



Love
him
or hate
him,
no one has
lukewarm feelings
about **Vernon Jones**,
the hotheaded DeKalb
politician who is definitely
larger than life.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID STUART

Mr. Big

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

If Vernon

Jones were a symbol, he'd be a yin-yang sign, that black-and-white, ancient Chinese graphic representation of two primal forces, opposing but complementary, found in all things in the universe. The outer circle represents "everything," while the shapes within represent the interaction of two energies: the black yin—dark, passive, downward, cold, contracting, weak—and the white yang—bright, active, upward, hot, expanding, strong, causative. But unlike the yin-yang energies, DeKalb County's chief executive officer cannot be contained in such black-and-white terms.

Take, for example, one breezy Tuesday morning, just before the twice-monthly DeKalb County Commission meeting. Television crews mill about as a diverse group of picket sign-carrying protesters—from elderly gray-haired black men in button-downs to 30-something white men in baseball caps—march in front of downtown Decatur's Manuel J. Maloof Center.

The low-key protest erupts into a flurry of activity as Jones emerges on the breezeway. "Come on out and talk to us, Mr. CEO!" the protesters shout, closing in like vultures circling carrion. This prompts the previously lax news photographers to jump into action. They jockey for position, cameras and microphones held aloft, hoping for good footage for the noon newscasts—and they *know* Jones will deliver.

Flanked by his chief of staff, Jones—a clean-cut, cinnamon-colored man in an immaculate dark-gray pin-striped suit, crisp white shirt and burnt crimson tie—squeezes his wiry frame through the throng, a spurious but amiable smile spreading across his face.

The demonstrators here today are convinced that the recent firing of county police officer Malik Douglas was an act of retaliation for his role in organizing a union. Sure, the decision seems more directly tied to then Police Chief Louis Graham, but they choose to take their grievances to the top.

Jones leans into the sea of microphones, stating matter-of-factly that the firing was the result of an internal investiga-

tion that yielded disturbing information about the officer, including a history of domestic violence. But he doesn't stop there. Capitalizing on the impromptu news conference, he seizes the opportunity to hurl pot shots at the media, particularly the thorn in his side, WSB-TV reporter Dale Cardwell.

"Dale, you're not a journalist, you're an advocate acting on someone else's behalf," Jones barks at Cardwell, brandishing a newspaper. "If you had done your research and read what the *AJC*, which is *your* company's newspaper [both the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and WSB-TV are owned by Cox Enterprises], reported today, you would know this officer's history."

Jones then strolls up the sidewalk, trailed by reporters and photographers. He pivots for a final comment. "I just want to thank Fox 5 and CBS 46 for doing your research," he says with a hint of sarcasm. Then he disappears behind the auditorium door.

Fast-forward. It's just before rush hour, and Jones, during a rare occasion when he's not being chaperoned by his controversial security detail, is sitting at an outdoor cafe on East Ponce de Leon Avenue in downtown Decatur. The presence of the county's highest-ranking official, perched along the busy street, ignites reactions comparable to those of people who've just sighted a B-list celebrity, or at least a small-town mayor. Jones, still in the same sleek suit, sets off a barrage of horn-blowing, waving and all-out gawking.

A black man dressed in a paint-smeared jumpsuit hops out of a tattered pickup stopped at a red light, rushes over to shake Jones' hand and passes on his business card. "Can you paint my house?" Jones teases, waving as the truck rolls off. "I'll pay you!"

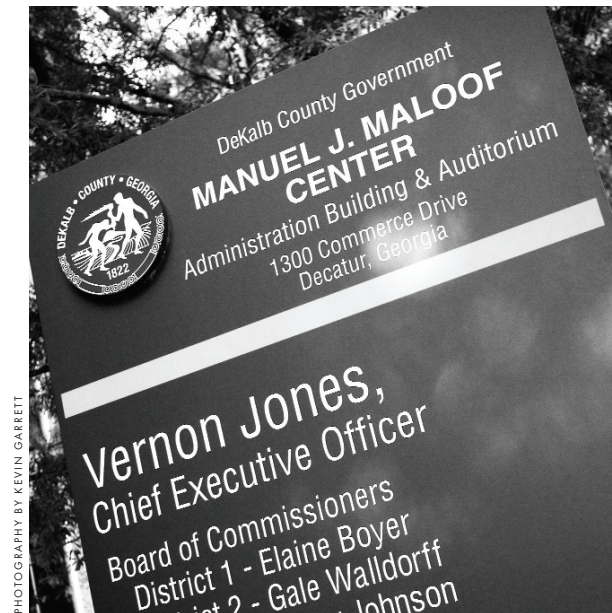
A lanky, bushy-bearded white man walking by shifts the briefcase he's carrying to his left hand then pumps his right fist in the air and yells out, "Vernon!"

A middle-aged black woman briefly replaces a weary gaze with a look of sheer surprise as she does a double take.

