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Growth, more partnerships in Secrist's lineup

Southern Institute's new chief aims to expand horizons

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Jack Secrist III looked around the DoubleTree Hotel banquet room at a sea of blue golf shirts worn by current, retired and former Southern Research Institute employees gathered to celebrate their organization's 65th anniversary.

Many of the 400 or so faces were familiar to Secrist. For 27 years, the researcher has worked with or supervised workers at the institute's Southside campus, which has had a hand in six anti-cancer drugs that have gained Federal Drug Administration approval. But at that midday gathering last month, he stood before them as their new president and chief executive and proclaimed another discovery.

Secrist said he'd observed that the best way to get everyone to show up is simply to provide food.

It was a joke, of course, but had a meaning on a deeper level. For his co-workers' professional appetites and for Southern Research's future, Secrist envisions an environment where researchers can expand their horizons, the institute can continue to grow and revenues can flow in from new sources.

On the table now, Secrist said, is continued collaboration with UAB on technology, focusing on more partnerships for commercial ventures and conducting additional research on drug candidates and health-related issues. Of the 470 workers in Birmingham, Oxmoor Valley and Wilsonville, 320 are involved in technical projects, spokeswoman Rhonda Jung said. She said 129 of the 320 are scientists and 50 are engineers.

Getting the institute's work force on board with those initiatives shouldn't be hard.

"He had widespread support throughout the organization, top to bottom," said UAB President Carol Z. Garrison, who chairs Southern Research's board, which promoted Secrist in September. She said the board believes that he has the vision, experience and leadership skills to move the institute forward.

Staying on top of things at Southern Research could be a chore. The institute founded in 1941 works in fields ranging from drug discovery to aerospace, from engineering to defenses against biological weapons. It has worked on curbing greenhouse gases, evaluated high-temperature materials for rocket motors and

studied how to blend coal and switchgrass to produce electricity.

"We wanted someone who we thought could, on their own, really bring some new ideas, some new approaches, and Jack really was able to articulate those and articulate them in some creative ways," Garrison said.

Accomplishments:

Despite his deep ties to Southern Research, the 59-year-old Secrist had to beat out a crowded field to win the post of CEO.

When Robert C. Lonergan retired earlier this year, Dr. Tina S. Rogers served as interim president and CEO while the board searched for a permanent chief. Garrison said a search consultant firm and advertisements generated a large number of applicants from across the nation and abroad.

Secrist was among the three finalists from the search, which lasted a couple of months.

"It was obvious as we got to the end of the interview process that we had the best person for the job here," said Garrison, who added his great experience in the organization and his commitment to the institute was obvious.

Charlie Bugg, chief executive of Birmingham-based BioCryst Pharmaceuticals Inc., thinks Secrist is an excellent choice to lead Southern Research. Bugg said the medicinal chemistry area where Secrist worked has always been a backbone of the institute. Plus, he's been helpful to BioCryst, a UAB spinoff that is working on experimental drugs for influenza and certain forms of leukemia, Bugg said.

"Secrist has been closely involved with BioCryst since the company was founded" in 1986, Bugg said. "He is one of our early collaborators ... and he's been heavily involved in chemistry work that we did at SRI. And he's been working with us off and on as a consultant over the years."

Secrist is an accomplished scientist. He was in Bern, Switzerland, for a meeting of an international scientific society he once headed when he got word that he had been chosen as Southern Research's new leader. He was in Bern to receive the 2006 John A. Montgomery Award that recognizes outstanding contributions in cancer research. Montgomery and Secrist worked together on Clofarabine, the institute's cancer drug that has been approved for sale in Europe and the United States.

Back home at Southern Research, Secrist intends to keep a finger in research, if time allows, by overseeing a few projects. He also plans to continue nurturing young scientists. Plus, he has other important duties at the institute, which generated nearly \$90 million in revenue in 2005 and performs work for NASA, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Institutes of Health as well as private corporations.

"I feel the leader of the organization should be involved in interacting with clients, finding new business directions and generating opportunities for new projects," he said.

Secrist believes the institute has a good senior management team that understands the operations and will be able to unite behind its priorities. However, he will make two moves on that team. One is filling the post

of vice president of drug discovery, his old job. The second is finding someone to serve as a vice president on the business side to help with some of the new initiatives.

Secrist said he envisions a growth spurt for the Southern Research campus, which is located downtown near UAB.

"I would be ... disappointed if we didn't end up needing to do some construction," he said.

Bowling and softball:

Since his promotion, Secrist said, there has been little change in his working hours. Most days, he in the office shortly after 7 a.m. and leaves between 6 and 6:30 p.m.

"I always got here early and stayed late, so I don't really see much change in that regard. It's just a question of what I have to spend my time on."

Secrist was teaching chemistry at Ohio State University, when Montgomery recruited him to come to Southern Research. Secrist said he couldn't pass up an opportunity to be on a team that was doing significant research.

As for family, he takes walks with his wife when not working in the yard and garden. Their children are grown. Their daughter, 32, lives in Ohio and their son, 28, lives in Indiana.

Secrist said he occasionally shoots basketball in his driveway and plays golf pretty regularly and tennis periodically. He is a "sub" on his bowling league team and his travel schedule has relegated him from a regular softball player to more time on the bench. "I play reasonably well," he said. "I don't embarrass myself or the team."

In sports, Secrist's goal used to be have a good time and play well. "Now it's to make sure I don't get hurt," he admitted.

As Southern Research's leader, Secrist has another goal: create good times and fond memories that can be shared at future anniversary celebrations.

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