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Raycom's Rick Ray says he'll step down

■ Charlotte-based sports programmer's sales top \$100 million a year.

By TAYLOR BATTEN
Staff Writer

Sixteen years after toting cameras, lights and dreams to a little-known college basketball tournament in Alaska, Rick Ray is resigning from the sports programming company he started and led to national prominence.

Ray, the president and chief executive of Charlotte-based Raycom, said Tuesday he will leave the company he created in 1979. Raycom rocketed from an obscure, four-person operation to a company with sales exceeding \$100 million a year.



Ray

Ray said he has talked with executives in the movie industry and might want to become a movie producer and help bring film production to the state. "North Carolina is third in the country in feature film production. I'd like to see us become first," Ray said.

But first, after 16 years of 60- to 80-hour work weeks, he wants to spend more time with his wife, Dee, and three children in their 52-room, 21,740-square-foot Duke Mansion in Myers Park.

"I've had a great time but it's time to step back," said the 45-year-old Ray. "I want to spend more time with my family and enjoy some things and not have to worry about the day-to-day."

Ray will continue to be active in the Charlotte community and will expand his relationship with the N.C. School of the Arts in Winston-Salem and its new film school.

Ray was 29 when he and Dee created Raycom to produce college sports programming for a basketball-starved region. The early months gave no hint Please see **Raycom**/next page

Raycom

Sports programmer will lose its founder

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of the multimillion-dollar success that was quickly to follow.

They had \$16.20 in cash after the first season, which started with the production of the Great Alaska Shootout and ended with a broadcast of a UNC-Maryland basketball game in Washington, D.C. Ray had to drive home because he couldn't afford a motel room. When he got to Charlotte, the gas had been cut off in his home, and he and Dee built fires to stay warm until they had enough money to turn the gas back on.

"I don't think we had any idea we'd grow to the size we've grown," Ray said.

Earlier this year, Ray was named the nation's eighth most influential person in college athletics by College Sports Magazine.

"It's really kind of neat. It's the American dream. You work your (bottom) off and try to do things right and everything works out in the end. I'm not bragging but it's a neat story to tell people because anybody can do that if you work hard and know what you want," he said.

Raycom has 81 employees at its offices in Charlotte, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and St. Petersburg, Fla. It televises or produces hundreds of sports and entertainment events and specials each year, including ACC basketball and football, the Carquest Bowl and the Diet Pepsi Tournament of Champions in Charlotte.

"Rick and Raycom are both huge success stories. And Rick very much personifies Raycom so it'll certainly be different without him at the helm," said John Swofford, athletic director at UNC-Chapel Hill. "Rick and Dee have built a very vibrant company and organization and I think their legacy will be there for years to come."

Ray sold Raycom to Ellis Communications of Atlanta in February 1994. Sales in 1995 topped \$100 million and profits, which Raycom does not reveal, are up 50 percent, Ray said. He and Dee, who left Raycom in December 1994, will remain on the Ellis board of directors.

Ellis also owns 12 television stations, including WACH-TV in Columbia, two radio stations, and a multimedia company, IXL. Bert Ellis, chief executive of Ellis Communications, said Raycom has been a great acquisition.

"Rick and I have known each other for a long time, played tennis together. He plays tennis like he runs a business — 150 mph," said Ellis, who will assume the CEO duties for Raycom. "He's entrepreneurially enthusiastic and optimistic."

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Around the dial

... With Rick Ray, who built Raycom into the premier sports syndicator, resigning as president to pursue other opportunities, Ken Haines and Ray Warren will run Raycom, now owned by Ellis Communications. ... Ratings game: ABC had a low 15.7 for Oakland Raiders-San Diego Chargers, but the 17.1 *Monday Night Football* season average is only 2% below 1994. ... ESPN, now 6% below last season, scored a two-year low of a 7.3 rating for Sunday's game involving the expansion Carolina Panthers at the New Orleans Saints. ... Ex-Turner senior vice president Don McGuire will serve as a TV consultant for the Golf Channel.

Hollywood Reporter

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Raycom founder steps down

Rick Ray has resigned his post as CEO and president of Raycom Inc., the sports and entertainment events TV production company he founded.

He started the company in 1979 with his business partner — now his wife — Dee Birke. They grew the enterprise into a sizable production, sales, marketing and event management company with more than 80 employees, based in Charlotte, N.C.

Raycom was acquired some time ago by Ellis Communications, which owns 12 television stations.

Bert Ellis, president and CEO of Ellis Communications, will assume the CEO function for Raycom, it was announced Tuesday.

"After 16 years of 60- to 80-hour work weeks and 300,000-plus air miles a year, it was time to take a breather," said Ray. "I really want to take some time to be with my family and enjoy life."

Raycom chief operating officer Ray Warren and senior executive vp Ken Haines will continue in their roles in the daily operation and strategic planning for the company.