Minutes later, a 25-ish platinum blonde in a shiny black Ford Expedition spots the CEO as she pulls up to the traffic signal, smiles in his direction and rolls down the rear window, revealing a chubby-cheeked toddler who shares his mother's bright locks and sapphire eyes. "Wave at the CEO," she prods, prompting the smiling toddler strapped contently in his safety seat to flail his pudgy fingers.

From protest to praise in the course of a few hours—this day represents a mere morsel on the massive buffet table that makes up the complex, complicated and often-contradictory existence of Vernon Jones, who, in just six years, has transformed himself from a virtually unknown state representative to a household name. He's one of the most polarizing politicians in metro Atlanta and, arguably, the state of Georgia. Whether you know him personally or have just heard about him via the constant barrage of media coverage, you probably have strong feelings about him.

Like the opposite energies represented in the yin-yang sign, the characteristics that make some embrace Jones make others loathe him.



"He does have a short fuse. He's got a temper and gets hot quick, but part of that is because he cares so much about his work," says County Executive Assistant Richard Stogner.

Perception is reality—or so the saying goes—and a lot of what you think of Jones depends on when you first heard about him. Was it in 2000, when as a Democrat making a first bid for the CEO's seat, he landed critical endorsements from both the *Journal-Constitution* and the county's GOP forces, nabbing 63 percent of the vote in a runoff—an incredible feat in a county known for its Mason-Dixon line of sorts (residents in South DeKalb are mostly black and Democrat while those in the North are primarily white and Republican)?

Or was it was when, during his 2004 bid for a second term, he beat out seven contenders without a runoff? Or in late 2005, when, through his signature brand of grassroots campaigning, he convinced voters to raise their property taxes for a \$230 million-dollar bond referendum that would fund capital improvement projects including parks, libraries and roads?

Perhaps it was in 2003, when his \$800,000-a-year personal security detail prompted a grand jury investigation. Could it have been when Jones' former deputy chief of staff was charged with holding a woman against her will in a hotel room, or when Jones himself was alleged to have raped a 29-year-old woman in his own South DeKalb home? Maybe it was when he kicked American Red Cross workers out of the disaster relief center he established for Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

No matter when you first heard of him or what you think of him, you definitely know his name (unless you're one of the many who mistakenly refer to him as "Vernon Jordan," President Clinton's former adviser).

It's clear that Jones has made his mark—whether positive or negative—on Georgia politics. What's not as clear is whether it's his political prowess or his personal escapades that make him such a fascinating character. The only logical answer seems to be that it's a little of both.

Jones certainly has all the right ingredients to provide fodder for gossip, both political and social. He's an attractive, outspoken, single, 46-year-old African-American man who oversees a \$2.6 billion budget and helms the state's second most populous county, an area that also happens to be the nation's second-richest majority black suburb (after Prince George's County in Maryland). Jones is the first African-American and the youngest person ever elected to the post of DeKalb County CEO—and the first to have a college degree.

The post, which combines the administrative duties of a county manager with the legislative abilities of a commissioner, was created in 1985. The CEO sets the commission agenda, prepares the annual county budget and oversees government operations. It is the only county government position of its kind in Georgia.

What makes Jones a heck of a lot more interesting than, say, Governor Perdue—and what allows him to avoid the perception of volatility that plagues Democratic Fourth District Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, also of DeKalb—is the perpetual duality that clings to him like heavy dew on morning grass.

For example, Jones, a Democrat, won his seat primarily through the support of Democratic African-American voters in South DeKalb, yet he admitted to voting for the WASP-y

poster child of conservatism, George W. Bush, in the last presidential election. Jones touts himself as a devout Christian with centrist political leanings who sticks to his conservative “country boy” roots, but he has publicly admitted to engaging in a *ménage à trois*.

The duality is even evidenced in his attire. It’s not uncommon to spot him sporting a pricey Hugo Boss business suit with his signature black Cowboy boots peeking out at the hem, as he did at a recent commission meeting—sort of a GQ meets “Jethro” look.

Jones’ public persona sometimes seems to clash with his professional record and resumé—an impressive hybrid of experience as both an executive in the private sector and an active public servant. As an undergrad studying business administration at North Carolina Central University in Durham, he earned money by washing cars at an Avis rental car company. After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in 1983, management positions at MCI and BellSouth lured Jones to DeKalb. As Jones tells it, once here, he almost immediately set his sights on DeKalb’s CEO seat: “I knew I wanted to be CEO. It took me 14 years to do it, but I made it.”

After leaving the private sector, Jones, a graduate of one of the executive programs at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, served eight years as a state representative for DeKalb in the Georgia General Assembly. There, he sponsored or co-sponsored more than 60 bills—including one to remove the Rebel emblem from the state flag and another to ban minors from purchasing music with explicit lyrics—and served on the powerful Appropriations and Insurance committees, as secretary of the Health and Ecology Committee and chairman of the Health Professions Subcommittee.

