

Giving Back *The Heart of Entrepreneurship*

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Read any paper in any community across the country these days and the prime “above the fold” headlines are often reserved for stories of local businesses creating new jobs and hiring more employees. When we think about what entrepreneurs mean for the economy, we tend to focus on job creation and business growth. But, rural places in particular know that entrepreneurs mean so much more to their communities – they are elected officials, civic leaders, role models, parents and school boosters. In addition to building their businesses, most entrepreneurs are committed to **giving back** – supporting the communities and regions that have helped them find success and build their business and personal wealth. These stories of give back represent the heart of entrepreneurship and a prime reason for communities to value and encourage the entrepreneurial aspirations of all their residents.

Recently, John Parker, Center Board member and member of Good Work, a nonprofit community development collaborative in North Carolina, shared two such stories with us. The entrepreneurs – John’s father, Tony Parker, and father-in-law, James Maynard, are rural North Carolina natives who built successful businesses but never lost touch with their rural roots. Both men demonstrate that the importance of entrepreneurs to their communities goes far beyond the jobs and income they create.

Tony Parker was born and raised in Moore County, North Carolina where his family had deep roots. After the National Guard and working as a rural land appraiser, Parker dug in and started Parker Hardware & Supply Company in Moore County. He ran the business for 25 years while also being actively engaged in the life of the community – serving as a county commissioner, board member for the library and many other civic organizations. He was serving as the county historian when he passed away unexpectedly in 2010.

While Parker gave deeply to his Moore County community during his life, his give back spirit continues. A memorial fund established in his honor at the Moore County Community Foundation has been used to initiate an annual Anthony E. "Tony" Parker Memorial Entrepreneurship Award at Sandhills Community College in Pinehurst, North Carolina, through the community college’s foundation. The award goes to an outstanding entrepreneurship student from Moore County who exhibits vision, passion, resilience, and a spirit of service and stewardship – in essence, the spirit of Tony Parker. This year’s award was



Photo by Easter Maynard

given at the state's annual Entrepreneurship Summit to Sue McKenzie, a licensed contractor, designer, sewer, and crafter who is developing a quilt shop in Vass, NC.

A little further east and a few years younger, James Maynard was raised in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The son of a contractor, Maynard was introduced early to the life of hard work that is entrepreneurship. This entrepreneurial spirit served him well – helping him turn a vision in the 1970s into the Golden Corral restaurant corporation that continues its success today. Like most entrepreneurs, Maynard started with very little – an idea, \$20,000 raised from family and friends, and another \$20,000 from a bank. But, he recognized that people really matter – whether his employees, his partners or the educational leaders with whom he's worked over the years.

Maynard and his wife, Connie, focused much of their give back on education – endowing several scholarships at their alma mater, East Carolina University and through the National Restaurant Association. More recently, their daughter, Easter Maynard, worked on behalf of the family to answer a question that would define their long-term give back strategy – what gift would make a positive, long-term impact for children, particularly disadvantaged children and families, in Eastern North Carolina?

The result? A \$10.5 million gift to establish the James and Connie Maynard

Children's Hospital at East Carolina University and an endowed distinguished professorship in pediatrics. This gift will bring quality medical services to children and their families in the more rural eastern part of the state. In the press release announcing the gift, Maynard acknowledged the connection between his entrepreneurial success and his capacity to give back to the region that nurtured that success:

Connie and I have been blessed to be able to make this gift, which will benefit children and families of eastern North Carolina. This gift is possible because of the many loyal customers of Golden Corral and the outstanding efforts of Golden Corral associates every day. We can think of nothing more worthwhile than helping East Carolina University's Brody School of Medicine



*Photo by Cliff Hollis
East Carolina News Services Press Release*

and Pitt County Memorial Hospital continue to excel in providing world-class care to the people of eastern North Carolina.¹

So, how can rural leaders leverage this give back spirit to achieve even greater benefits for the community? One place to start is to identify, acknowledge and support your local entrepreneurs. Too often, the focus of economic development efforts is on landing the “big one” – the new automobile factory or large manufacturer. As these two stories show, homegrown entrepreneurs are building successful businesses, creating jobs, and giving back, often under the radar screen and without the recognition and support they merit.

A second important step is to create the infrastructure to turn this spirit of giving back into development resources that the community can use to achieve its vision. Community foundations are one important means for capturing some of the wealth that local entrepreneurs create so that it can be used, for example, to support the next generation of entrepreneurial talent.

Together these two stories demonstrate the true power of entrepreneurs in their communities – as business **and** community leaders. They show the deep connections that Parker and Maynard, and many other rural entrepreneurs, have with their communities and their regions. Most importantly, these are two of many positive examples of entrepreneurs who are **giving back** – sharing the benefits of their passion, commitment, hard work and success with the places they call home.

For more information on...

... the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org.

... rural community foundations, go to <http://www.aspenccsg.org/rdp/msg/msg-overview.php>.

¹ Doug Boyd, \$10.5 million gift to help build pediatric wing, fund professorship, Press Release, East Carolina University Press Services, <http://www.ecu.edu/news/uhsdonation511.cfm>.