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### Rocky Wenton – Legacy of Learning

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ROCKY WELTON-LEGACY OF LEARNING

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## CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH MR. ROCKY WELTON

The walls in his house were grandly decorated with an array of pictures, portraits, and paintings. An experienced professional decorator would have sighed with disapproval, while making a futile effort to ascertain why any educated man would place those pieces on the same wall.

Anyone who knew Rocky Welton understood the theme behind his furnishings. He was a modest man with a simple perspective. He did what he loved, he loved what he did, and he surrounded himself with reminders of both. For that reason his walls were donned with portraits of family, pictures of former students, and paintings which were created for him by students who yearned to give back to him just a little of what Rocky Welton had given to them.

Welton's journey in education began in 1959 with his first teaching and coaching job at Liberal High School in Liberal, Kansas. He left Liberal in 1963 because he wanted new experiences.

This decision lead him to Oakley, Kansas, where he remained for four years until a change in administration prompted a decision to move. Mr. Welton spent the 1967-1968 school year teaching and coaching wrestling in Clay Center, Kansas. However, the promises that were made to get him there were not kept, and he moved on to Goodland, Kansas. He had already

established himself as a superior teacher and coach. His records were evidence of this. He established some roots in Goodland and spent fifteen years enhancing the lives of its students.

He became disenchanted with the politics of education at that point because a new administration instituted a salary freeze to which he could find no rationalization, so he resigned. Welton's resignation was accepted in June, and at that time there were no notable coaching positions available, so he sold insurance for a year. It was not surprising that he was successful in his new profession, but he was not happy.

It was at that time, 1984, when a friend inquired if he would be interested in a teaching and coaching position in Garden City. Rocky Welton accepted the position in Garden City and led Garden City High School to five State Championships. His coaching record and style earned him several "Kansas State Coach of The Year" awards, which is why Rocky Welton was labeled a master teacher.

However, it was not his teaching assignments nor his coaching notoriety which motivated his students. Mr. Welton's beliefs, determination, and joy of teaching compelled his students to set goals, push the boundaries, and realize their potential.

A picture of a marine hung on Rocky Welton's wall which was a testimony to this. One day he received the picture of this marine, a former student, in the mail. It came with a note which stated, "Without wrestling I never would have graduated, and without you I never would have wrestled."

Welton loved teaching. He could not bear the inservices in August each year. Although he knew the meetings and instruction were necessary, he longed to get the kids into the classroom. During passing periods, he was posted outside his door as he was supposed to be, but not for the intended purpose of crowd control. He just liked to watch the kids go by and to talk with them.

This interaction with the students was Rocky Welton's greatest strength. He thrived on the loyalty which formed in his classrooms, and he delighted in having semester courses so he would get a new batch of kids to get to know each semester. He urged teachers to take the time to get to know their students. He believed teachers did not realize the profound impact they had on children. He understood, from experience, that teachers could affect lives without having ever known they were doing so.

While teaching in Goodland, Rocky Welton had a young man show up in his class one morning and asked if he had any work he could do for him. He sat down to

work, and Welton asked him how everything was going. They had a pleasant conversation, and Mr. Welton never thought anything about it.

The same young man began to appear in the classroom every morning. They chatted. They spoke of economics, families, and the ways of the universe. One day he came in and explained that his parents were having troubles. Welton told him the story of hearing his own parents feuding at night when he was young.

Rocky Welton thought he was a nice young man. He enjoyed talking with him, and they became friends through discussion. Welton, however, did not think of it any deeper than that.

Years later, he received a letter from the young man explaining that he had become a teacher at the Youth Center in Larned, Kansas. He thanked Welton because he felt it was he who had caused him to become a teacher and to take the position in Larned because he felt he had something to offer them.

Mr. Welton treasured that letter. He felt it was the most fulfilling aspect of his career. Yet, he was saddened to realize that he had missed the highlight of his career because he thought he was merely exchanging pleasantries with a nice young man.

