

Brought to you by:



"First & Foremost," August 16, 2007

Seek inspiration in people's everyday greatness

By Ron Kitchens

Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Michigan First

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of spending most of the day with business leaders from throughout the Chicago area, where I was the featured speaker for an event with Fast Company magazine. During the question-and-answer period I was asked, "Who inspires you?"

I have been doing a lot of thinking about that very question and how inspiration may very well be the most underrated activity in our day-to-day lives.

We live in a world of 24-hour media coverage and un-reality TV, where it makes it pretty easy to wonder, like the Jack Johnson song, "Where have all the good people gone?"

But the truth is, the good people are still here, all around us. We just forget to stop and be inspired, or for that matter, to inspire others.

In thinking about inspiration, I am reminded of the very first professional baseball game I attended. I was 12 years old and had won a radio contest that got me a seat on a chartered bus for a four-hour trip from my hometown of Ozark, Mo., to Kansas City and a ticket to see the Royals play the Red Sox.

Like most kids, I could not wait to get to the ballpark to take in the joy of the stadium and maybe get an autograph or two.

As I stood against the first-base rail waiting to ask anyone for his autograph, a kindly looking older man wandered up and struck up a conversation with several of us kids, asking our names, hometowns and what we wanted to be when we grew up.

When he got to me, for some reason I still cannot explain, I told that man that I would like to work here in the stadium someday.

He responded with, why not own the team someday?

Again, I am not sure why I felt the need to tell that nice old man my life story, but I explained to him that I could not own the team because my father had died and we did not have the money for the ticket to the game, let alone to buy a team.

That nice man turned out to be Ewing Kaufman, the founder of Marion Labs and owner of the Kansas City Royals.

Mr. Kaufman climbed up into the stands and set me down next to him, and explained that where you are from is just the starting point in life. You can own this team or anything else, if you want it and work hard enough.

You do not need to be rich and famous to inspire. Nor do you have to be a kid. You simply must take the time to be open to giving and receiving.

Undoubtedly someone reading this is thinking, how does it apply to my business? It was on that day and subsequent days that I remembered Mr. Kaufman's advice and found the inspiration to not limit my future by my own ignorance of the possibilities in life.

It was also that same Mr. Kaufman who left over a billion dollars for the establishment of the Kaufman Center for Entrepreneurial Development. His center is the pre-eminent facility on the planet in aiding and advising entrepreneurs on creating and growing businesses.

Talk about inspiring.

So to answer that question of who inspires me, it is the Mr. Kaufmans of the world - the nice man who let me pull out on the street in front of him and the wonderful people that I have the pleasure to work with every day, in particular Heather, who makes me laugh even when I am stressed that my column is late and my editor is not happy.

Ron Kitchens, [www. RonKitchens.com](http://www.RonKitchens.com), is the CEO of Kalamazoo-based Southwest Michigan First, the general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Venture Fund, a director of the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center and a nationally respected speaker. For a daily e-mailed business quote, go to SouthwestMichiganFirst.com and click on the free subscription link. "First & Foremost" alternates with columns by Battle Creek Unlimited's James Hettinger, Lakeshore Advantage's Randy Thelen and the Right Place Inc.'s Birgit Klohs.