Jones’ tenure as CEO has been—and continues to be—filled with solid victories. Even his critics will admit that, with Jones strategically at the controls, DeKalb has emerged as quite a well-oiled government machine, making strides in all



“I think he’s proven to be a **popular leader** among many DeKalb voters; he easily won re-election. But he does have a high **potential for criminal charges**,” says M. Alexis Scott of the *Atlanta Daily World*.

arenas, including the economy, technology and ecology.

Since he has been on board, the county has maintained a balanced surplus budget and upgraded to a Triple-A bond rating by both of the agencies that rate counties (comparable to a top-notch credit score for an individual), a distinction shared by only two other Georgia counties, Gwinnett and Cobb. He has also cut taxes three times through millage rate reductions.

DeKalb was the first government in the state to establish domestic partner benefits for employees, and the first to create an office of homeland security after 9/11, recognizing that the DeKalb-based Centers for Disease Control might be a target. Jones is excited about this year’s launch of the first phase of a new 311 call center, which will handle routine calls that currently tie up the county’s emergency 911 system (roughly a third of the 1.12 million calls that poured into DeKalb’s 911 system last year involved non-emergency inquiries, such as the procedures for paying parking tickets).

In 2001, barely a year into office, Jones convinced voters to pass a \$125 million bond issue for capital improvements. Seventy percent went to land acquisitions and 30 percent went to park development and improvements, a cornerstone of what many consider to be Jones’ legacy, the county’s acquisition of more than 2,200 acres of greenspace during his tenure.

He is also credited with the creation of the county’s first economic development department, which has generated \$4 billion in new investments since its launch in 2001. “When he came on board back in 2000, there were three people in charge of development in all of DeKalb,” says Leonardo McClarty of the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, who notes that Jones helped to lure several major companies to DeKalb, including HomeBanc, which now has home offices in the Perimeter Mall area. “Fast forward to today and we have a full-fledged economic development staff with roughly 12 people on board. He has let it be known that economic development is a major focus of his administration. He

has let us know in very certain terms that he will do whatever needs to be done to close the deal,” says McClarty.

Jones also earned brownie points earlier this year when he traveled, albeit unsuccessfully, to Detroit in hopes of convincing General Motors executives to reconsider plans to shut down a 58-year-old assembly plant in Doraville, which provides 3,000 jobs.

Now, in the midst of his second four-year term, which ends in 2008, his detractors, including Republican commissioner Elaine Boyer, a long-time rival, are quick to point out that county spending has increased since he’s taken office and that property taxes, though still the lowest in the metro area, have nearly doubled. Still, you’ll be hard-pressed to find anyone who’ll flat-out state that Jones has done a poor job as CEO or that DeKalb has not blossomed in many ways under his watch.

Jones’ office feels every bit like a miniature version of the Oval Office—the plush navy blue carpet accented by matching thick velvet drapes, the heavy dark cherry wood desk with intricately carved legs flanked by American and Georgia flags with the DeKalb seal centered between the two. Spread neatly across the desktop are a figurine featuring Washington D.C. monuments and a silver magnetic mobile with the words “thinking outside the box” etched on the front. An oil portrait of Jones bears only a minor resemblance. On another wall is a photo of Robert E. Lee.

The book *The Road to CEO* by Sharon Voros is prominently posted in the display case facing his desk. The massive antique-looking structure with shiny brass handles is decorated with mementos he’s collected over the years: a Wilson basketball signed by the Shaw University team, an American flag hologram and a stack of books, among them, *Think Positive Thoughts Every Day*, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, *Turner’s First Century* and *The World Is Flat*.

On the credenza behind his desks rests a Bible open to the Book of Habakkuk, an assortment of bald eagle figurines, a green marble clock engraved in gold with the words “Mr. CEO,” a framed photo of himself with George W. Bush and another of Jones and his pride and joy, a wide-eyed springer spaniel named Henry Jones, posing in front of the dog park named in Henry’s honor.

Minutes after he sinks into the rich leather chair pushed behind his desk, Jones’ assistant, a mild-mannered woman he calls “Pat” (Jones, like George Bush, is fond of handing out nicknames), delivers a stack of small bright-pink papers with “Important Messages” emblazoned across the top. “He returns all phone messages,” Pat says, returning to her desk just outside his office door. “Especially those who insist on speaking with the CEO.”

She’s right. He does return all those left for him that day—even the bizarre ones, like the one from “Brother Africa,”

TOP DOG Jones’ pride and joy is Henry Jones, the Springer spaniel who is the namesake of a DeKalb County dog park.

which reads like a flyer for a Black Panther Party rally: *Meeting Location:* Here. *Date/Time Needed:* Now. *Subject/Nature of Meeting:* Revolution! Jones leaves a message for Brother Africa, playfully asking him to “call back, brother, so we can talk about the revolution!”

