



## Stephen L. Davis

Stephen L. Davis has had many memorable mentors, teachers and those who made enormous contributions to his life development, but none as significant as his parents William E. & Mary Davis. Reared in the Lyons View community of west Knoxville, Steve learned from his parents that hard work and persistence are the qualities that define any successful person. At Bearden High School a memorable teacher was Joyce Burchett, who challenged Steve to expand his knowledge by exceeding daily class assignments. While at Bearden High school Stephen participated in several sports, but excelled in football. During Stephen's time he was recruited to play football by several SEC schools, but loyalty kept him close to home. For the next four years Steve learned valuable life lessons from another mentor/teacher, Coach Johnny Majors. Steve was a standout linebacker from 1976 to 1979 and whose teammates included Willie Gault, Tim Irwin, and Jimmy Streater.

When his stellar collegiate career at the University of Tennessee was over Steve made a decision that surprised some of his friends. Stephen eschewed an offer to sign with the Miami Dolphins and turned his back on a potential lucrative career in the NFL. He decided to finish his degree, thus proving once again the values and character instilled in him by his parents were instrumental in his decision-making. Stephen made a commitment to his parents to obtain a college degree and shortly after graduating from UT with an Electrical Engineering degree, Davis started a training program with General Electric's lighting division in Hendersonville, North Carolina. It was there that he met his wife, Tanya, an Asheville native. Later he was assigned a permanent position in GE's Oak Brook, Illinois, office, but over time his entrepreneurial heart won out. In 1986, Steve decided to be his own boss and created a business to honor the legacy of his father William E. Davis, who was known for his integrity, pride and hard work. Today, the Will Group comprises several entities that provide diverse electrical products, services and solutions. The company's mantra is, "***Where There's a Will, There's A Way.***" Since 2010, The Will Group has consistently been recognized by Black Enterprise Magazine as one of the country's Top 100 Black businesses. Stephen has a passion for economic development and has been an active member of Chicago's business community for several decades. He currently serves as Commissioner of Aviation (Board Chair) of the DuPage Airport Authority, which oversees airport and golf course operations as well as the development of a 500-acre business park. It was this resume of entrepreneurial success that led Randy Boyd to select Stephen Davis to direct Minority Business Development for the \$75 million Downtown Smokies ballpark scheduled for completion in 2024.

But not only is a successful hometown businessman bringing his entrepreneurial expertise from Wheaton, Illinois to the largest economic development project in Knoxville in more than two decades, but Stephen is bringing the innovative **TuskegeeNEXT** program. When Stephen served as chair of the DuPage Airport Authority board, he had heard about the coming shortage of pilots as baby boomers retire. He also knew about the need to create career opportunities for at-risk youth. Davis thought of his father, who had been a Navy cook in World War II and often talked with pride about the Tuskegee Airmen. That sparked an idea: "***why not teach under-represented students to fly?***" Each summer **TuskegeeNEXT** trains 18- to-20-year-olds in a 10-week program in which they earn their private pilot license and drone certificate. Of the 57 cadets who have completed the program so far, the vast majority have landed jobs in the aviation industry, joined the military, or started college. "I feel that I am passing on a legacy," says Davis. "It's all about job creation. If we can help people over that hump of finding a good job, we can break that bubble of poverty." This program was launched on August 28, 2021 at the Downtown Island Airport when more than two dozen inner-city youth ages 7-17 participated in 30 minute flights and aviation safety briefings by the **TuskegeeNEXT** pilots. The popular program returned to Knoxville on May 14, 2022 with an overwhelming youth participation. Today, the program has 55 cadets, 53 solo pilots and 47 licensed pilots and growing interest in aviation by at-risk students of color. Further, Stephen has formed an academic partnership with Pellissippi State Community College regarding an aviation curriculum. Finally, the success of the Tuskegee NEXT program is dependent on voluntary donations, so please visit our website: [Tuskegee NEXT](#). The Beta Theta Boulè Foundation is honored to present the **2022 Fatherhood Excellence Award** to Stephen L. Davis.