

Rotary
Club of
Charlotte



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

November 15, 2022

2022-2023 Board Members

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Chris William, Executive Producer and Moderator, PBS Carolina Business Review

by **Rick Handford**

Jim Rogers introduced Chris William, who for over 30 years has been the moderator and executive producer of PBS' Carolina Business Review. The show is broadcast over 22 television stations covering some 16 million people in NC, SC, and northern Georgia. A native of Buffalo, NY, Chris has a degree in electrical engineering from the University of Colorado, and has continued to work in private wealth management for Wells Fargo (he started with Interstate Securities 34 years ago and stayed on after they were acquired by Wells) in addition to his TV career. He has also served on the boards of numerous charitable and educational organizations, serving as chairman of several.

Chris William is a former Rotarian, and he expressed his appreciation for the good work of the Club.

He conceived the idea for the Carolina Business Review in 1990, and they had their first show on September 14, 1991. It featured Ken Iverson, the CEO of Nucor Steel. They have produced 50 shows per year every year since that time, creating over fifteen hundred unique 30-minute discussions

of business, finance, and public policy. At the time, there was little in the way of financial news, with CNBC and CNN FN being largely dedicated to providing market news to traders and others in the financial business world—lots of numbers and statistics but not much coverage of the people running the actual companies whose numbers were being discussed.

Charlotte was a lot smaller then, and Chris thought that it would be possible to get some of the local “rockstar CEOs” on television in a format that would let people get to know them as people instead of headliners. By way of example, many people had heard of Hugh McColl and Eddie Crutchfield, but had no way to know them, or hear them speak and see how they presented themselves and how they thought and worked. In that first show with Ken Iverson as the featured guest, the panel was made up of Smokey Bissell, John Connaughton, and Bill Keenan. The talent and influence in that first program set a very high bar for future ones.

Chris went on to stress that the show was never about the moderator but was about conversations between business and political leaders in North and South Carolina getting together to discuss the important issues of the day with each other. Stocking the panel with A-listers—the top influencers, leaders, and thinkers—was what made the show successful, and is how it has come to be one of the longest-lasting programs on PBS. Of course, influencers, leaders, and thinkers would tune in to the show to see what others were thinking, and this would also cause them to want to be on the show themselves. Chris read off a list of 20 names (less than 1% of those who have been on the show) and it was extremely impressive.

Chris was very selective about who would be invited to be on the show, either as the featured guest or a panelist, and over time a profile of the ideal guest was put together. They looked for A-listers, not afraid to be vulnerable or to speak frankly, smart, humble (when possible), optimistic, inclusive, and servant leaders, because these people made the best guests and had the best conversations. He went on to tell some stories about guests: Hugh McColl in 1992 revealing that he had the same fears and feelings that we all share; Susan Bies in February of 2008, the Federal Reserve Governor who coined the phrase “sub-prime mortgages” on the show and identified them as a potential danger to the economy; McColl again in 1993 discussing the Resolution Trust Corporation formed to resolve the savings and loan bankruptcy problems; Jim Sills, CEO of M&F Bank in a recent show revealing that the 24% of the bank’s employees who are not minorities were feeling ostracized because of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies; and Phyllis Schultz, a local franchise investor, who managed to get Ben and Jerry to appear on a show back in 1992.

Chris then moved on to where we are today and pointed out that the number of registered Unaffiliated voters exceeds number registered as Democrat or Republican. What does this mean for us going forward? Voter participation in the latest election is down from the last one, 51% vs 53%. How do we get people more interested in participating in the political process? Some CEOs are concerned with the quality of our political leadership. He went on to quote Thomas Jefferson, “It is not the bad politicians but rather the defective citizenship.” and John F. Kennedy, “We want the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.” How do we get

better at citizenship? We need to improve Public Safety and reverse the increases in crime and violence in Charlotte.

Jobs and labor participation in the workplace are down. He told us that John Connaughton had stated that this problem was a demographic one, as there are not enough people in Generations X and Z to replace the retiring Boomers. What do we do about getting adequate workers to fill the jobs? Transportation and infrastructure are closely connected to development. The Charlotte Unified Development Order has been hotly contested, but we need to get this right unless we want to have more traffic and congestion than Atlanta. How do you tell the difference between inflation and price gouging? How do we begin to solve the mental health crisis?

And in response to a question, he pointed out that where leadership was once concentrated in uptown Charlotte where a few successful and motivated leaders were instrumental in visualizing a future Charlotte and making it happen, leadership is now more dispersed and is moving out of the center and into the surrounding cities and counties. He does not see this trend reversing. Chris William was a most entertaining and informative speaker. I urge you to watch the recorded presentation on the Charlotte Rotary Vimeo account.

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/772151376>
The speaker's introduction begins at 25:20 minutes.