Then there was the message from the 20-something single mother who called to complain that her “baby’s daddy’s new girlfriend” had brutally beaten her with a baseball bat outside a DeKalb County home. Jones is clearly confused about why he’s being briefed on the sordid details of this ghetto-fabulous melodrama, but he graciously lends his ear to the caller’s colorful account and wraps up the call by setting the young mother up to meet with a domestic violence officer.

The next message is from what sounds like an elderly white man with a Southern accent thicker than the stack of papers packed inside the bright-red folder that Pat has just delivered for the CEO’s approval. Jones quickly introduces himself then listens patiently while the long-winded man rambles about a drainage problem in his front yard. The conversation eventually turns into a bizarre duel of the drawls as Jones, interjecting at random intervals, repeatedly responds to the man by saying “yessir” in his own heavy North Carolina accent. The caller wants the CEO to “stop by and take a look” for himself. Jones arranges for a public works staffer to visit the man’s house within two hours.

Watching him in action, it seems he gets a surge out of this personal interaction with DeKalb citizens, sort of a small-scale “each one, reach one” counter-attack carried out to discredit his detractors who don’t play nice on the political playground.

“I’m the poster child for receiving complaints, but I enjoy it,” says Jones. “I try to create a solution for their problems. I love it. It’s an honor to be in a position to help people. It’s my ministry.”

It’s time to shoot a commercial for an upcoming county fes-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 99]



VERNON JONES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 97

tival. Another assistant, a bubbly young African-American woman named “Diamond,” hands him a script, as he awkwardly perches on the edge of his desk. “This is the hardest part of my job,” he quips, skimming over his lines.

He’s right. Six takes later, the lines seem much more complicated than at first. After the seventh blooper, he abandons the script, throws on some dark Blues Brothers–style sunglasses, folds his arms and, instead of introducing himself as DeKalb County CEO, says, “Hello, this is da man,” causing his staff and the camera crew to double over in laughter.

After the ruckus, he finally nails it, just in time for more staffers to begin transforming a small table in the corner of his office into a makeshift restaurant table for the winner of the “Win Lunch With the CEO” contest sponsored by the county’s senior services department. They hastily spread a flimsy baby-blue paper tablecloth then top it with a basket of fake flowers.

The winner, a 40-something white woman from Avondale Estates who professes to be a Jones “fan,” seems visibly giddy in his presence. Over cold chicken breast sandwiches and pasta they exchange polite banter about county issues, like Jones’ strides in acquiring greenspace, and she expresses appreciation for her low property taxes. “I’m going to be in the paper,” Jones teases, after the woman mentions her husband. “I’m out with a married woman!”

They pose side by side for a photo. Jones and his assistant Kimbrough, also black, fight back laughter as the contest winner, clearly unfamiliar with African-American Greek traditions, mistakes the fraternity signal Jones holds up as an outstretched hand and stiffly grasps his fingers.

After lunch, he dashes out of the office, down the elevator and over to a side hallway, where his driver waits to whisk him to his next appointment. He ducks into the sleek black Ford Crown Victoria with dark tinted windows, never missing a beat in the conversation he’s holding on his cell phone.

As the car, with folded newspaper

Vernon Jones, known for his
outspoken and brash demeanor,
pulls no punches when responding to
the controversy swirling around him.

>> ACCUSATION

Jones was accused of excessive spending in 2003 when a news article highlighted that \$250,000 in taxpayer dollars went to salary and overtime pay for his five-member security detail.

>> OUTCOME

Two successive county grand juries concluded that the detail should be decreased but found no criminal wrongdoing.

>> IN HIS OWN WORDS

“J. Tom [Morgan] was trying to indict me, he got a grand jury to ask for that inquiry. The security issue was used as a smoke screen to assassinate my character. Even Stevie Wonder could see that!”

>> ACCUSATION

Members of Jones’ security detail were accused of abusing Georgia’s computerized criminal history database to conduct improper background checks on a number of his political rivals.

>> OUTCOME

An outside prosecutor agreed with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that DeKalb police did not improperly use the state’s crime database for political or personal purposes and that there was no evidence linking the inquiries to Jones.

>> IN HIS OWN WORDS

“Yet another baseless attack. There is no evidence of corruption in DeKalb County government.”

>> ACCUSATION

Republican DeKalb County Commissioner Elaine Boyer filed a police complaint claiming Jones hurled insults at her and intentionally bumped her in a hallway after a contentious meeting.

>> OUTCOME

Boyer opted not to press charges. Jones issued two apology letters classifying her account as “an unfortunate misinterpretation” of events.

>> IN HIS OWN WORDS

“It never happened. I never bumped her. We brushed shoulders when we passed each other in the hallway. She was upset because she had lost a budget battle . . . I beat her [in the vote]. She was just pimping the media because it’s easy to do. I would do it if I could.”

