

IN APPRECIATION OF RALPH KISER

by Rocco DeVito

Ralph Kiser is an epitome of a Virginia gentleman, family man, Southern hospitality, humility and abiding love for VSDB. Only a few VSDB alumni can actually match him.

Ralph Kiser came from a big close-knit family, having seven hearing brothers and two deaf sisters in Castlewood, Va. He was a loving husband of Mary Fridley Kiser for 63 years, a loving father of two sons, Charles and Jim, a loving father-in-law to Elsa and Sheree, a grandfather to Danielle (daughter of Charles and Elsa Kiser) and Hunter (son of Jim and Sheree Kiser). A first great-grandchild will be born in August. I have watched Ralph's family grow with much admiration.

Ralph and I crossed paths for the first time in 1964 at VSDB when I landed a job as physical education instructor and head coach of three major sports. I recall meeting Ralph after practice of his junior varsity football team and he looked like a veteran while I was a rookie. He told me his family resided in Darden Hall and asked me to visit when I had some free time. From there we hit it right off and became close friends. His wife Mary and Ralph spoiled me, feeding me well every visit. One of my favorite foods Mary cooked was home fries and to this day nobody has equaled her!

Ralph and I had something in common being die-hard New York Yankees fans. Often we watched them play on the tube together at his apartment. He always wore his NY Yankees baseball cap with pride.

Ralph was actively involved in several Deaf organizations namely; Virginia Association of the Deaf (VAD) of which he was once dubbed the oldest living member for more than 50 years, Skyline Chapter of VAD, Shenandoah Valley Club of the Deaf (SVCD), Virginia School for the Deaf Alumni Association (VSDAA), Deaf History of Virginia Museum committee, and VSDAA Service/Sports Hall of Fame committee. He also served as a deacon and a treasurer at the First Baptist Church. He served all organizations with dedicated commitment. He had the distinction of becoming the first father-son team to be enshrined to the VSDAA Sports Hall of Fame.

Another distinction was to become the first deaf father to be presented the "Deaf Father of the Year" award by VAD in 1999. The VSDB yearbook known as *The White Columns* was dedicated to Ralph for his unselfish and dedicated service to VSDB boys for many years in 1978.

Many of us did not realize how thrifty Ralph was during his productive years as a boy's dorm supervisor. He was very wise with his time and money. When he was off duty during his school breaks such as Christmas, spring or summer, he reported to Kessler's Auto Body shop in town to work for extra money. The owner really appreciated his high-quality skills in repairing cars.

Ralph often shared many interesting and funny real life experiences with me. For example,

(1) During World War II the Selective Service System was in dire need of American soldiers. Ralph wanted to participate in the war to challenge the Japanese army despite his deafness. So he filled out the form with hope of being drafted. The SSS used a device known as "Wheel" to draw names of men for the military draft. At the third draft Ralph's name was drawn so Ralph pretended to be a hearing person and tried to depend on his lip-reading skills. He was very excited when his name was announced. He raised his arm and tried to maintain his "hearing"

savvy. Then a doctor gave Ralph a physical and talked to him and Ralph nodded several times as if he understood what the doctor was saying. The doctor was puzzled, so he stood up behind Ralph to test his hearing. It was when the doctor realized that Ralph was deaf, and the doctor issued Ralph a 4-F identification card, meaning that he failed the physical. Ralph was very disappointed but his parents were relieved.

(2) After a year of having worked at both Darden and Byrd Halls supervising younger and older boys, Ralph realized how exhausted he was. When he received a new contract in March from Superintendent Joseph Healy, he decided to hold out until June as he wanted to negotiate. Mr. Healy was worried when Ralph had not returned his signed contract but Ralph told him that he wanted to make some demands to improve working conditions. During the June meeting he requested that two dorm supervisors be hired for Byrd Hall and another be added to Darden Hall. If Ralph's demands were not met, he would return his contract unsigned. Finally Mr. Healy agreed to Ralph's demands.

When I interviewed several members of the 1969 VSD undefeated football team, they mentioned how appreciative they were of Ralph's patient coaching in junior varsity football and his encouragement before they moved up to the varsity level. I am greatly indebted to Ralph for instilling toughness and fundamentals in the JV boys who wound up playing for the varsity team and were very successful in 1968 and 1969.

We lost a real Virginia gentleman, Hall of Famer, and a great friend of the deaf, but Ralph won't be forgotten as long as we live. We thank our Lord for putting Ralph on our planet Earth for good reasons.

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Little Acorn Newsletter

Source: Little Acorn newsletter, May 2009, page 4.