

Mentor Appreciation Scholarship Entry

I am the oldest of five children. We grew up in a little shack my father built on a small plot of land between fruit orchards in the Santa Clara Valley of the 1950's. My father was a carpenter and was frequently unemployed. During hard times, we survived on a case of elbow macaroni along with fruits and vegetables from the garden.

As a youngster, I did not know how to read in first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grade. In sixth grade a marvelous teacher, Gerry Schmidt, told me I was going to learn to read or we would both die trying. I believed him and I did. Mr. Schmidt literally saved my life and motivated me to stay in school and eventually go to college. I never forgot.

Thirty-five years later, I became the principal of Edenvale Elementary School in San Jose, California. In 1988, the Edenvale neighborhood had the second highest "crack cocaine" arrest rate in San Jose, 43% of the kids dropped out of high school, and five teenagers were arrested for murders. The tragic waste of human potential was simply unacceptable. I remembered that Gerry Schmidt changed my life because he really believed in me and knew he was the person who could make the difference in my young life. I wanted to be that person in the lives of Edenvale students.

A small group of parents, community members, teachers and I decided that we would change things for kids growing up in the Edenvale community. Research was clear: teachers could identify dropouts with 80% accuracy by third grade and that youngsters' aspiration level was "set in concrete" by age eight. If the fate of youngsters in the Edenvale neighborhood was to be changed, something had to start before third grade.

With that in mind, we wrote to over three hundred colleges across the country and asked if an Edenvale student could adopt them. Our students would be pen-pals to college students or faculty members and wear college t-shirts to special assemblies. At the end of the year, I made a crazy promise to the graduating sixth graders. "If you stay in school, show up to class every day and do your personal best, I will give you a scholarship to get you started in college." I had no idea how I would raise the money.

Six years later, twenty-three students came back to Edenvale to receive their scholarships. On Thursday, May 7, 2009, \$44,500 in scholarships was awarded to the 2009 high school seniors from the Edenvale neighborhood. In the twenty-one years of the Adopt-A-College Program, \$323,500 has been awarded to 505 young adults who sat on the cafeteria floor, wore their college t-shirts and dared to dream big dreams because they knew their teachers really believed in them and served as their advocates and mentors.

When I retired five years ago, I found Gerry Schmidt, my sixth grade teacher, and honored him at my retirement party...in the Edenvale School cafeteria filled with kids wearing college t-shirts. Thanks to Gerry Schmidt, I learned that no one can do everything. Everyone can do something. And when we really believe and work together, we accomplish absolutely amazing things.