>> ACCUSATION

Jones was accused of attempting to profit from the county greenspace program that he initiated after he purchased a 54-acre estate in south DeKalb, a short distance from Arabia Mountain.

>> OUTCOME

No formal investigation was conducted. Jones still lives in the home.

>> IN HIS OWN WORDS

“I have the right, like any other citizen, to buy land. I got my 54 acres and two goats. I tried to get me a mule, but I couldn’t find one. At least I didn’t ask for reparations! I got it the old-fashioned way—I bought it!”

>> ACCUSATION

In early 2004, former DeKalb CEO candidate Teresa Greene-Johnson filed for a temporary restraining order against Jones, complaining that he and several of his supporters aggressively confronted her while campaigning.

>> OUTCOME

A judge denied Greene-Johnson’s request. No charges were filed.

>> IN HIS OWN WORDS

“When she showed up in court the judge told her to get out of the courtroom. She just tried to borrow a page from Elaine Boyer, because she knows that it works.”

>> ACCUSATION

Four current and former DeKalb employees accused Jones of trying to replace white managers in the parks department with blacks, claiming he desired a racially “darker administration.”

>> OUTCOME

J. Tom Morgan, now a partner with the firm Balch & Bingham, is handling the still-pending case. In light of a transcript of a secret recording between two county officials, U.S. District Judge William Duffey announced, at press time, plans to broaden the scope of the case to include an examination of all hiring practices countywide.

>> IN HIS OWN WORDS

“Most of those involved in the case are just disgruntled employees. J. Tom is just using this to get clients.”

pages and development blueprints strewn across the back seat, weaves through a maze of tree-lined DeKalb County streets, Jones juggles back-to-back phone conversations on one of the three telephones now at his disposal (two cell phones in his pockets and one on the car's dashboard). The calls come so fast that, at times, he balances a cell phone on each ear. He abruptly cuts off one conversation to call in a pothole sighting to the public works department.

"I don't know how he does it," confides his driver—a clean-cut black man who looks like he should work for the Secret Service—reaching to answer one of the ringing phones for Jones. "It's like this all day."

The chaos doesn't end during a quick stop at the barbershop. As his coiffeuse, a scarlet-haired white woman with a heavy accent (Jones refers to her as "Gabby"), intently drags the shiny clipper blades through his dark afro, another barber-shop regular—a pot-bellied man with a bald spot—peppers Jones with questions about regulations for business signs. And although the man—dressed in a gold shirt, baggy jeans and sneakers—opens each question with the promise that it's "the last one, and I'm through," his interrogation doesn't end until the CEO, now with a fresh haircut and meticulous beard, springs out of the barber's chair en route to his next appointment.

It's just after 4:15 p.m. at Stonecrest Mall in Lithonia, and the middle-aged white woman can't seem to stop staring at the lanky black man strolling by in a dark suit. "I know you," she says, pointing in Jones' direction before resting her index finger on her lower lip. "I'm a preacher's wife . . . are you a minister?"

Jones chuckles. "No, ma'am, but I do have a ministry of sorts," he says coyly. "I'm the CEO of this great county you're in right now."

"Oh," the woman says, still struggling to figure out the connection. "Wait a minute, are you the one who's always in trouble?"

"Yes, ma'am, that would be me," Jones says. "I'm always in trouble."

It's true. His administration has weathered its share of storms, like the grand jury investigation into his five-

"Even my staunchest critics have not been able to question my ability to effectively run and operate this county. I'm kicking their ass!" says Jones.

member personal security detail, which ultimately found no criminal wrongdoing but agreed that the security detail should be reduced.

There were also those allegations that Jones had ordered "unauthorized computer searches" on fellow county officials and journalists. After an extensive investigation, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation concluded that the checks were not done improperly and that there was no evidence linking them to Jones.

In January 2005, a state ethics panel fined Jones \$7,500 for accepting at least 19 illegal campaign contributions—including some for a runoff campaign that never happened—exceeding the \$1,000-per-election limit. Jones later returned the contributions and apologized for his actions, noting that the campaign finance laws had changed between his first election and runoff elections.

Although those charges were resolved, others still hover over him like a bloated storm cloud, such as the pending discrimination lawsuit filed in 2004, whereby four current and former DeKalb employees accuse Jones of trying to replace white managers in the parks department with African-Americans. Former DeKalb District Attorney J. Tom Morgan, Jones' well-known political adversary, is representing the plaintiffs and has declined comment on the case, citing a judge's orders. Morgan was the DA in 2003 when a county grand jury investigated operations in Jones' office.

Jones insists that he's often misunderstood and misquoted, the victim of a media vendetta aimed at painting him as a bad guy (he notes that a reader poll in *this* magazine deemed him the most "embarrassing politician" of 2004). But many perceive him as a bully with anger management issues. There's a long list of

allegations of ugly confrontations to support those claims.

