

CHRIS JENNINGS

EXECUTIVE VP
SPARTANBURG CVB



Photo by Shawe Stamm/RedEye Studios

1 What was your first job?

As a kid, I sold Christmas cards door to door. Then after college, I was the sports editor at a weekly newspaper in Kennebunk, Maine. I really enjoyed the journalism field, but learned quickly that it didn't pay well, and that in order to grow professionally, I needed to explore a different career path.

2 What are some of the skills you developed early, that you've found to be beneficial or essential, to your practices now?

I have learned that customer service is essential. I grew up a "hotel brat," with parents and grandparents running a resort in New Hampshire. The customer is always right. Period. I also used to be very shy about public speaking. I learned quickly with my first government job that I had to relax and become comfortable speaking to large groups, public officials, and the media. Respect your colleagues and give them the credit as your organization succeeds. Teamwork is essential, and I see myself more as a cheerleader and co-worker than a boss.

3 How do you strike a balance between your personal and professional lives?

I love my job, and I really love this place—its people and its history. Telling visitors the stories of Spartanburg, and showing all the famous—and the undiscovered—gems of this county is very satisfying. But I sometimes need to be reminded to turn "off" to just enjoy time each day with my family and friends.

4 What are some strategies you use to do so/keep yourself in check?

I like to explore new places around the state and the Southeast, especially with family. I also escape on a bicycle two or three times a week to exercise my head and body.

5 What vision do you promote for your community, and how do you get others to buy into or tap into that vision?

Spartanburg is changing so fast, I tell folks they need to be part of that momentum. The downtown is bustling with new hotels, retail and restaurants and several organizations have teamed up with the governmental agencies to invest in new trails, sports facilities, redevelopment of textile mills, and public art. It's amazing, and we don't brag enough about all the "firsts." As our Chamber slogan says—There's only one, Spartanburg.

6 What do you struggle with?

It's hard to say no to interesting ideas and projects. However, one of the challenges of any successful organization is to stay focused. We concentrate on our mission of increasing the length of stay and spending by travelers. I'm reminded of the Polish proverb, "not my circus, not my monkeys", when someone asks the CVB to take on a project that does not meet that mission.

7 What was your biggest failure as a professional, and how did you recover?

I would say having to close a small business and terminating four employees, and being unemployed for three months during the Great Recession (2009). Moving to Spartanburg, S.C. and growing the tourism destination here has been the best medicine.

8 What is your plan for yourself in the future?

I'll figure that out after our three daughters graduate college (attending USC Upstate, Clemson and College of Charleston).

9 What goes into making Spartanburg a destination, both tourist and sports?

Spartanburg's emergence in travel and tourism began when our leadership—both industry and governmental—realized the potential and invested in a strategic plan more than six years ago. It outlined the major assets we have in this county, and recommended strategies to grow our visitor economy. We have used that plan as our blueprint, and you are seeing the success it has generated.

10 In terms of the development of Spartanburg as a destination, what are some of the challenges that come with that?

We don't have an ocean beach like the three major tourism spots in South Carolina. Spartanburg needs more hotel development to meet the current visitor demand. We also have to be careful not to compare ourselves to Asheville or Greenville—we have plenty to brag about here in Spartanburg.

11 How do you get the word out about what Spartanburg has to offer?

Traditional advertising (broadcast and print) is important in increasing awareness, but public relations and social media are vital to building brand awareness. But the best way to get the word out is through our residents and visitors alike and the word of mouth—they can be our best advocates. Once they visit, they will love it!