

*James Ronald Childers*

# Building on history

RICH POLIKOFF  
 ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

**SELF PORTRAIT**

**Date and place of birth:** Feb. 23, 1951, in Fort Smith

**Occupation:** architect, founder of James R. Childers Architect, Inc.

**Family:** wife Janie, sons Bryan and Breck, daughter Sarah Jane Jones, four grandchildren

**My favorite subjects in school were** math and history.

**If you went to my house, you would think** it probably needs the leaves raked. If it was summer, it probably needs the yard mowed.

**What you learn at architecture school is** that everyone doesn't look at your work the same. You can't please everyone. You do what you think is right for that job and that client, and you're happy with that.

**My favorite aspect of my office is** the detail of the woodwork.

**The best thing I cook is** grilled salmon. We grill out a lot.

**The last really good book I read was** *No Country for Old Men*. The reason I was interested in it is because it takes place in Del Rio, Texas, where I go fishing.

**A word to sum me up:** humble

**F**ORT SMITH — James Childers wanted to do it all. When Childers was fresh out of the University of Arkansas' School of Architecture in the mid-1970s, he landed an internship in St. Louis with the international architecture firm HOK. Today the largest architecture firm in the world, HOK was already sizable by then, with about 150 architects on staff.

HOK occupied a building near the Gateway Arch, and it had three floors that were teeming with young, talented architects. But as Childers looked around, he realized not all of them were so young.

Some of them had been there 15, maybe 18 years and were still working on narrow pieces of projects. That wasn't for Childers.

"I wanted to work on it from beginning to end, to experience building," he says. "Those architects in big firms didn't get the full range of experience of designing, putting together the construction documents and then the satisfaction of seeing it built."

Determined to tackle projects in their entirety, rather than handling mere slivers of them, Childers arranged to finish his three-year internship back home in Fort Smith. It was there that he had spent the second half of his childhood, and where he and several friends had been inspired to enter the world of architecture.

He started working as an architect in Fort Smith in 1980, working in several successful firms before launching the firm he currently heads in 1986, James R. Childers Architect, Inc. Since the mid-1990s, the firm has focused heavily on American Indian health-care facilities, to the point that Childers estimates it accounts for more than 90 percent of its business. In Arkansas, the firm is part of a project to reno-

vate and add to the Epley Center for Health Professions at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

From conception to completion, it can take years for Childers' firm to build a new Indian health-care facility. The painstaking process starts with a concept and ends with a ribbon-cutting, and requires enormous attention to detail. For Childers, it's the sort of work he dreamed of doing more than 30 years ago: all-encompassing.

In October, the Cherokee Nation's Tribal Employment Rights Office presented Childers and his firm with its 2011 "Certified Consulting Firm of the Year" award. The award recognized Childers for his nearly 20 years of work with the nation, since the firm designed the

See **CHILDERS**, Page 2D



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

"I wanted to work on it from beginning to end, to experience building. Those architects in big firms didn't get the full range of experience of designing, putting together the construction documents and then the satisfaction of seeing it built."

**SPOTLIGHT MARCH OF DIMES**

## New Year's Eve bash targets cash for charity

RICH POLIKOFF  
 ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

**ROGERS** — Lisa Rose knows how to party.

Rose, of Rogers, has been an event planner in Northwest Arkansas for 11 years, organizing everything from weddings and rehearsal dinners to fundraisers. In that capacity, she strives to do one charity event each year, something where she can help her community.

Serendipity will be hosting a New Year's Eve event Saturday to benefit the Arkansas chapter of the March of Dimes. Located at 117 W.

Walnut St. in downtown Rogers, Serendipity is a special-events venue that opened Oct. 1 and is owned by Rose; her fiance, Darren Dawson; her cousin, Julie Kearney; and Kearney's boyfriend, Dave West, all of Rogers.

"I didn't want to do something someone else was doing [to benefit a nonprofit]," explains Rose, who grew up in Springdale. "I was just researching different groups, and it seems like everyone is doing something for other people, but no one is doing anything for

the March of Dimes."