In February 2004, Republican Commissioner Elaine Boyer filed a complaint with Decatur Police, alleging that, after a contentious budget vote, Jones hurled insults at her and intentionally bumped into her in a hallway.

He's also been accused of engaging in shouting matches with former CEO candidate Teresa Greene-Johnson while campaigning at a busy intersection, and a Lithonia homeowner claims that the same thing happened when Jones, upset about a neighborhood policy dispute, showed up unannounced at her door.

Clearly the most damaging of all the allegations against him to date is the one made by a 29-year-old Lithonia woman who claimed that Jones raped her a few days after Christmas in 2004, following a sexual encounter with her and another woman at his South DeKalb home.

According to more than 400 pages of documents relating to the investigation obtained from the office of DeKalb County District Attorney Gwen Keyes Fleming's office, the unidentified woman says she first met Jones during a break at a county commission meeting in December 2004. After striking up a conversation, she says she handed him, and others at the meeting, her business card with her cell phone number scribbled on the back.

The woman says she and Jones spoke briefly when he called her cell phone on Christmas, but they did not meet in person until she called him on December 28. After they met for lunch at a Houston's restaurant in Buckhead, Jones invited the woman to "hang out" with him and an ex-girlfriend at his home, a 54-acre estate near Stonecrest Mall, later that evening. After a night of cocktails, dancing and roasting marshmallows in the fireplace, the party moved upstairs to Jones' bedroom, states the report. The accuser says she hesitated at first, even locking herself in a bathroom at one point, but she eventually joined Jones and his friend in a session of groping, fondling and other sexual activity in his bed.

Jones' ex-girlfriend says she left around 3 a.m., leaving Jones and the other woman alone at the house. The accuser then claims that Jones, still undressed, apologized for his earlier actions, then

“coaxed” her back into his bed.

“He removed my clothes. We layed [sic] down in an embrace,” the woman’s statement reads. That’s when, she alleges, Jones forced himself on her. She says she protested, in particular because he wasn’t wearing a condom. She says he put one on and tried to force her to have intercourse again. She shoved him off, and, according to her statement, shortly afterward, he reached for his cell phone to text message his security.

Four days later, at the urging of her roommate, the woman claims she sought medical attention at a hospital, where she confided in a doctor that she had been raped. A nurse called police, who later convinced the woman to file a complaint.

Jones vehemently maintains his innocence, classifying the incident as a “consensual” sexual encounter between adults, a point he contends is backed up by the alleged victim’s decision, in October 2005, to drop the case, claiming she wanted to avoid the trauma of a trial.

“The DA dropped those charges because she knew there was nothing there,” says Jones. “You best believe if they had a shred of evidence against me, they would have definitely moved forward with or without [the alleged victim].”

Antje Kingma, an attorney who served as a “victim advocate” for the accuser, contests Jones’ assertions. “She was scared,” says Kingma. “Vernon Jones is a master manipulator and he completely manipulated the situation.”

But, as Jones passionately insists, the aforementioned allegations are just that—*allegations*. He has never been formally charged in any of those incidents. He shrugs them off as personal vendettas driven by the local “liberal” media outlets and his known political adversaries, including DA Keyes Fleming, former DA Morgan and Commissioner Boyer.

Jones says there was public speculation that Keyes Fleming prolonged his rape investigation in an effort to pressure him to support her request to fund a domestic violence unit for her office. Keyes Fleming declined all comment for this story.

“What a travesty,” says Kingma. “The victim never recanted her claim against Vernon. She just gave up because she knew she would never get

justice in DeKalb County.”

Jones says that the media consistently downplays controversies involving better-liked politicians, such as Mayor Shirley Franklin, whose son and ex-husband were, according to a judge’s ruling, improperly awarded a \$1 million Hartsfield-Jackson contract and whose former deputy chief operating officer, Gary Cox, was busted for soliciting sex for money from a 16-year-old boy.

Jones prefers to describe himself as a man who is often overly “passionate” about his work. He eagerly points out that other public officials—including the county’s first CEO, the late Manuel Maloof—are known to have had abrasive personalities, but those characteristics were never allowed to overshadow their work. “Why is it that when Manuel Maloof acts a certain way, that’s just the way he is, but when Vernon Jones, who is passionate about his work, does it, he’s an ‘angry man?’” Jones asks. “I’m treated differently; it’s a double standard. I just don’t have patience for bullshit.”

But many political observers—both detractors and supporters, including members of Jones’ own staff—seem to think that, in the end, Jones may be his own worst enemy. “He’s been a very effective administrator, but a lot of the antics he gets into in his personal life often cloud that,” contends County Executive Assistant Richard Stogner, Jones’ first hire as CEO. Stogner candidly describes Jones as a “colorful” character, noting, “He does have a short fuse. He’s got a temper and gets hot quick, but part of that is because he cares so much about his work.”

