

Ralph Quackenbush Citation
For November 24, 2010 G. Jackson Burney Award

Ask anyone. If Ralph Quackenbush tells you that he will do something, you can consider it done.

In his plain spoken and modest way, Ralph has made and kept many promises in Davidson. He first learned the importance of service and of being a person of his word from watching his parents in Norwood, New Jersey, a small town that reminds Ralph of Davidson. His mother was a homemaker and played the organ at their church for 25 years. She also volunteered at a local hospital. His father, after retiring from the textile industry, worked with the mental health department. They both encouraged Ralph and his brothers to give back to the community.

Music filled their home, with his mother and brother on the piano and his father dancing to the tunes. They lived next to a ball field, and though Ralph loved the music too, he just had to go outside and play baseball. It was nothing organized, but he discovered that, even without formal training, he had a strong, accurate arm from right field and could hit the ball. His batting average was 600 during his teenaged years. But more importantly, on those dusty fields of childhood, he learned fair play and the simple justice of being a good sport - values that have served Ralph well all of his life.

Ralph had two brothers, one of whom was close to Ralph in age and the other who was 12 years younger. The baby brother had a rare kidney disorder, and he was in and out of hospitals every few weeks, for his entire life. But he was always cheerful and never complained and, as Ralph said, "the family was grateful for the years that we had with him." Though he was away in the Army when his brother died at the age of ten, Ralph carried those lessons of cheerfulness and endurance with him always.

After Ralph completed college at the Philadelphia Textile Institute to become a textile engineer, he was drafted that fall into the Army and joined the infantry. He was stationed in occupied Germany. He served in the Germany Headquarters Company as a member of the Intelligence Squad S-2, also known as army intelligence. As a squad leader, Ralph was out in the field for nine months each year as a scout observer ahead of the troops, and he had Top Secret clearance.

He patrolled the German/Czechoslovakia border, and, at night, dug a hole in the snow and slept there in a sleeping bag. After enduring Germany's bitterly cold winters, Ralph vowed never to camp out or stand in a line again. Fortunately, he also decided that he wanted to be warm, which would eventually help him make up his mind to leave New Jersey and come south. The military also taught him that he didn't particularly like people to tell him what to do, which would take him on a life-long journey of owning his own businesses and being his own boss.

After returning home from the army, he met Carol on a blind date in 1956. They married in 1959, which Ralph calls the most important event of his life. She provided the support that helped him be unafraid to take chances. He moved to Cornelius to work for a textile mill on what is now the site of the Food Lion at the corner of Highway 115 and Catawba Street. Carol and their three-month old baby daughter, Lynn, joined him in May of 1960. Carol didn't mind moving that far from her home state of New Jersey because all she wanted was to be back together with Ralph. Their son, David, was born at Lowrance Hospital in Mooresville on April 4, 1964, Carol and Ralph's 5th wedding anniversary.

When the mill closed in 1961, neither he nor Carol wanted to move back to New Jersey. North Carolina suited them just fine. So, he went into business for himself while Carol continued her nursing career. He opened the Tastee Freeze in Cornelius, and in 1962 turned his attention to Davidson, taking over The Hub on Main Street. He served burgers, sandwiches and soda fountain milkshakes made from scratch, and sold magazines, records, school supplies, sundries and bus tickets. He drew customers from the Town and the College.

Back in 1962, businesses and institutions were segregated, something that Ralph just didn't understand. It didn't make any sense to him. From the first day at The Hub, anybody could come in, sit down and eat, and he remembers it as being the first food place in the area to integrate. He had no uproar or protest, and went on operating it happily until 1976, when he opened the Workbench on Main Street. Two years later, he moved that business to the Cotton Mill in Cornelius, and remained there until he "retired" in 1996.

The Workbench is an example of another of Ralph's values. Back in The Hub days, Charlie Lloyd asked him if he could recane a chair for him, and Ralph said "sure." He found a Boy Scout Handbook and read all about basket weaving, teaching himself to cane chairs. Charlie Lloyd told others, and a business was born. Then he began refinishing and even building furniture of all kinds and taught furniture restoration at Central Piedmont Community College from 1976

to 1989. He figured that if someone else could do it, he could learn to do it, whatever "it" was, an approach he has taken to many of the different roles he has played in ourTown.

Some of those volunteer roles have been with the Davidson Community Players, the Town of Davidson, and two local churches, having been elected as Deacon at Davidson College Presbyterian Church. In the mid-90s, early in the life of the Davidson Housing Coalition, Ralph joined its board and became Treasurer shortly after that. He still serves the organization in that capacity. When DHC asked him to become Treasurer, it was something he had never done before, but that wasn't about to stop him. He learned the sophisticated requirements of the volunteer job and, at least twice a week, selflessly spends hours in the DHC office.

Ralph, because you have lived your life serving others, not seeing the differences in us, but understanding the ways in which we are all alike, you are this year's recipient of the Jack Burney Community Service Award. You call yourself just a plain person who likes to work with his hands, but we know that you have lived with honesty, creativity, intelligence, trustworthiness and love. These simple virtues are easy to say but hard to accomplish.

And accomplish them you have, Ralph. Your Town is grateful. Thank you.

by Marguerite Williams