Serendipity came to the March of Dimes with the idea for the event, and it gladly signed on, says Mellissa Wood, Northwest division director of the charity's Arkansas chapter. Proceeds, after operating expenses, will be divided within the March of Dimes, with 70 percent of it staying with the local chapter and 30 percent going to national research.

Every week, Wood says, there are 105 babies born prematurely in Arkansas. See **PARTY**, Page 2D



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

**Julie Kearney** and Lisa Rose, both of Rogers, are two of the co-owners of Serendipity, which is hosting a New Year's Eve event to benefit the Arkansas chapter of the March of Dimes.

**Need Holiday Cash?**  
 We make it easy with  
 double the ATMs!

*Walgreens*

Liberty Bank ATMs

Visit [mylibertybank.com](http://mylibertybank.com) for locations.

**LIBERTY**  
**BANK**  
 OF ARKANSAS

Real Banking

MEMBER FDIC

# He's as meticulous at fishing as he is at design

• CHILDERS, from Page 1D

Wilma P. Mankiller Health Clinic in Stillwell, Okla., which opened in 1994.

"The uniqueness [of his work] would be in identifying the culture and the cultural symbolism," says Dana Espinal of Tahlequah, Okla., the director of planning and development for the Cherokee Nation. "If you look at James' projects, they may be modern buildings, but they have a lot of history."

Incorporating the culture and symbolism of a tribe into a health-care facility appeals to Childers. He has long been fascinated by history, and before shovel meets dirt, he goes through a period of intensive research, to make sure that he knows exactly whom he is working with, and what is important to them.

As working with Indian tribes has challenged him intellectually, it has also given him an opportunity to better understand his own American Indian roots. Childers is a member of the Cherokee Nation, and his grandfather signed the 1906 Dawes Roll, which determined tribal citizenship for U.S. government purposes.

"He's always been a history buff, and all of these projects require him going back and looking at the tribe's history," says son Breck Childers of Fort Smith, an architect in his father's firm. "That's always been intriguing to him, that cultural element, where if it was just a private health-care facility, you wouldn't have that in-depth look at the history behind the people you are designing it for."

"I think he's always been interested in [his heritage], but I think his work has given him more of an opportunity to look back into his history."

## INSPIRED TO BUILD

It was less than 20 miles, but it felt like a different world.

When Childers was in fourth grade, his family moved from tiny Gans, Okla., to Fort Smith. His final year in Gans schools, he was in a class of 12, whereas his graduating class at Fort Smith Northside High School was approximately 500.

Fort Smith presented Childers with a world of educational opportunities, inside the classroom and out. He made use of Northside's work-study program, leaving school at midday when he was a senior and going to work for Fort Smith Sash and Door Company.

Childers got a job there through his dad, the late Cleve Childers, who was a salesman at the company. James' primary jobs were to make windows and doors, and in doing so, he learned a lot about building materials.

Where he really got an education, though, was in James Neely's classroom at Northside. Neely had worked for a design-build construction company, giving him real-world experience that he enthusiastically passed on to his students.

Childers graduated from high school in 1969. He, along with five other students from Neely's classes, wound up



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

"It's not just architecture, it's history. It blends the two together. It blends together understanding these people and their culture and their history, and where they came from and what's important to them."

graduating from architecture school.

Neely's coursework was as challenging as it was engaging. Typically, high-school architecture classes tend to focus on single-family houses, says lifelong friend Wade Walker, but Neely's classes spanned a wide range of structures.

"He was a really great teacher," says Walker, the president of Gastinger, Walker, Harden Architects in Kansas City, Mo. "He was fun and gregarious, and a really big influence on all of us."

At Neely's encouragement, Childers took the entrance exams for Arkansas' school of architecture.

"As a senior, by midterm I'd pretty well focused in on the fact that I was going to go to architecture school," Childers says. "Up until that time I thought I would go to college and go into the engineering field. I'd always had a strong math background."

The years at UA were informative, but challenging. He and his wife, Janie, married in December 1970, and they had two sons before he earned his bachelor's degree from the school of architecture in 1975.