Says M. Alexis Scott, regular panelist for the local political show *The Georgia Gang* and publisher of *The Atlanta Daily World* community newspaper, “He’s charismatic, handsome, single, and everybody has something to say about what he does socially. People are certainly following what he does. I think he’s proven to be a popular leader among many DeKalb voters; he easily won re-election. But he does hold a high potential for criminal charges, and that has tarnished his relationship with some women voters. ”

Robert Brown, a political scientist who specializes in racial and urban politics at

Emory University, says reaction to Jones is a matter of interpretation. “Such is the case with the whole issue of his security detail. He looks at it as an issue of increased security following the murder of [former DeKalb Sheriff-elect] Derwin Brown, but many view the same situation as an issue of arrogance and inflated self-importance. Many don’t seem to have as much a problem with what he’s doing as much as his style of leadership.”

Rusty Tanton, a former journalist who covered DeKalb during Jones’ first term and now operates an Internet blog, Radical Georgia Moderate, which regularly tracks the doings of Georgia politicians, says, “When you look at the parks department lawsuit, he seems to bring the trouble on himself, but when it comes to a lot of the other stuff, it becomes a question of whether it’s just easier to kick someone when they’re down.”

Jones’ tenure, many political observers say, may have inspired several proposals that continue to gain momentum in the county, including a proposal to establish the Dunwoody community as a city and a call, led by Democratic Senator Emanuel Jones, to consider limiting the power of the county’s CEO. (Senator Jones insists that his proposal has nothing to do personally with CEO Jones.)

Jones shrugs off any suggestion that the perceived “unfair” treatment he receives is rooted in race, adding that he “wouldn’t like to think it has anything to do with that.” Other political observers disagree. “As an African-American CEO, he, like many others, is under a microscope,” says Brown of Emory. “Many strong black figures are often perceived as arrogant . . . but that doesn’t remove him from all responsibility as an elected official.”

Jeff Dickerson, longtime Jones ally and regular *The Georgia Gang* panelist, agrees with Jones. “I’m the last person to cry race, but I have seen a consistent pattern throughout my career that I can’t ignore,” says Dickerson, who lives in DeKalb. “African-American officials are more highly scrutinized than others, especially as it relates to their sexual proclivities. You saw it with Bill Campbell, Marion Berry, Clarence Thomas, and the same goes for Vernon Jones.”

Critics like Dick Williams, a veteran *AJC* staffer who now publishes *The Dun-*

woody Crier community newspaper and serves as a frequent political commentator, do not agree that race is a factor. “This isn’t about the color of his skin; this is about broken promises,” says Williams. “This has everything to do with the fact that he has backed out of some key campaign promises. [He said] that he would not accept a pay raise, which he did. He said funds were allocated for the ball fields in Murphy Candler Park, and that ended up getting rolled up into his first bond issue, and he promised to keep 100 percent HOST, but he abandoned that within a year [of being in office].” (In January 2003, Jones, citing an “economic slump,” reduced DeKalb’s homestead exemption on property taxes, known as HOST, from 100 percent to 77 percent.)

Lance Robertson, Jones’ former deputy chief of staff—who, in March, was exonerated of charges that he held a woman against her will inside a hotel room in 2004—echoes Jones’ sentiment about the media. “There’s a lot of misinformation spread in the media; it’s not fair and balanced,” insists Robertson, who says he was forced to resign after months on administrative leave without pay. “They pick and choose what they want to report, whether it’s accurate or not. It happened with me, and it continues to happen with him. I was thrown under the bus with the media.”

Robertson, who now runs his own concert promotions company, maintains that he merely offered his hotel room to a woman who drank too much at a party he sponsored at the W Hotel near Perimeter Mall. He also discounts rampant media reports that he was living with Jones. “I stayed in Vernon’s condo for six to eight weeks before I closed on my own house,” says Robertson. “He did not live there at the time. They reported this over three years after the fact. I had been gone for three years!”

McClarty of the DeKalb Chamber agrees that unfavorable media has clouded Jones’ many contributions to the county. “What has happened is that people let personality issues cloud their ability to judge the job he has done,” he says. “I think when he’s out of office, many people will be forced to look back at some of the monumental things that were done during Vernon’s tenure.”

Most of the patrons are too engrossed

in their reading material or busy pecking away at their laptop keyboards to notice that Jones has just walked into the Starbucks in downtown Decatur—an amazing oversight considering his towering 6’ 4” frame. The mix of Sam Cooke’s sultry voice wafting through the speakers and the soothing aroma of coffee beans seems to immediately put Jones at ease as he sinks into a velvety purple chair near a large window. Sunbeams bounce off his glossy, immaculately manicured fingernails, his hand now wrapped around a cup of his current favorite coffee drink—a grande Cinnamon Dolce Latte, decaf, with soymilk.

