

Tracing Tracy Territory: We'll miss Mr. Hands-on  
by Sam Matthews / TP publisher emeritus  
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Tom Hawkins at the Breakfast Lions snack stand at Wayne Schneider Stadium. Press file photo  
After graduating from the University of San Francisco in 1950 with a degree in business administration, Tom Hawkins had several office-management jobs in San Francisco.

But he was born into a family of educators — his father was a teacher and administrator, and an uncle was county superintendent of schools. He later wrote: “I felt a natural calling to teach, and decided to work toward being a teacher.”

He told me personally on several occasions that he was fortunate to have launched his career in education at Waverly School, a rural elementary school east of Stockton.

The fortunate part, he said, was that Lawrence DeRicco was superintendent of the Waverly School District when Tom became a fifth-grade teacher.

Tom wrote: “Lawrence DeRicco was an extremely bright and caring person who made me understand that teaching was so

important because of its influence on the lives of our students. He made me feel that anything that I could do to improve these students' lives was the most important thing that I could accomplish. I always took my teaching much more seriously than I felt I could when I started."

DeRicco later moved up the educational ladder, from heading a small rural school to becoming president of San Joaquin Delta College.

Tom, his protégé, took DeRicco's words and example to heart and dedicated his life to making a positive contribution "on the lives of our children."

From Waverly, he came to Jefferson School south of Tracy in 1957 to succeed Bill Cecil as district superintendent, principal and eighth-grade teacher. Over the next half-century, the students at Jefferson and throughout the Tracy area became the beneficiaries of that commitment.

At Jefferson, as his three-hat job title attests, Tom became one of the great hands-on multitaskers many of us in Tracy have known.

"After three years of these three duties, the board took away my teacher responsibilities," Tom wrote. "However, I always taught at least one period of math to upper-graders each year. I found this to be very valuable to me, because I was able to know the kids better. I also was able to know everyone closely by teaching a speech and debate class each day before the regular school day started."

He didn't stop there. Tom also coached seventh- and eighth-graders in basketball, flag football, baseball and track.

Citing the combination of a dedicated staff, strong parental support and a community of board members and volunteers who all wanted the best for Jefferson, he asked, "How could anyone ask for more in a situation like we had here at Jefferson?"

Tom also felt that another aspect of the Jefferson success was that the school — there was only Jefferson for most of his 31 years — had classes beginning with kindergarten and extending to the eighth grade.

The continuity and comfort level that a neighborhood K-8 school gave to its students was an important factor in the rural school's success, he felt.

Although Jefferson district schools have a different structure these days, the spirit of the Hawkins period continues.

And after becoming a trustee of the Tracy Unified School District, Tom pushed for the creation of K-8 schools in the district. Freiler, Poet Christian, North and Kelly, all now K-8 schools, are the result.

Casey Goodall, TUSD assistant superintendent for business, said he was well aware of Tom's strong advocacy for nine-grade schools.

"Tom felt the students did better in neighborhood schools, and K-8 schools made that possible," he said. "We have two middle schools (Monte Vista and Williams) in the center of our district, and the four K-8s are located on the edges. It's worked out well for education and development of schools."

After retiring from Jefferson, Tom never slowed up. He took on the Tracy Dry Bean Festival coordinator's job for six years, and yes, it was hands-on all the way.

And as director of boys and later girls holiday basketball tournaments, Tom was at the gym for days — and nights — on end.

Of course, Tom was hands-on as treasurer of the Breakfast Lions Club for more than 40 years, and he headed up the snack stand at Wayne Schneider Stadium for decades. During football season, he was always busy making sure supplies and volunteers were ready for Friday night games. He arrived early at the snack stand and stayed late.

I was fortunate to have stopped by the hospital Friday to chat with Tom. He was there because the dialysis he had faced three times a week in the past couple of years hadn't been completed. (In retrospect, it was not a good sign.)

He was in pain, but in full command of his mental capacities. We talked about renaming Monte Vista Middle School for Jim Franco, and he was 100 percent in favor.

He also said he had gone to a football game at Schneider Stadium two weeks earlier. Even though he was in a wheelchair, he was at the snack stand to lend his support. He was always very proud of the money the Breakfast Lions raised at the snack stands, all of

which went to the high schools to help defray expenses for their athletic programs.

“I’m going to do my best again next Friday night,” he said. I told him I’d try to make it, too.

Mr. Hands-on won’t be there, as we now know. After a long struggle, his body finally gave out Tuesday morning. Other Lions manning the snack stand tonight will know, though, they are continuing a tradition that was inspired by Mr. Hands-on, Never-give up — Tom Hawkins.

- *Sam Matthews, Tracy Press publisher emeritus, can be reached at 830-4234 or by e-mail at [shm@tracypress.com](mailto:shm@tracypress.com).*

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