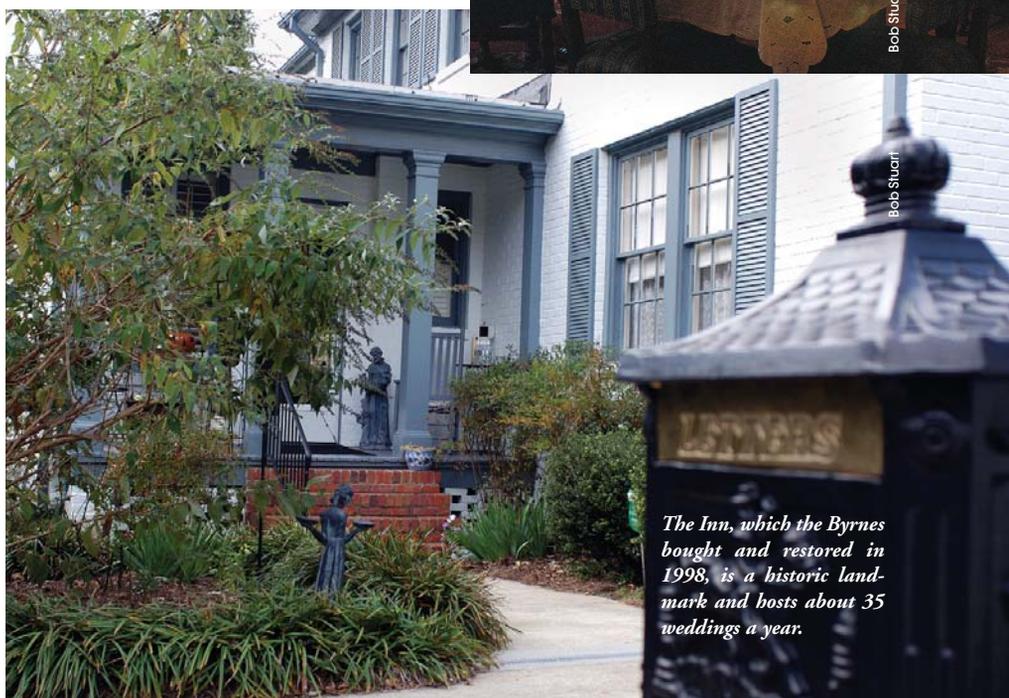
**CM:** Did you have to do a lot of extensive repairs?

**Byrne:** Actually, the building was in pretty good shape for a building built in

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Bob Stuart



Bob Stuart

*The Inn, which the Byrnes bought and restored in 1998, is a historic landmark and hosts about 35 weddings a year.*

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1927. Of course, we had to do a lot of modernization things like updating the bathrooms and putting in a lot of insulation. We became masters at figuring out the best way of utilizing spaces, while keeping the charm of an older building.

An old building allows you to do some things, but not other things. You have to be smart about what you do. You don't want to do something, only to find out later that it will not work and you have to do it over again.

Look at that staircase over there. Today, when people move into a house they stay there about four or five years and then move on. When homes were built like this, they were built to be lived in for a lifetime. You will notice that the stairs have that gentle slope, and that was so that people could age gracefully and still get up the stairs. The issues today (in building a house) are not thought out as well as they were back then.

**CM:** This is a very unique house.

**Byrne:** The Inn is a historic landmark in Wake County. This is unique in that there are less than 90 buildings that have been landmarked. It is on the National Register of Historic Places, but there are more than 4,000 of those. The landmark designation is pretty significant.

**CM:** How did you get interested in local politics?

**Byrne:** The revitalization of our downtown area has always been of interest to me, and I have wanted to do what I could. I have been involved in this area for many years. When I was with the bank, I worked closely with the town, the civic clubs and even served as president of the historic society.

**CM:** When did you first run for political office?

**Byrne:** It was in 2001 when I ran for mayor.

**CM:** You didn't serve on the town board first as a commissioner?



(l to r) Emily Harding, Kitty Holleman, Mayor Byrne and C.B. Tutor visit at Elliott's Pharmacy in downtown Fuquay-Varina.

David Solabarasti

**Byrne:** I was appointed as a town commissioner to fill an unexpired term, but at that time I told them I was planning on running for mayor. So the first office to which I was elected was mayor.

**CM:** When you were elected as mayor, what was your vision for Fuquay-Varina, and how well do you think you have accomplished that vision?

**Byrne:** Probably the most important thing I saw was downtown revitalization. Our community had wanted to revitalize downtown for many years, and others in town had encouraged me to lead that effort. Also, as a town goes through a period of rapid growth, you have to work with a lot of state agencies like the Department of Transportation and federal officials such as U.S. Congressman David Price. You also have to work with the school system, and we have outstanding teachers and schools in Fuquay-Varina.

I am pleased with what has happened, but there are even more opportunities for the future. We have to continue working together.

**CM:** With your interest in history and preserving the small-town atmosphere, how do you handle the clash between the Fuquay-Varina of the past and the fast-growing town of the future?

**Byrne:** It is difficult to blend those two

things together, but I think there is a way to do it. Part of the solution is your philosophy, where you try to do a good job in appointing people to different jobs and different community boards. You need to allow the community to have input for a sense of ownership. We're just at the cutting edge of the growth that is coming to our town. The Fuquay Mineral Spring Park (which is how the town was named Fuquay Springs until 1963) is now a part of the community once again, and it is from deep roots like this that our community draws its strength.

We've had Home Depot and Wal-Mart come here, but we also have Stephens Supply Co. in Varina, which is a very neat place to find things you won't necessarily find at major shopping centers. The Varina Historic Shopping District is becoming very popular, and getting a chocolate milkshake or orangeade at Elliott's Pharmacy is like stepping back in time. These are places that offer our people a special place in time. This is how we hold onto the town's heritage.

**CM:** Fuquay-Varina is definitely home for you.

**Byrne:** Most definitely. Patty has taught school here for more than 30 years, and she is now teaching some students who are children of students she taught earlier in her career. We are involved in the community, are excited about its future and proud of its past. **CM**