



William J. Gillilan III

Chairman Emeritus
Centex Real Estate Corp.
BSIE '68

*For his outstanding
career and
leadership in the
home construction
industry*

Engineering and Community

A fourth-generation legacy, William Gillilan came to Purdue as much by chance as by intent, he says. “I liked math. I liked science. But my application process had no logic to it. I applied to Duke, Yale, Princeton, and Purdue. I finally decided on engineering, and that eliminated everybody else.”

Gillilan was attracted to the generalized nature of the industrial engineering curriculum and broadened his studies further through activities outside the classroom. He worked at the Purdue *Exponent*, becoming a senior manager his senior year, and was president of his fraternity, Delta Tau Delta. He also joined Gimlet, ODK, Skull and Crescent, and Tau Beta Pi. He was not yet set on becoming an engineer, and a summer internship where he did time-and-motion studies at a major corporation did not inspire him.

“I enjoyed the education, the problem-solving, the analytics,” he says. “That sort of thing appealed to me, but I knew I didn’t want to work as an engineer. So my thought was that if I got an MBA, I would have more choices.”

Outside the Box

That was in 1968, and graduate school deferments for the Vietnam draft had

been eliminated. Gillilan had already been accepted to Harvard and discovered that the U.S. Navy had begun an ROTC program there for graduate students. He was accepted and entered the very different world of Harvard, joining the ROTC despite strong antiwar sentiment on campus. While there, he discovered the field he would ultimately enter and work in for 25 years.

“I had taken a commercial real estate course at Harvard, and I was intrigued,” says Gillilan. “So, during my last year in the Navy, I started talking to everyone involved in real estate development who would let me in the door and finally began to focus on residential development. I got an interview with Centex, and I was one of six or seven trainees they hired across the country. I road my wife’s bike to my first assignment as a framing laborer at a construction site. The things that intrigued me about homebuilding were working outdoors, the entrepreneurial approach, and no coats and ties. I went to an industry where there were no MBAs and relatively few engineers.”

After a two-year training program, Gillilan was named project manager and sent to the Chicago area to oversee a 700-home development. “That was my first exciting job,” he says. “We had to get the development designed and entitled, then dig the wells,

create water storage, and negotiate with the city, county, and state for infrastructure and services and also with the school system. After we had worked with local government, we began to develop the site, and built and sold 200 homes a year. For a young person, it was a very challenging position. My office was in a trailer on the site. I never had a day that I didn’t enjoy being there. It was never work—not a day of it.

Building an Organization

Gillilan credits the process of building the organization as one of the most rewarding aspects of his career. “Many of the people in Centex’s key positions today are people that I hired and mentored,” he says. “It’s such an entrepreneurial, decentralized organization that I can’t take the credit for its growth. My job was about people and capital. I tried to select the right people and help them push their own envelopes and to put the capital where the returns were.”



Centex grew from \$100 million in revenues to about \$8 billion in revenues during the 25 years that Gillilan worked there. The company is composed of many small, local businesses that together make up a very large business, says Gillilan. “If each of those businesses is well led, then they will succeed in their own right.”

“I have an aversion to things that stifle people’s initiative and creativity,” Gillilan adds. “What differentiates a company is your people’s ability to look at the world and see opportunity, then figure out how to seize it while minimizing risk. I certainly tried to lead by example and give people a framework to make their own decisions.”

- 1998 Retired and named Chairman Emeritus, Centex Real Estate Corp.
 - 1997 Outstanding Industrial Engineer, Purdue School of Industrial Engineering
 - 1997–2002 Dean’s Executive Council, Purdue School of Technology
 - 1996– Advisory Board, Purdue School of Industrial Engineering
 - 1991–98 President and Chief Operating Officer, Centex Corp. Centex Homes named “Builder of the Year” by *Professional Builder* magazine.
 - 1989–91 Chairman, President, and CEO, Centex Real Estate Corp.
 - 1986–89 President, COO, Centex Homes
 - 1983–86 Executive Vice President, Centex Homes
 - 1979–81 President, Centex Homes Midwest
 - 1978 Executive Vice President, Centex Homes Midwest
 - 1970–74 Lieutenant, U.S. Navy
- BSIE '68, Purdue; MBA '70, Harvard Business School