That is why Welton believed teachers were so important. He felt they never could really know what knobs they were turning, so they had to give a little

attention and advice and be aware of how impressionable the young minds were.

After receiving the letter, Welton made a few changes. He tried to be more aware and make overt gestures to the children in his classes. If someone appeared to be having a bad day, he chatted with them. He made it a point to know his students' interests. That is how he got started. Sometimes, the students came back to talk. Students he had two years prior would stop to give him a hug. His interaction made a difference.

Sometimes, just knowing a child's interest was not enough. Nothing frustrated Welton more than the inability to reach a student. He could not tolerate watching a good mind waste away.

He had a student one year who was extremely bright. Welton hungered for this child to bite and take hold, but nothing he tried proved successful. He recognized the potential in this boy, and he could envision the enormity of what he could accomplish if he could get the student to work.

Finally, Welton became so angry with the young man's apathy that he walked right up to him and pronounced, "You are going to be the smartest ditch digger in the world!"

Seven years later, the Weltons were in a grocery store and that same young man rushed up to them. He

searched Mr. Welton's face for recognition and inquired if he remembered him. He emphatically informed Mr. Welton that he had become a civil engineer.

The young man stormed off, and Welton watched as he told his young wife that he just put his old teacher in his place. Simultaneously, Welton was rejoicing with his wife because he knew that he had been unable to reach the boy any other way, but he had gotten him angry. That anger compelled the young man to prove himself to his teacher. What he had proven to Rocky Welton was that teaching was the most rewarding profession. Welton could only stand there with his chest puffed out thinking to himself, "I guess I do succeed sometimes."

Rocky Welton did not see himself as an intellectual. He believed in academics, but he did not over stress them. He felt his teaching style was antiquated. He lectured too much because he liked to talk. He had to fight that tendency daily. He won battles, and he lost battles. He became an advocate for block scheduling because it gave him a chance to talk and still possess classtime for other activities.

Respect was the foundation of Rocky Welton's classes. He never wanted to hear a confession of ignorance. It hurt him to call upon a student in class, only to have the student respond with, "I don't know". For this reason, he instituted the phrase, "I'm

on vacation." Under this guise, students were spared any embarrassment they might have felt having not remembered an answer. Welton rationalized that everyone's mind wanders now and again. He didn't feel that he would be needed if all of the students knew everything. Afterall, he was there to teach.

The phrase "shut-up" was never uttered in Rocky Welton's presence. His students didn't use it, nor did his children or grandchildren. He felt it was disrespectful. He preferred the term, "modulate". Welton felt that classrooms should never be threatening. Knowledge was to be a comfort, something in which students could find security.

Welton treated the students with the same respect he demanded. He adhered to the belief that to teach or coach, an individual had to be a little arrogant. A teacher had to know he could do something well in order to instruct others how to do it properly. Arrogant, however, he knew was not synonymous with infallible. Rocky Welton made mistakes. He had a temper, and occasionally, he stepped out of line. If he ever thought he had offended a student, he apologized and admitted his mistake. Those actions taught more than any textbook ever could.

It was those convictions which lead to Welton's "Teacher of the Year" award presented by the Association of Hispanic Professionals in 1990 and 1997.

The award was in recognition for his history of benefiting the Hispanic children of the community.

Welton did not believe that he educated Hispanic children any differently than any other students. He felt the award more accurately reflected his philosophy that every child deserved equal opportunity.

Rocky Welton's teaching expertise and philosophy extended from the classroom to the wrestling mat. He had success in coaching wrestling in every school regardless of the school's size classification. The success was not derived from an endless supply of wrestling talent. It emerged from thoughtful, constructive molding from Welton.

In the midst of a wrestling tournament, spectators could scan the gymnasium and witness an array of coaching styles. The rigid and hostile voices of various coaches could be heard above the roar of the crowd. This characteristic was absent from the mat where Welton's charges were competing.

Rocky Welton was a competitor, and he loved to win, but his wrestlers always took precedence. He would instruct from the side, but if a wrestler lost a match, even one he knew he should have won, Welton was encouraging.

