

Hospitality

Restoring a National Treasure

An Interview with
James C. Justice II, Chairman and Owner, The Greenbrier



EDITORS' NOTE In May 2009, West Virginia businessman Jim Justice announced that his company had purchased The Greenbrier Resort and the buyout of the DPS interest in the Greenbrier Sporting Club. Justice began his career in 1977 by starting Bluestone Farms (currently operating as Justice Family Farms, LLC), which is now the largest grain producer on the east coast. Justice also developed Stoney Brook Plantation, a 15,000-acre hunting and fishing preserve in Monroe



James C. Justice II

County, West Virginia. He became the President and CEO of Bluestone Industries, Inc. and Bluestone Coal Corporation in 1993. Over the next 15 years, a massive expansion of multiple businesses occurred. During late 2008 and early 2009, Justice successfully negotiated the sale of Bluestone Industries, Inc. and affiliated companies. The Justice's Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia coal operations and the West Virginia, Virginia, and North and South Carolina agricultural operations continue today under the parent James C. Justice Companies, Inc. Justice has carried on his family's tradition of being major supporters of youth programs. He received his B.S. and M.B.A. from Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Greenbrier (www.greenbrier.com) has been welcoming guests since 1778. Located in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia, it encompasses 6,750 acres that includes four golf courses, The Greenbrier Clinic, a 40,000-square-foot spa, an array of sporting activities, shops, private homes at The Greenbrier Sporting Club, guests-only casino and, at its heart, a vast and imposing grand hotel. The Greenbrier has undergone a \$250-plus-million restoration and is now home to The Greenbrier Classic, which is a PGA TOUR, FedExCup event.

What excited you about acquiring The Greenbrier and what was your vision for it?

As a child, my family could not afford to come to The Greenbrier but it was always thought of in our family as a national treasure and we appreciated it.

As we started to do better, my dad got into golf and I got to be a good junior golfer. So golf led me to The Greenbrier.

I have a tremendous passion for our state

and its people and I wanted to get involved when I learned what The Greenbrier was going through.

I worked a deal out with incredible speed – in eight days – but it was centered around me giving them more certainty and trying to save a community, as well as a national treasure. So that drove the purchase.

The vision has been for it to become The Greenbrier of the olden days, when it was the king of the hill, because I believe it deserves to be that. To do that, we needed to restore energy into

the place; it had lost its appeal and become old and lazy.

We will never let go of its wonderful tradition, elegance, and history. But it had to have some level of excitement and energy. That's what I've tried to bring and I've wanted to do that not for me but for the state and the people, and more than anything for the treasure that is The Greenbrier.

It humbles me to think I'm the owner and I can help so many and our state by restoring this treasure.

Was it tough to get people onboard who were concerned about their future?

No. It was a time of doom and gloom. There was a real possibility that The Greenbrier would close and that whole communities could dry up.

Marriott had already told the employees that they felt the total employment would end up between 700 and 900 and union contracts had been ratified in which employee benefits had been slashed significantly.

I tried to restore a great many of their benefits. We now have 1,850 people working here and the communities are thriving.

They were ecstatic. They held a town hall meeting where they announced me as the new owner and the entire room erupted. People were crying and cheering.

But that is not to say there hasn't been a lot of hard work.

How much needed to be done to bring the property back to that treasure status and where are you in that process?

There was a massive capital investment that had to be made, just in terms of upgrading the facility itself, be it in carpeting or fixtures or paint.

But more than anything, people needed hope. Some have been here 50 years – this is not a transient workforce.

Once we removed the thundercloud, these people became happy and we built a fabulous casino and entertainment area. It doesn't make any money, but it's a wonderful amenity and an experience for people. We have dancers and champagne toasts, and it's jackets-only and smoke-free.

We put it underground because I could not think of another place to put it where it would tie in with the ambiance and elegance of The Greenbrier. It boosted the energy level.

We also added some wonderful new restaurants as well as the golf tournament, and touches like ice skating and laser tag. We also upgraded our retail area to one that provides a world-class shopping experience.

For every step we make, we're adding energy and appealing to a different demographic and people have really responded; the place is thriving.

What's the secret to your success?

I'm a people person and this business is easy for me because it's centered around appreciation of people. It's driven by the fact that you love and appreciate the guests that come.

If you show them that, they want to come back and spread the news.

In implementing technology, how important is it no to lose the personal touch?

The personal touch is what The Greenbrier is about. Part of The Greenbrier was built in 1778. So it's all about our doorman who has been here for 53 years greeting people at the front door.

There are many wonderful places, but there is no other Greenbrier. If you try to change it and make it something other than it is, it won't work.

The Greenbrier is all about its people, who get to know you. They don't act like robots delivering a cold five-star level of service. The personal touch and warmth is what distinguishes us from everybody else. ●



The Greenbrier's front entrance and gardens (top); the master staircase (center)