Yesterday was a busy day on behalf of our Government & Community Relations office, with five meetings set up by the GCR folks. We have a couple more today, but the Office of Development is leading the way with four events. Of course, we always finish the evening with an Alumni Association event, which provides a more leisurely, fun-filled finish to a busy day!

From our hotel in Augusta, we traveled a short distance to meet first thing this morning with Georgia State Senator Harold Jones II at his law office. Sen. Jones represents Georgia Senate District 22, which includes parts of Richmond and McDuffie counties. He holds four committee memberships in the State Senate — Economic Development & Tourism, Judiciary, Public Safety, and Special Judiciary.

Next up was Elberton, about 85 miles up the road from Augusta hugging the Georgia border, for a tour of the Hillcrest Granite Company, a fitting destination in the city known as “The Granite Capital of the World.” The city’s website and a sign in town trumpet that Elberton “produces more granite monuments than any other city in the world.” Since Elbert County’s first commercial quarry opened in 1882, granite has been a key component of the area’s economy. The Granite Bowl, where the Elbert County High School Blue Devils play football, is built with rows of granite seats and is one of the country’s most unusual and distinctive high school football facilities. More than 100,000 tons of Elberton granite went into its construction.

In 1969, the Elberton Granite Association (EGA) contracted with Georgia Tech to run blind tests on Elberton granite and samples from a few other areas to determine how they compared. The results, which gave high marks to the durability and hardness of Elberton granite, have long been shared with the industry, according to the EGA.

We followed the process from start to finish as we watched huge blocks of granite being chipped and shaped and cut with diamond saws and readied for shipping. There were grave markers and tombstones everywhere. While it won’t be in the foreseeable future, Elberton might run out of granite, but they’ll never outgrow the need for grave markers! Our hosts, Mark Hill and his sister Patsy (Hill) Johnson, were very gracious to share their family story. They also import and sell granite from other countries. I am proud to say that our folks from Georgia Tech have worked with Hillcrest Granite Company on water conservation and recycling and other alternative uses for the granite cuttings from the sawing process.

After our Hillcrest tour, we headed for a lunch with a group of Georgia Tech alumni, family, and friends at The White Plate restaurant in the historic Samuel Elbert Hotel and Conference Center in downtown Elberton. We are grateful to Jack McConnell, IM ’59, for helping host this event. Among those attending and photographing was Gary Jones, publisher of The Elberton Star.

After lunch, we headed to Athens for our third Georgia Tour excursion into the home of our in-state sports rival. Many people are surprised to learn that our two universities collaborate in numerous areas. This past fall, we received $20 million from the National Science Foundation
for an Engineering Research Center for Cell Manufacturing Technologies. It is built on a $16 million gift from the Marcus Foundation and our partnership with the state, companies, and other universities. In this new ERC, we’re partnering with UGA, Augusta University, the Technical College System of Georgia, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Puerto Rico, and others. We will be able to expand the use of therapies with living cells, and the cells become “drugs.” It could revolutionize the treatment of cancer, heart disease, autoimmune diseases, and others. It has the potential to be a $90 million investment that can literally change the world and save lives.

In addition, we’re always proud to share that Georgia is one of only three states in the country with two or more public universities in the top 20 in *U.S. News & World Report*’s rankings. The area has a somewhat small but enthusiastic contingent of Yellow Jackets who always make us feel very welcome and right at home.

First, though, we met in the afternoon with Georgia State Senator Bill Cowsert, the Georgia State Senate majority leader, in his office not far from the UGA campus. He represents Senate District 46, which includes Clarke, Oconee, and Walton counties. First elected to the Georgia Senate in 2006, he is a member of four Senate committees, including Appropriations, and is vice chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

Following a Development appointment with Georgia Tech alumni and friends, we checked into the Hotel Indigo, our destination for the night and the site of our Athens Alumni Reception in the evening. About 80 alumni, family, friends, and supporters attended the reception. Retired University System of Georgia Chancellor Hank Huckaby, who lives in the area and attended along with his wife, Amy, gave a gracious introduction. We owe a debt of gratitude to Chancellor Huckaby for his leadership. All of us at Tech benefited from his commitment and vast experience in countless ways, and we are grateful for his support not only of Georgia Tech, but for the entire University System. We had a number of other special guests including former Chairman of the Board of Regents Dink NeSmith, State Representative Tommy Benton, and State Representative Deborah Gonzalez. There were also longtime Athens residents Dan and Dottie Blitch, as well as newcomers such as Alice and Gary Welsh.

The 130-room Hotel Indigo is a relative newcomer to the Athens downtown cityscape, but its sustainability features would probably interest some back on our campus. When it opened in 2009, it was among the earliest LEED Gold-certified hotels in the country. Sustainable and salvaged materials obtained mostly within 500 miles of the city were among those used, along with reclaimed wood from a 100-year-old South Carolina cotton mill and local granite. I wouldn’t be surprised if the latter was from Elberton! The first in the Hotel Indigo chain — the Hotel Indigo Atlanta Midtown — opened in 2004 near Georgia Tech’s campus in the historic former Cox-Carlton Hotel building and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Down on the C level was a wonderful, funky space, with several rooms where we held our Alumni event. I understand it is a favorite new venue for the folks in Athens!

-G.P. "Bud" Peterson

For a look at the public gallery of photos from the Georgia Tour, visit: [https://gtgcr.smugmug.com/2018/GeorgiaTour](https://gtgcr.smugmug.com/2018/GeorgiaTour)

Photos from Day Three:
With the backdrop of a giant granite saw, (from left) Georgia Tech alumnus Jack McConnell, President Peterson, Hillcrest co-owner Mark Hill, first lady Val Peterson, and Lynn Durham, Assoc. Vice President and Chief of Staff to the president, pause for a moment from their tour of Hillcrest Granite Company in Elberton, "The Granite Capital of the World." The saw uses recycled water and composite diamond blades to cut granite into slabs.
Alumnus Jack McConnell, Georgia Tech’s host while the Georgia Tour was in Elberton, proudly shows off his Rat Cap from 1955. McConnell was a 1959 IM graduate, his father, Turner, a 1928 College of Business graduate, and his son Jack a 1988 management graduate.
As alumnus Jack McConnell, left, listens in, Hillcrest co-owner Mark Hill (hand raised) explains about the saw's operation to Val Peterson, Lynn Durham, and President Peterson.

First lady Val Peterson and President Peterson meet "The Rock"!
Present G.P. "Bud" Peterson and first lady Val Peterson pause with Amy Huckaby and former USG Chancellor Hank Huckaby at the Hotel Indigo in Athens.

From left, former Board of Regents Chairman Dink NeSmith, Amy Huckaby, former University System of Georgia Chancellor Hank Huckaby, and Georgia State Rep. Tommy Benton (District 31) socialize during Alumni Affairs gathering at the Hotel Indigo in Athens.
From left, Georgia Tech first lady and "Queen Bee" Val Peterson, Georgia State Rep. Deborah Gonzalez, and Casey Aultman, manager of State Relations for Georgia Tech's Office of Government & Community Relations, in Athens.

The Ramblin 'Wreck, as always, gets preferred parking at Alumni Affairs events!
Nick Laconico, a 2017 Georgia Tech graduate who is working on a master's degree at UGA, reconnects with his past as he meets the Ramblin' Wreck outside the Hotel Indigo in Athens.