He realized that, as a coach, there were many things he could teach, aside from wrestling. He taught his wrestlers lifeskills. He wanted them to know how

to behave. He knew anyone could behave when he won, but Rocky was determined to teach them how to accept defeat with dignity and grace.

Team work was the essence of Rocky Welton's wrestling program. He had no tolerance for selfishness, disrespect, or irresponsibility. He modeled acceptance, gratitude, humility, cooperation, and honesty. He instilled these values in his wrestlers. He prepared them to succeed in society.

Mr. Welton had an incident which occurred when two of his wrestlers were wrestling each other. The assistant coach, who was refereeing the match, became distracted and had apparently made a bad call. The boy who won had not been expected to.

Later, the assistant coach was visiting with Mr. Welton about the call. He did not believe that he had erred, but he admitted it was possible. At that moment, the boy who had won the match knocked at the door and requested another match. Welton reminded the boy that he had just won the match. The boy replied that he had been awarded the extra points when he was out of bounds and, therefore, it would only be fair to have a re-match.

Welton was proud. He was grateful he had the opportunity to work with kids who were honorable. He was not only working with students like that, he was creating them. The honorable actions of that young man

did not guarantee that he would ever make a great fortune, but it did guarantee that he would become a great man. Rocky Welton deserved a portion of the credit for success stories like that.

Rocky Welton never stopped learning. He believed we could all benefit from the strengths of others. He once had a fellow teacher supervise his class for thirty minutes while he had to be away. When Welton returned to class, the students were mesmerized. That teacher had drawn out kids that he had not yet sparked. Some educators would have been intimidated by this, but Welton was intrigued. He learned a few things, as well. That only made him a better teacher.

Rocky Welton had postulated that teaching was a noble profession to which individuals are called. He adhered to the belief that he had been chosen. He could not comprehend that a teacher taught because that was his job. Rocky Welton taught because that was his passion.

Everytime a child failed, he failed. He could recollect times when he lead them to the water, pushed their heads under, but they still refused to drink. Those images haunted Welton. In his mind, any teacher who had a child fail, and did not feel a sense of personal failure, was in the wrong profession.

Following his 1998 State Championship, Rocky Welton flirted with the idea of retiring from coaching.

His wife had been concerned with the toll coaching was taking on him. Welton needed to retire, but just didn't want to.

His assistant coach of fifteen years did not want the coaching position. Welton needed to be sure that the program was going to rest in good hands.

Regrettably, he wrote his letter of resignation, thanked a number of people for having allowed him to continue for fifteen years, and acknowledged all of his supporters. He reread and reworked his letter many times, seeking perfection. As he began the long walk to deliver the letter, he envisioned himself not coaching. He recalled the year he sold insurance, and he could feel the anguish he had experienced by not being a coach.

He called his wife because he had cold feet. She supported him by saying he needed to do what his heart commanded. However, she did inform him that if he were to continue coaching, he was going on a diet.

He decided to get into better shape for the next season. Rocky Welton taught because it was fun, and he coached because it was fun. He was determined that they would probably have to shoot him before he quit.

Welton had no regrets about his career. He thought if he could change anything he would have started out a little less sure of himself. He seemed to know it all when he started at age twenty-two, yet

if he had been more receptive to new things, he could have been that much more affective. The title, "Master Teacher" was a new idea for Mr. Welton. His response was, "The fact that I am a master at anything amazes me." He was equally amazed that he had never wanted for anything. "I do not know of anyone who has spent his whole life doing what he wanted to do, except me."

If Rocky Welton were asked to produce his numerous awards, he could perhaps find two or three. However, if he were asked to prove he was a successful teacher, he could spend hours sharing the memories that were displayed proudly on his walls.

The thrill of victory is fleeting and can fade over the years. Rocky Welton possessed a great deal more than a shelf of trophies. His was a legacy that lives on in the hearts, minds, and souls of those of us he taught.