

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

UNSTOPPABLE **WILLARD EVANS JR.** CAN'T SAY NO TO SERVICE EVEN AFTER A LONG AND PRODUCTIVE CAREER FOCUSED ON DOING GOOD.



“You learn what sacrifice is. You learn that if you want something good, you have to do what it takes. I use that in everything that I do. I have to be all in.”

When Willard S. Evans Jr. ('77, Kellogg '81) was around 12 years old, a fun outing for him was a trip to the Allied Electronics store in his West Side neighborhood of Chicago. That's where he bought parts to make his first crystal radio set, sparking a flame in the young student's imagination that set him up for an impactful career.

“That was the ignition point for me,” Evans says. “Building electronic projects as a kid fueled the fire that would become my career as an engineer. It's what I was born to be.”

That passion to build led Evans to Northwestern Engineering in 1973, where he majored in electrical engineering. An internship in 1974 at Peoples Gas, which provides heat for the country's third largest city, turned into a full-time job after Evans graduated in 1977. That, in turn, led to a long and rewarding career at the utility, which culminated with him retiring as its president 40 years later.

Evans's time on the Evanston campus wasn't easy. Handling his classes and working for Peoples during the summers demanded an engineering mindset and solid work ethic for him to persevere.

“You learn what sacrifice is. You learn that if you want something good, you have to do what it takes,” says Evans, who also earned an MBA from the Kellogg School of Management. “I use that in everything that I do. I have to be all in.”

That attitude became foundational. When he began working at Peoples, his major at Northwestern gave him a leg up and provided a solid foundation for understanding computers. That earned him a job overseeing the utility's computer system, a thankless, faceless position at that time.

Undeterred, his drive to excel propelled him up the corporate ladder, moving through 20 different positions during his tenure.

In 2013, Evans fought for the state legislature's passage of the Natural Gas Consumer, Safety and Reliability Act, which supports one of the most capital-intensive infrastructure projects in the country and modernized Illinois's natural gas infrastructure. He also helped create a partnership among City Colleges of Chicago, Peoples Gas, and the Gas Workers Union to train veterans and displaced workers to be utility workers.

True to form, Evans's love of hard work didn't allow his retirement to stick. He became chair of the Village of Skokie's Board of Fire and Police Commissioners after heading up the town's Human Relations Commission, where he led efforts to encourage understanding and respect among residents of different racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. He has also served as president of the Northwestern University Black Alumni Association and chairman of Chicago Commons.

His next act came unexpectedly.

As Evans was coming off a golf course in 2019, Illinois Deputy Governor Christian Mitchell called and asked him to take on the job as chairman and CEO of the Illinois Tollway.

Though Evans had been happy to serve as a consultant for a few handpicked clients in retirement, he really didn't give much thought to turning down that opportunity.

“You can't say no to your governor,” Evans says. “It's truly an honor to serve.”

BRIAN SANDALOW