He’s direct but polite, laid-back yet passionate as he attempts to offer insight into his complex existence. He is clearly wary of talking to reporters, particularly about personal stuff. What he ultimately divulges amounts to the perfect skirt length—long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to be interesting.

One thing’s for sure, this is not the Vernon Jones that’s often splayed across the television screen. It’s a reaction he’s used to getting. “When people who think they know me meet me, they always say, ‘You’re not as bad they reported on the news,’” he says.

His analysis seems at least partially true. Everywhere Jones goes during the five weeks that I shadow him, he elicits responses that seem to range between vague familiarity and hearty adulation. His enemies don’t bother identifying themselves. Almost everyone he meets mentions something about seeing him on TV.

Although Jones’ personal life is a hot-button issue discussed everywhere from beauty salons to talk radio programs, little is really known about it—except for what’s in salacious media accounts.

Here’s an arbitrary list of things you probably didn’t know about Jones: Although he’s known to break out into impromptu performances of Kanye West’s Grammy-nominated Ray Charles-inspired hit “Gold Digger” (“I just love Ray,” he says), Jones prefers bluegrass, classic soul and house music to hip-hop hits. Although he adores vampire flicks, his favorite film of all time is Robert Townsend’s musical-themed *The Five Heartbeats*. He Tivos *Meet the Press*

every week, but his favorite TV program is *The Bernie Mac Show*.

He dates and plans to marry one day, but doesn’t have a special someone in his life right now. He doesn’t have any children, but he has a young nephew in the metro Atlanta area with the same name as Jones (the moniker often raises eyebrows at the child’s daycare).

He greatly respects Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona and says that he’s tried to pattern himself after General George Patton because “he’s a straight shooter who got results and got the job done.”

Jones is left-handed, enjoys fishing and deer hunting and is a founding member of the Stone Mountain-Lithonia Alumni Chapter of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. Asked why, as an undergrad, he pledged Kappa, the self-proclaimed “pretty boys” of the black Greek circuit, Jones briefly abandons his politician’s spiel about community service, leadership training, yadda, yadda, yadda. He pauses, flashes a broad, telling smile and quips, “Well, the *pretty boys* do get the *pretty girls*,” before snapping back into his politically correct response.

And yes, he can “step”—a term used to describe the synchronized foot-stomping performances of African-American Greek organizations—with or without the signature red and white canes associated with Kappas. Can you imagine Vernon Jones in one of those high-energy scenes from the famed Spike Lee flick *School Daze*?

He’s the fifth of six children (four brothers and a sister) born to parents with a third-grade education. His father died during Jones’ first campaign for CEO and was a World War II vet who later made a living as a mill worker. Though technically a stay-at-home mom, Jones’ mother worked the family farm in Laurel Hill, North Carolina, a small town near the South Carolina border, alongside Jones and his siblings. Jones says those humble beginnings on a farm with no running water gave him the appreciation for nature that later inspired his efforts to acquire hundreds of acres of greenspace for DeKalb, earning the county a spot among the top “nature friendly” communities in the country.

As a child, Jones disrupted his class at Pate-Gardner Elementary School with crazy antics that earned him a reputation

as the class clown. In fact, one of his most cherished childhood memories is of when his first grade teacher, Mrs. Shirley Robinson, decided to re-channel his energy by naming him student council president. Perhaps it was then that Jones first tasted the sweetness of being in charge. Since becoming CEO, he has contacted his former teacher and, out of gratitude, treated her to a weekend stay at The Ritz-Carlton.

Spend any length of time with him, and it becomes clear that Jones never tires of talking about what’s going on in his county—or of taking jabs at his adversaries. “I’m perceived by some as being colorful, charismatic, and I’m criticized by some because of their own HATER-ation,” he says, adopting a popular slang term. “Even my staunchest critics have not been able to question my ability to effectively run and operate this county. I’m kickin’ their ass! Not a single other elected official has been able to endure an onslaught of baseless media attacks and still have a solid record of accomplishments.”

Jones is as tight-lipped about his future plans as he is loose-lipped about the discretions of his detractors. He brushes off any suggestion that he’ll seek to unseat Congresswoman McKinney and earlier speculation that he ultimately has his sights set on the governor’s mansion. “When my term is up, I plan to start a newspaper that’ll go after unethical journalists,” he confides rather unconvincingly.

It’s soon crystal clear that any attempt at understanding Jones’ celebrity catapults one on a journey with an indefinite destination—the only definitive conclusion about him being that there is no definitive conclusion.

Jones says his overall goal is to leave DeKalb County “better than where I found it.” So far, that is something that both his supporters and his detractors, for the most part, agree he has done. But with roughly two and a half years left in office, the final analysis remains to be seen.

“I do my own thing. I’m independent,” he says, before stepping back into the sleek black Ford with tinted windows. “In the words of Frank Sinatra, in the end, I want people to know that I did it *my way!*” 🍌