

December 31, 2007

TO MY GRANDSONS: WORK HARD AND HAVE PASSION

To Zachary and Nicholas Wansley, Brian and Thomas Yarbrough

Thinking about what I wanted to share with you this year, I was struck at how much we — you and I — have changed since we began this annual correspondence back at the beginning of the new millennium. Zack was a newly minted teenager, and the rest of you guys were barely double-digit. Now before this year is over three of you will be in your 20s and Thomas will be a ripe old 18 years of age. There is no question that every year that passes, you guys become smarter and more sophisticated. Me? I just get older.

As I reflect back on my life, nothing turned out as I had expected. Never in my wildest day did I think I would end up as an officer in one of the largest corporations in America. Nor did I ever imagine that I would have the privilege of working with such an extraordinary individual as Billy Payne and to be a part of a unique event — the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. When those exciting and stressful days were over, I swore to your grandmother I would finally retire, only to start writing a statewide syndicated newspaper column now in its 10th year.

By all measures, it has been a successful career, and as difficult as it was at times, I wouldn't redo a day of it. But my perception of success has changed greatly since I first set out on my journey. I have discovered that success is not defined by the possessions you accumulate, how much money you make or what kind of car you drive. Success is being able to look yourself in the mirror at night and know that you lived that day with absolute integrity, that you didn't besmirch your good name. At the end of the day, your integrity is all you have. Don't ever compromise it.

No matter how smart you are, somebody close by is smarter. I have had a lot of good mentors in my life — I still do — and I learned something from each of them that has helped shape my life. Seek out men and women you admire. Ask them questions. Learn all you can about how they got to where they are today, personally and professionally. I guarantee you they had a mentor or two along the way and would be flattered to serve in that role for you.

Have goals and aim high, but don't be afraid to change those goals as you move through life. Don't be something someone else wants you to be. That is a recipe for unhappiness. Discover what makes you passionate. You may not know what that is today, but it will come. One of my mentors, Jasper Dorsey, once said, "Find something you love to do so much you would pay someone for the privilege of doing it. Then get them to pay you. That is the perfect job." Amen.

Whatever you choose to do with your life, do it to the best of your ability. When you don't do your best, you are cheating yourself and those who depend on you. There is no place for apathy or laziness in this world. You are the product of hard-working grandparents and parents. We are depending on you to work hard, too.

Finally, keep life in perspective. As I have told you many times, I didn't always do that. I have come to understand that a strong faith and a loving family are more important than any plaque or platitude or paycheck. For that, I give you the credit. Your parents are no doubt amazed that their sometimes overbearing, always career-focused father has turned out to be such a doting and devoted grandfather. Grandchildren do that.

I am too old and see too much of my life in the rearview mirror to presume there will be other letters in other years. So just in case: Never forget that I love you very much and pray that you will make as much difference in this world as you have made in my life. Happy New Year, boys.

Love,
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