

One Superkid's story

Rufus Edmisten looked intensely across his desk at the 18-year-old young man sitting with him. As the kid — he's a young man but we're calling him a kid — told his story to Rufus (using his last name was long ago abandoned by all who know him) it was clear it was getting to the veteran politician/lawyer/lobbyist.

The youngster had been raised by his father after his mother had run into some struggles she couldn't confront and raise a child at the same time. The boy's dad is a good, good man, but he's had some tough breaks in life in terms of not getting opportunities at education past high school. But he provided for Ayden, and later for other children that came along, by working hard and long hours in restaurants. He married later in life, but was solid with his wife. Between them, and with each other, they had five children.

For Ayden, the youngster, his father's encouragement and that of his adopted grandfather, a family friend who also happened to be acquainted with Edmisten, had brought him to Edmisten's office. Rufus had run into the grandfather and when he heard the boy's story, and the frustrations in trying to put together enough money for college, he brightened and his eyes widened. Because this kid isn't ordinary. He worked hard enough to get in the National Honor Society, to play first chair violin in the school orchestra, to play football and throw shot put. He had proved himself and demanded excellence of himself in everything he did.

"My God!" Rufus Edmisten said. "He's a Superkid! He's a perfect Superkid!"

The Superkids Foundation is a part of the Foundation for Good Business, founded more than 30 years ago by Edmisten to promote North Carolina, and to help average citizens, and the Superkids grew out of that after Rufus helped some youngsters along the way, before the Superkids grew into a larger organization with a Board and a scholarship program.

It started, frankly, in Rufus Edmisten's big heart. One young woman was living in a car. Another was virtually raising herself. There were other stories, heartbreaking stories. Early on, Rufus helped a youngster to go St. Mary's School, and when he got a call that she was getting an award, he took a couple of friends and one of those friends looked at Rufus when the girl's name was announced and tears were flowing down his face.

Over the last 32 years, there have been spectacular and inspiring stories of success. One Superkid is a doctor. Others are teachers. Others are professionals in one line of work or another. They are productive citizens. Some have come from nothing. Some, like Ayden, needed some help to get going even though they were good students.

In his case, there was much success in high school, but the story of higher education was harder to write. It's not unusual for public schools to cost \$25,000 a year, or more. Yes, there are loans, but Rufus Edimisten feels strongly that loans should be a last resort. A mountaineer from the Boone area, he hates debt and has heard of too many kids who are burdened for life by it.

So there he was with this youngster in his office. "I think we're going to be able to help you, son," he said. But he said the call would come within three or four days.

Come it did. A full scholarship. His grandfather would pay for the books. But the Superkids would send him through.

Ayden was beside himself, and he told his father and his grandfather that he intended to work hard. They were both about to pop with pride.

He brought gifts to Rufus and his assistant — and the force behind Superkids management -- Cheryl Mattingly. He began to get in touch with his NC State roommate, whom he hadn't met. "When I'm not sleeping," he told his roommate, "I'll be at the library."

And sure enough, a month in, Ayden's a good student, he's working hard, he's embraced most of his classes, and he's kept his focus, while also having some fun.

Here is what he said that tells you all you need to know about what really motivates a Superkid: Ayden said, "I want to make Rufus and Cheryl proud of me, to show them that I earned this scholarship and that I intend to make the most of it."

He's so focused on school — and this may be hard to believe but it's true — that his grandfather has had to encourage him to buy himself things at the student store with the spending money the grandfather provides. Almost everything he does, however, is connected to his educational work. (But OK, not all of it.)

* * *

The Superkids are a small but mighty group. Edmisten would like to reach more kids, which is why he's trying to be more aggressive with fund raising while not expanding too quickly.

The beauty of a small foundation and a scholarship program is that he and Cheryl and board members can point, directly, at success stories. And beautiful stories they are, with lives changed. Forever.

Forever.

* * *

Rufus Edmisten has been comfortable in the spotlight of politics, as much as a surfer is comfortable with sunshine. But like that surfer, he's been burned a time or two and had to get up and dust himself off and come back. Political defeats have been channeled into a successful law and lobbying and government relations firm.

But there has been one constant through all his struggles and political victories and defeats: The Superkids. He has never taken his eye off the effort, or slowed down his personal giving to the organization, which he doesn't discuss. Now, in his mid-80s, he is looking for others to take up the funding cause, to take some organizational duties, to help ensure the foundation will survive him. Cheryl Mattingly has been a rock, to be sure, and will continue to be. But Edmisten is turning to others to give their off time to the cause, and he's found some who are as dedicated to the foundation as he is.

"I want," he said, "to make sure this carries on without me. We need to see this going. We must."

In many ways, the Superkids will be his legacy of the most value to him — not the public offices or the presidents known or the elections won. The Superkids will stand tall for themselves, and will be the kind of legacy he wants, not a statue or a library or a campus building. Rufus Edmisten will be just fine if it's the Superkids who survive him.

* * *

The big night for Superkids, the one when supporters and those who would like to be, is Wednesday, October 29, from 5:30-8 pm at Pam's Farmhouse restaurant at 511 Western Boulevard in Raleigh. Tickets are \$75, and cash is preferred for tickets.

A number of Superkids will be there to meet donors and potential donors. Very little money is spent on running this program; the funds raised go to the schools that are

helping the kids.

It is more important than ever before that Superkids expands its endowment, to ensure preservation of a program that has helped so many. And yes, saved so many. On this evening, talk to some of the kids if you wish about what the program did for them. You won't be sorry. You will be inspired.

Rufus and his friends have carried the funding burden, but with 30 years of success behind them, they're looking to the 30 years ahead, and for more success, they need to raise more funds. The Superkids aren't about just the present, or just the beneficiaries. The teachers, the doctors, the successes in all fields that this program produces make their communities better and yes, their world better.

So let's change the world. Let's make a difference in some more lives, so that those lives will make a difference to all those around them.

* * *

The foundation has several kids in school this year. Most of them enrolled with the same pride that Ayden showed that August day at NC State. His dad and stepmother brought him to his camps room, laid out his clothes, helped him arrange things, find the laundry, all that. His dad went to the student store and bought a "Wolfpack Dad" t shirt for himself, and a shirt for his wife and one for Ayden's siblings.

His adopted grandfather got a shirt and a license plate holder and a hat and relished the idea of doing grandfather things. "Pops," Ayden called shortly after moving in,, "can you bring us a plunger? Our suite mates clogged things up." The grandfather was there in minutes, and loved the project. Ayden makes it a point to see his dad and stepmom and brothers and sister at least every two weeks. His grandfather needs the same, while trying to give Ayden the chance to enjoy his well-earned freedom. He writes thank you to Rufus and Cheryl once in a while. He is grateful and wants them to know it.

And, he'll be involved in helping the foundation raise money come October to see that more kids get the break he got. The break of a lifetime. The break to change a lifetime.

Because Superkids already have a track record of making a difference. And the point of fund raising efforts is to ensure that the life-saving hand of this organization

continues to have the support to reach out. To reach out, and grab the hand of that young girl of long ago, to grab the hand of a gutsy kid like Ayden, and many more.