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## **Banker knows all aspects of his trade**

By Dave Flessner, Business Editor

Greg Jones says he's always been fascinated with money.

"Ever since I was a child, I was interested in how people make it, how people save it and how people spend it. So I went to school to find out and upon graduation went into banking," he said.

For the past 29 years, Mr. Jones has worked in virtually all areas of banking in Alabama and Tennessee. But the 50-year-old banker has stayed at community banks. He came to Chattanooga in 1979 as controller at Pioneer and today heads Cornerstone Community Bank as its chairman and chief executive.

When he joined Pioneer Bank in 1979, that bank was comparable in size to \$175 million in assets. By the time he left the bank nearly two decades later as Pioneer's chief financial officer, \$1.1 billion-asset bank operating in two states with five subsidiaries.

"Over the next 20 years, I was able to learn almost everything about how to play bank, from the back room to credit and loan review to regulation to information technology services," Mr. Jones said.

That experience has proven vital in his role at Cornerstone. When he was hired as bank president in January 1999, Cornerstone still was recovering from costly loan chargeoffs and expenses related to the bank's merger with the former Bank of East Ridge. The bank was placed under regulatory sanctions in 1998 and suffered losses both that year and in 1999.

"Greg is probably one of the best bankers in Tennessee," said Frank Hughes, another former Pioneer Bank manager who was Mr. Jones first hire in 1999. "He has worked in all operations of the bank, and that helped in getting us back on track."

Mr. Jones revamped Cornerstone's staff, upgraded back-room operations and worked to clean up the bank's troubled loan portfolio. Last year, the bank hired former First Volunteer Bank President Barry Watson to head a new asset-based lending division and expand the bank's Small Business Administration loan program.

"We don't have as many branches as SunTrust or First Tennessee in Chattanooga, so we can't always claim the most convenience in locations," Mr.

Jones said. "We have to go out and work the area. But we're finding that the business community is responsive, and there is still a lot of potential for us.

"There's still a huge market of small and medium-sized businesses that are not being served by the regional banks to the degree that many customers want," Mr. Jones said. "We're able to move in and provide that customized service that bigger banks don't always provide."

Cornerstone, which started in February 1996, has grown to include four branches and is building another in Collegedale, which should open by the end of the year or in early 2004.

Earl Marler, the original chairman and CEO, handed over the chairman's role to Mr. Jones this spring.

"We've finally got expenses under control after having to put aside more for loan losses from the past, and we've enjoyed phenomenal growth in earning assets," Mr. Jones said. "We probably need two or three more branches in the Chattanooga area over the next five to seven years. But we're going to make sure our growth is cautious and profitable."