It was difficult balancing the responsibilities of being a father and a student — particularly an architect

student, which requires a mammoth time commitment. It was common, recalls Childers and Walker, for architecture students to sleep on campus in Vol Walker Hall.

Yet Childers never wavered in his desire, in part because of his wife's support. Janie Childers didn't complain that her husband needed to be home more with their young boys; she helped make sure he was studying enough.

"We communicate well," Childers says of his wife of 41 years. "She did a good job of grounding me, keeping me focused. I've always said for architecture school, 'The biggest thing is perseverance.' It's such a long grind, and you just have to stay with it."

The famed architect E. Fay Jones was the dean of the architecture school when Childers was there, and Childers took several courses taught by Jones. Jones is still an inspiration to Childers today, and his architecture firm is in a building Jones designed in 1969 — a dental office Childers converted to an architect's office when he bought the building eight years ago.

Childers' firm has a second office in Tahlequah, and 18 people work for him between the two locations. At the Fort

Smith office, detailed wood carvings can be seen in every direction, and eaves outside the front door simultaneously provide coolness in the summer and the sense that visitors are entering a cave in the Ozarks.

"It's a beautiful building," Childers says with pride. "I love the detail of it. He was inspirational, just a fantastic person. I loved his work."

After graduating from Arkansas, Childers landed the internship with HOK. Part of the appeal of HOK was the fact that it had designed St. Edward Mercy Medical Center in Fort Smith.

Although St. Louis and working for a big firm were ultimately not the right fit, the experience was beneficial. A diehard St. Louis Cardinals fan, Childers was able to take sons Bryan and Breck to scores of baseball games at Busch Stadium, as well as to see the NHL's St. Louis Blues.

And HOK immediately threw him into health-care work. His first project with the firm was doing drafting work for a medical center at Duke University in Durham, N.C. (Before Childers got involved with Indian health-care facilities, he designed and built health-care facilities throughout the Arkansas River Valley for more than a

decade, often for the Sisters of Mercy Health System.)

The Childerses always planned to return to Fort Smith, but remain thankful for their time in St. Louis.

"We wanted to be closer to home and our families," Janie Childers says. "But I think [HOK] really helped him gain a base for [his health-care work]."

"When we got back here, he worked for several different firms, moving around and doing houses, things like that, but he didn't like that."

## EVERYTHING MATTERS

At the Three Rivers Health Center, Childers' attention to detail can be seen without even walking through the front door.

A large colonnade stands in front of the 100,000 square-foot facility in Muskogee, Okla. These columns represent the male and female seminaries that once stood in Tahlequah, but burned down many years ago.

"That directly relates back to Tahlequah, and the culture and history of the Cherokee," says Espinal, the Cherokee Nation director. "For most of those who have not visited Tahlequah, [the columns] may not be relevant when they first see them, but when you understand the history, you see why the building was

built the way it was."

Three Rivers is the largest facility Childers' firm has built for the Cherokee Nation, followed closely by a 95,000 square-foot health facility under construction in Vinita, Okla. That facility, whose official name is "A Place Where They Get Well," is expected to take 16 months to build, Espinal says, and has a planned opening for September.

It took a solid two years of planning, she added, meaning that by the time the facility opens, Childers and his firm will have been working on it for well beyond three years. Throughout this time, Childers and his staff have been in close contact with Cherokee Nation representatives.

It's important to have an ongoing dialogue with clients, he says, because ultimately these health-care buildings do not belong to the architect. They belong to the people who use them.

"It's not just architecture, it's history," Childers says. "It blends the two together. It blends together understanding these people and their culture and their history, and where they came from and what's important to them."

Childers' firm is also doing work in Lawton, Okla., for the Comanche Nation. The Comanche, he explains, came off the prairie, and it is important that their structures represent their history.

Each Indian health-care facility is customized to the tribe who hired him; there is no "James Childers style," he says.

"I would characterize James' practice as pursuing clients, not projects," Walker says. "As a result, he has a lot of longtime clients. Quite often, he works with a committee, and he's always trying to build consensus from a group that's not accustomed to making design decisions."

"On the softer side, he tries to create an environment that patients feel is nurturing, because a hospital can be a very sterile place."

