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Pollster Dan Jones deserving of honor

By **Frank Pignanelli & LaVarr Webb**

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On Friday, the Hinckley Institute of Politics will honor pollster and political scientist Dan Jones (who polls for the Deseret Morning News) for five decades of service and inspiration to the community. The public is invited to this event at noon, April 4 at Rice Eccles Stadium Tower. Proceeds will be dedicated to the Dan E. Jones Future Leaders Scholarship. (Please contact the Hinckley Institute at 801-581-8501 for more information.)

Your columnists (who will be at the event) are disciples of Jones and offer their perspective on the guru of survey data.

Pignanelli: Yoda is the mythical father figure and spiritual leader of the Star Wars movies. This older, diminutive, sometimes grumpy figure has been enormously popular among generations of the young — who respect his wisdom, courage and unique charisma. These characteristics also describe an actual human being — Dan Jones.

Dan is a local celebrity because of the respected polling research company (Dan Jones & Associates) he co-manages with his wife, state Sen. **Pat Jones**. Yet Dan has impacted thousands of Utahns through his mentoring as a political science professor (initially at Utah State University, now at the University of Utah). Dan knows the names of all his students, even in the packed American history course. Many a pupil has received a concerned phone call from professor Jones, inquiring why he/she missed the last two classes. His enthusiasm and conviction for American democracy and the election process remains with students for the rest of their lives. Indeed, university alumni consistently list him as having a strong impact upon their lives. (Politicos note the dark side of Dan's "Pied Piper" influence: students originally focused on medicine, engineering and other occupations needed by society shift to political science).

Every year, hundreds of Jones' student proteges serve as interns, assistants and support for a multitude of political activities, including the Legislature, U.S. Congress, media, special interest organizations, lobbyists and nonprofit advocacy groups; all of them under the sway of the Utah Yoda.

High-powered political and business leaders revert to a student demeanor when in the presence of Jones. They beseech him for advice and counsel on their political careers or trends of thought in the populace. A much-requested speaker, Jones always captures the imagination of the audience with his love of democracy and insight from his polling enterprise. On at least two occasions I witnessed very masculine men cry at the end of a Jones' speech rallying a rededication to democracy.

As with Yoda, Jones never surrenders to the dark forces of cynicism and tyranny but reassures us of the inherent greatness in our government, and in ourselves.

Webb: Polling wars are part of any major political campaign or public policy initiative. The guy in the middle of most of those wars in Utah for the last several decades has been Dan Jones, Utah's pugnacious pollster. I've worked closely with Dan, the consummate professional, on hundreds of polling projects over many years.

Being the go-to local pollster in Utah is a bit like being a family doctor in a small town — you sometimes have to deliver bad news to neighbors and friends, and they don't always like it. Utah's political community is relatively small, and a survey on any given topic or political campaign usually makes about as many people mad as happy.

Unlike national pollsters who can knock out a Utah survey, not caring who they offend or even whether their numbers are very good, Dan lives here and is part of the community. The fact that Pat Jones, Dan's wife and full business partner, is a high-profile Democratic state senator, is a further complication.

Dan navigates these challenges the only ways he knows how: by producing unfailingly good survey research and letting the chips fall where they may. I've never worried about Dan's numbers because I know Dan is doing enough worrying for me, him, and the rest of the world's population. Numbers are Dan's babies. He fusses over them. He is sometimes grouchy and seldom seems to be enjoying himself because he worries so much about the numbers. He frets, he stewes, he agonizes, he micro-manages, he drives his employees nuts. He checks, re-checks and triple checks. Because he is in the field so much, Dan knows almost instinctively if he has a good sample or if something needs to be adjusted. He has an intuitive feel for Utah's demographics, culture and attitudes.

He is super-sensitive to criticism, which makes him try all the harder. As he likes to say, a pollster's success rides entirely on his integrity and reputation.

Dan Jones & Associates survives and thrives in a tough and rapidly-changing business environment. Cell phones make reaching representative samples more difficult. New competition abounds. Survey research has almost become like publishing: anyone with a computer can do it (or thinks they can). Computer programs draw samples and crunch numbers. Ambitious firms pop up every day offering cheap polling using automated phone calls and huge Web-based panels that provide near-instant results.

Dan may be a throwback to the good old days. But he stays busy because he worries so much.

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