



David Perry

Bill Elliot was thrust into the president's chair of his father's business in 1982 and has thrived since

Always playing against type >

Executive Summary:

Bill Elliot has rarely lived life by somebody else's prescription, but he's living it quite well, thank you very much.

By David Perry

Bill Elliot is a liberal in a conservative business.

After all, how many top executives do you know with degrees in philosophy and conflict resolution, who volunteer for charities promoting religious tolerance and international artistic health resources?

Elliot's family shares his progressive leanings. His wife Diane is a licensed minister who teaches spiritual inquiry classes and performs weddings and blessings. She also teaches Sufi, the inner and mystical dimension of Islam, and performs cranio-sacral therapy, which involves connecting with the rhythm of her client's cerebral spinal fluid for healing purposes. Son Rives runs the Local Roots Cafe in the

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Grandin Gardens Center, which serves locally-raised foods from organic and sustainable farms.

It makes you wonder how a self-described social liberal like Bill Elliot came to head up the Davis H. Elliot Company, Inc., a major Roanoke-based electrical company.

"I try to be fiscally conservative," says Elliot with a laugh.

Davis H. Elliot is not some run-of-the-mill home wiring company. It specializes in power line and utility construction and maintenance throughout the southeast, and has about 1,450 employees. Founded by Elliot's father, Davis, in 1946, the company began with one crew and one customer—Appalachian Power. Today, clients include the likes of AEP and the city of Nashville.

Throughout his youth and college years, while attending some hoity-toity schools, Elliot worked summers at his dad's company. After completing his law degree, Elliot returned to Roanoke, where he practiced law for eight years. Shortly after his father died in 1979, his uncle took over the company, and Elliot became vice president for sales and development. To his surprise, his uncle retired 15 months later.

Elliot suddenly found himself as the new president and chairman of the board in 1982. Today, he counts the company's repair work after the recent spate of hurricanes as some of its most important.

Elliot completed a master's degree in conflict resolution through the conflict transformation program at Eastern Mennonite University in 2001. He volunteers with the Center for Religious Tolerance, based in Sarasota, FL, and the Storydancer Project in Santa Fe, NM, which focuses on improving women's and girl's health through dance and storytelling.

Elliot also finds time for art. He recently spent four months in New York at the National Academy School of Fine Arts studying drawing and painting, and is going back for four more in 2009. "That was really a lot of run, extremely challenging and a lot of hard work," says Elliot. "He prefers "oil for the serious approach and watercolor for

In Brief

Name:	William Davis Elliot
Age:	62
Company:	Davis H. Elliot
Location:	Roanoke
Type of business:	Power line construction and maintenance; utility maintenance
Title:	President and chairman of the board
History:	Born in Lynchburg. Attended Episcopal High School in Alexandria and Gresham's School in Norfolk, England. Earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Trinity College, a law degree from Washington & Lee, and a master's degree in conflict resolution from Eastern Mennonite University. Joined his father's company in June of 1982 as vice president of sales and development and became president and chairman of the board in October of 1983.

fun, but I'm finding watercolor to be the more difficult of the two."

But Elliot's first love seems to be trout fishing, which he's done since his dad, who helped found the local Trout Unlimited chapter, taught him to fish as a boy. Elliot has taken a fly fishing trip out west every summer since 1984. Among his favorite streams is Idaho's Henry's Fork, "a graduate school river for fly fishing. I've come away from there humbled many times. They're very highly educated fish," says Elliot.

His best fish tale? While trying to land one on Henry's Fork, he caught his foot in a rock and fell face first in the water, struggling to right himself. "I didn't lose the fish, but I lost my wedding ring. I looked forever for it." Bracing himself for his wife's wrath, he phoned home, only to find a large maple tree had just fallen on the house during a thunderstorm. says Elliot, "She was more concerned about the tree, and so was I after I heard that." 