Every year, Childers and his wife will visit Sanibel, Fla., their favorite getaway spot. He also makes pilgrimages to Del Rio, Texas, fishing for black bass with a group of family members and lifelong friends.

"James is probably as good a fisherman as he is a health-care architect," Walker says. "He really knows what he's doing."

Nothing is left to chance when Childers prepares for his fishing trips. His fishing gear is meticulously stored and labeled, and when he's out on the water, he's extremely patient.

Just like when it comes to designing and building an Indian health-care facility, Childers finds that much of the joy comes from a dedicated preparation — because that is what leads to a successful outcome.

"It really ties back to his work as an architect, and his dedication to his work there," Breck Childers says. "He likes reading up on the subject, so he knows a lot about it. It's quite a sight to go out there and see all the work that he's put into fishing."

## Party

• Continued from Page 1D with 16 of them born before 30 weeks. The prematurity rate for the state is 13.1 percent, which means more than one in seven babies is born prematurely.

"Our goal is to get it down to 9.6 percent [which is a national goal of the March of Dimes for 2020]," Wood says. "That's one of the big things that we're working on, to reduce the prematurity rate."

While it works toward that goal, the Arkansas chapter provides support for those families whose children are born early and must be hospitalized in neonatal intensive care units. It also conducts educational seminars, teaching expectant parents the ways in which they can reduce the risk of low birth weights, which is defined as 5 1/2 pounds.

"Some of the things we stress are making sure you're not smoking, drinking or using drugs, and that you are taking prenatal vitamins and seeing doctors," Wood says. "These all make a big difference."

Tickets to the New Year's Eve gala are \$150 for a couple, which includes dinner from Crabby's Seafood Bar and Grill, beginning at 7 p.m. For those who don't want to have a meal but still want to attend the event, general-admission tickets are \$50 per person, with doors opening at 9. All tickets include beverages.

The band Studio B will be performing, and there will be a sizable silent auction, including four VIP passes to a taping of the game show *Wheel of Fortune*. Rose says the goal is to draw between 150-200 people.

"We [call] it 'dress to impress,'" Rose says of the event. "A lot of people like to dress up for New Year's, but it's not black tie. It's semi-formal."

The March of Dimes was founded in 1938 by then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt with the goal of eradicating polio. Following the release of the polio vaccine in 1955, the organization shifted its focus, and today strives for healthier outcomes for babies and expectant mothers.

Over the past 50 years, the March of Dimes has led several initiatives, including pushing for greater awareness



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

The March of Dimes will be owners of a fundraiser held on New Year's Eve at Serendipity in Rogers. Lisa Rose is one of the co-owners of Serendipity.

of the benefits of folic acid (which can prevent spina bifida) and the harmful effects of alcohol consumption when pregnant.

"I think a lot of people know of the March of Dimes, but they don't really know what they do, to the full extent," Rose says.

For more information about the New Year's Eve gala benefiting the March of Dimes, call (479) 246-6000 or visit Serendipity, 117 W. Walnut St. in Rogers.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

## Profiles

**Editor**  
Michelle Bradford (479) 365-2922  
mbradford@arkansasonline.com

**Writer**  
Rich Polikoff (479) 365-2913  
rpolikoff@arkansasonline.com

**Mail** Arkansas Democrat-Gazette  
2560 N. Lowell Road, P.O. Box 7  
Springdale, Ark. 72765

**Fax** (479) 365-2984

## Our Town

**Editor**  
Becca BaconMartin (479) 872-5054  
bmartin@nwaonline.com

**Writers**  
Kevin Kinder (479) 872-5188  
kkinder@nwaonline.com  
Bettina Lehovc (479) 872-5052  
blehovc@nwaonline.com  
CarinSchoppmeyer (479) 872-5049  
cschoppmeyer@nwaonline.com  
Ashley Batchelor (479) 872-5051  
abatchelor@nwaonline.com

**Mail** Northwest Arkansas  
Newspapers  
2560 N. Lowell Road, P.O. Box 7  
Springdale, Ark. 72765  
**Fax** (479) 872-5055