Gary Rhodes: Connecting J. Sargeant Reynolds to the community

BY JOHN REID BLACKWELL Richmond Times-Dispatch

Gary L. Rhodes, president of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, likes to point out one statistic that underscores the college's impact in the Richmond area.

"We've discovered that 1 out of 4 workers in the area has attended Reynolds, and 1 out of every 3 health care workers. That says a lot," said Rhodes, who is in his 13th year as president of the college, which has three campuses in the Richmond area. "I still get goosebumps when I think about what that really means."

Rhodes said the community college system trains a workforce that tends to live and work locally. "When they finish, they stay in the community," he said. "So it is like investing in your own family."

This year, Rhodes said he is particularly proud that Reynolds graduated its first class from its Advanced College Academy, a special program at J.R. Tucker High School in which students can earn a two-year associate's degree at the same time they earn their high school diploma.

Rhodes said it is an innovative way that the community college and local educators are preparing young people for careers.
"That is kind of a neat and new thing," Rhodes said. "These students finished with a two-year associate's degree in May and got their four-year (high school) degree in June."

While the college works to prepare adults for careers, Rhodes himself has devoted time beyond his duties as president to preparing children for a lifetime of learning even before they start school.

He said society does not place enough emphasis on education in the years between birth and starting school. "That is what is missing," he said.

Rhodes has served as chairman and remains on the board of Smart Beginnings, a regional consortium of organizations that supports early childhood development programs designed to make sure children enter school healthy, well cared for and ready to succeed.

"I guess I would say we are at the infancy stage of trying to create a national movement," he said. "We are trying to find ways to get funding for early childhood initiatives."

**IN HIS WORDS**

**Favorite movie**

"To Sir, With Love," with Sidney Poitier. Since the movie came out in 1967, I have seen it at least eight times, and there are so many profound messages woven into the plot. It is about those who have and those who have not. It is about those who have no role model at home and how the teacher can be a role model. It is about the importance of civility and respect for others. It is about a most important life choice for the teacher, who ultimately chooses to stay in the urban London school to change lives versus accept the more lucrative and easier teaching opportunity elsewhere.

**Something that might surprise others**

I wish I could have gotten to know Walt Disney when he came up with the idea of elevating the concept of an amusement park to the Magic Kingdom. Life is so very exciting when we aim high, and whether we are in business, education or something else, the lofty notion of a "Magic Kingdom" resonates well with aspirations of all fields.

**Alternate profession or course of study**

I love nature and animals immensely and, as a boy growing up with cages in his room (bats, alligators, snakes, toads, etc.), I adored Marlin Perkins, a zoologist who brought the wonder of animals and nature into people's living rooms. I never met an animal I didn't like - and I cannot say that about people. I would have loved studying the magic of nature though animals, insects and the outdoors.

**Something you'd like to do**

I wish I could discover any talent that might be within me to replicate life through the creation of art by painting with oils. My wife is a wonderful artist of nature scenes, and the process of taking a plain canvas and bringing it to life is magical for me.

**Role model**

The one I think of most often is my father, Charles Edgar Rhodes, who taught me from the time I was little to be curious about the world, curious about how things
worked, to not be afraid of but rather enjoy learning about the unknown, and also to
develop a set of values of which I am made up even today.

**Favorite thing about Richmond region**

There is a “contagious enthusiasm for community betterment” that can be
exhilarating at times. The greater RVA offers a very high quality of life with activities
for all ages and sufficient vision to strive to shape the future to attract millennials,
our future workforce and future leaders of our community.

**A small moment in life with a big impact**

A true story about a baby goose: “Lessons with Annie.”

* Part 1: The Good Samaritan

My wife, Nam, and I went to play golf on Memorial Day evening and, when we were
on the first green getting ready to putt, up came running to us a baby goose ... young
enough that she didn’t have colored feathers and had only a soft brown cottonlike
down. Not knowing what to think, we finished putting out, got into our golf cart and
rode to the second tee - when, waddling behind us as fast as her little legs would
carry her, was the baby Canada goose.

After ensuring that I wouldn’t hit the baby goose with my golf club, I went ahead and
hit the ball down the fairway. Nam did the same. As we rolled down the fairway,
continuing to run as fast as she could behind us was the baby goose. At that point, I
picked up the baby goose and held her close. She promptly pooped on my shirt
(which I didn’t mind), and I carried her to the pond next to the green and tossed her
into the water. She swam for about 10 seconds and then climbed up on shore and
followed us to the second green. Nam and I continued to putt out.

Driving to the third tee box, yes, behind us was the rapidly waddling baby goose. I
told Nam that I knew that mother geese were quite protective of their infants, so this
must have been a case where the baby got lost or something serious happened. We
decided to pick up the baby goose, leave the golf course with her, go home and take
our pontoon boat out to find a gaggle of geese with the hope that this little one might
be adopted.

I noticed across the lake was a gaggle of about 20 geese, although the babies in the
group were more mature and already had the coloring in their feathers of the adults.
We headed in our pontoon boat across the lake and tossed the baby goose into the
water and turned our boat around as quickly as we could and left. The baby goose
seemed to be comfortable swimming among the other geese, so we left feeling good
and hoping that the other geese would adopt our newfound baby.

It was one of those good feelings, like when you pull your car over and park to get a
turtle on the road off to the side before it gets hurt - the good feeling of saving an
innocent life.

* Part 2: Discovery

Nam and I went home, I changed my shirt, and we returned to the golf course and
decided to start over again, hoping to get in nine holes before the sun went down.
Upon reaching the first green, we saw a woman walking around calling out “Annie!
Annie! Come here, Annie!” and she turned to us and shouted out, “Have you all seen
a baby goose anywhere?”
Now what?

Nam and I agreed that we couldn't tell her what had happened, as we didn't know if we could find the baby goose again. The woman said Annie had lost her mother and that she was raising her until Annie grew her wings and she could give Annie her freedom. So, we turned the cart around and went back home for the second time.

Not knowing what to expect, we got into our pontoon boat and headed back to where we had let Annie join the other geese. The geese were not where we left them - they had moved. We went down the lake looking for gaggles of geese. After crossing the lake and looking along the shoreline, we spotted about 20 geese in a yard across the lake. As we approached closer, we could see Annie apparently comfortable sitting in the middle of the group, with the more mature geese on the hillside eating grass.

* Part 3: Annie Goes Home

We called out "Annie! Annie!" - and guess what? She raised her head, looked our way and began walking through the other geese, down the hill and jumped into the water and began swimming to our boat. After a few seconds, she reached our boat, I picked her up and held her, and told her we were taking her home again.

We took our boat home, jumped back into our golf cart and headed back to the golf course (for the third time) and found the woman walking a block away and told her that we had found Annie and were returning Annie to her home. The woman and her son were so very happy that they were on the verge of crying. A happy ending to an unusual and true story.

GARY L. RHODES

Position: president, J. Sargeant Reynolds Reynolds Community College

Born/hometown: May 26, 1952; St. Louis

College: Southeast Missouri State University (bachelor's in Spanish and English), Arizona State University (master's in Spanish linguistics and literature, and doctorate in higher and adult education)

Family: wife Nam

jblackwell@timesdispatch.com

(804) 775-8123