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An extra special day for a super kid

The word had gotten out — Sara Upchurch, an Apex Middle School eighth grader, knew she was going to get some kind of award, prize, honor, whatever. But she probably didn't know that the assembly called for the late morning Monday was her assembly. Just for her.

She filed into the auditorium with her classmates. There were some preliminary announcements, and then Rufus Edmisten took the microphone and proclaimed in his most urgent and dramatic fashion that 14-year-old Sara was an "extra special super kid."

Except Edmisten, former secretary of state, did it all with exclamation points. He is the one who took a program from a principal friend in Kinston seven years ago and turned it into the Extra Special Super Kids Scholarship Program, run under the private Foundation for Good Business. The program awards \$1,000 scholarships, which sometimes are increased by additional donations, to middle school students throughout North Carolina who have overcome adversity, worked hard and exhibited kindness to others. If they keep up the good work, the scholarship money is sent to the college of their choice when the time comes.

In Sara's case, she was praised by her counselor, Rebecca Andrews, for determination and hard work and just generally being a good . . . well, now an "extra special super" . . . kid. Considering that an entire assembly had been called for her, Sara accepted the honor with considerable grace and calm, posing for pictures with Edmisten, and then, without missing a literal beat, joining her band

mates for a brief concert, during which she played, flawlessly, a bass clarinet solo.

Her classmates rewarded her with applause and hugs, and were even more appreciative when they discovered that chocolate chip cookies for everybody went along with the deal — and this was before lunch.

Edmisten, who can get a little emotional when he talks about the super kids, remembers well the day he adopted the program.



JIM JENKINS

"The phone rang and it was Johnny Shepard, a friend of mine who was the principal of an elementary school in Kinston," Edmisten said. "He said he was sort of in a fix, that he had some students he called extra special super kids — they picked one a month or so who had been especially kind to someone — and these kids were supposed to get a trip to Raleigh, but their money disappeared. I told him not to worry, and we got him some money. The kids came up here and we had a little ceremony at the Capitol and every one of them was just as nice and appreciative. It was something."

Edmisten took the program under the wing of his private Foundation for Good Business, which previously had held seminars for business people, and thereafter scholarships were made the focus. "We had local committees," Edmisten said, "who would choose kids who maybe had faced some adverse conditions in life

and had overcome them, and who had good citizenship, honesty, good behavior, and who might not get a chance to go to college without some help."

Edmisten raises donations to pay for the scholarships from individuals and companies — in Sara's case, the donors were Jerry and Peggy McLaurin of Raleigh, and an extra \$1,000 came from West Group, a legal publishing company. There are 35 super kids now, and a few are college age and doing well. Edmisten finds when he presents the awards that what makes the honor special is the way the kids are cheered by their classmates: "We adults have all these jealousies and and all of that, but these kids spot somebody who's doing something rather extraordinary, and they know it. Today, they're all pulling for Sara."

This, of course, is the season of honors in the schools. Rare will be the day at any school, up to graduation, where an end-of-year recognition is not awarded. It's a good time, perhaps, to be reminded that for all the criticism our schools and our kids take from cynics, or from opportunistic politicians, there remains a courageous core of teachers and a good, hard-working group of students doing their best.

Counselors like Rebecca Andrews take a special interest in the children, an interest with a depth far beyond what's in the job description. Students like Sara hit those books and play those clarinets and work until the work is done right. Mostly, the rewards come only from within. Those around them know they're special, but they strive in anonymity. Monday, it was different. For one extra special super kid, it became official.