

Robert Ray, Drake '50

# Mr. Iowa

He answers his own office phone with a simple "Bob Ray."

The ex-governor of 14 years, long out of public office but still very much in the public view, is a true Iowa icon. By Tom Fruehling



**AT 74, HE'S ARGUABLY MORE** liked and trusted than any other politician in state history. He was elected to an unprecedented five terms in office, serving from 1969 to 1983, then embarked on a distinguished career with two of Iowa's largest insurance companies.

When a broad-based non-partisan coalition recently formed to lobby legislators for Gov. Tom Vilsack's Iowa Values Fund, it turned to Ray as their spokesman. The thinking was that if Bob Ray thought it was a good idea, well, then, it must be the thing to do.

Over the years, he's been given dozens of honors, most recently a lifetime humanitarian award from the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association and the Des Moines Register's first Iowa Star Award for community involvement.

He's still promoting the ambitious Iowa Child project. He raises funds for

Keep Iowa Beautiful and the Iowa Games.

These days, in addition to serving on myriad boards and volunteer positions, Ray says his "passion" is the Character Counts program in schools and communities that he spearheaded in connection with the state's sesquicentennial celebration in 1996.

He chaired that effort. Indeed, he seems to lead anything with which he's involved.

"A group of 20 of us met for several years to plan for it," Ray recalls. "And when it was over, we wanted to leave a legacy. Not just build a monument, but do something that would make a significant change in our state and would affect future generations."

Scott Raecker, an Iowa native who was lured back from a big-time business position in Vail, Colo., to serve as director of the 150th anniversary commission, says that from the time he was first inter-

viewed for the job in 1992, Ray had a vision in mind.

"The first question he asked was what I thought we could do to really impact people's lives and have a positive influence on the quality of life in Iowa."

Raecker says it was Ray's idea to somehow enhance how people treat each other, to improve civility and to show respect. In short, to make decisions that reflect good character.

"We knew what we wanted to do," Ray says. "We just didn't know how to go about it."

The upshot was the creation of the Institute for Character Development, based at Drake University, which began to look around the country for programs that fit its mission.

What the group settled on was Character Counts, a California-developed system of character education based on six





Kevin Wolf / The Gazette

pillars of conduct: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

"It's not a curriculum," Ray explains. "It's a way to change how people think and form a different way of life. It's a way to stimulate pride in schools and throughout whole communities."

It's now being used in more than 350 schools throughout the state, including many in Eastern Iowa; some cities in other parts of the state have also adopted it.

"I'm so passionate about it because I've seen too many places where it has had a real impact," Ray says. "In the schools, discipline rates have dropped dramatically. The kids are happy and helping others, and the teachers can teach without punishing students. Kids don't learn in that kind of environment."

"With Character Counts, everybody wins."

Raecker, who is now executive director of the Institute for Character Development in addition to having served three terms as a state representative from Urbandale, says the success of Character Counts is due in large part to the guiding principles Ray has exhibited in a long career of service.

"He is the epitome of civility and good character. He is just a great role model. He's always been committed to giving back."

**DEMOCRATIC GOV.** Tom Vilsack, who is a strong supporter of the Character Counts program, also has high praise for the onetime Republican governor who brought the idea to fruition.

"He's the embodiment of the program," says Vilsack, whose path has crossed frequently with Ray since he moved to Iowa in 1975. "When he was

governor, he worked with and was respected by both sides. He's a good guy."

He says Ray's widespread credibility provided a key boost to Vilsack's Iowa Values Fund, particularly among some reluctant Republicans.

"He is universally liked and respected," says Cedar Rapids attorney Wythe Willey, who served as Ray's chief of staff from 1970 to 1981. "He was always hard-working and dedicated to his job and to the state of Iowa. And he could get things done."

Among many other accomplishments, he credits his old boss with removing the sales tax from food and drugs, revamping school aid and increasing funding for the state's colleges, helping get the community college system off the ground and forming the Department of Transportation.

He also recalls when Ray once grounded the entire fleet of Iowa National



**Born:**

Sept. 26, 1928, in Des Moines

**U.S. Army:**

1946-48

**College:**

Drake University, 1952, business administration; Drake University law school, 1954

**Marriage:**

Billie Lee Hornberger, Dec. 21, 1951

**Family:**

Wife, Billie; three daughters, Randi, Lori Ann and Vickie; eight grandchildren

**Career:**

Attorney with Lawyer, Lawyer, Ray & Crouch, Des Moines, 1955-1968; Chairman, Iowa Republican party, 1963; Governor of Iowa, 1969-83; U.S. representative to the United Nations, 1984; President, Life Investors Inc., Cedar Rapids, 1983-89; Chairman, Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission, 1991-96; President, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Iowa, Des Moines, 1989-1997; Interim mayor of Des Moines, 1997; Interim president of Drake University, 1998-99



Gov. Bob Ray votes in a Gazerte (Cedar Rapids) straw poll in 1980.

Guard aircraft — much to the chagrin of federal officials — because of safety concerns.

"That shook up Washington, D.C.," Willey says.

But Vilsack and others feel Ray's most lasting legacy is his unceasing efforts to bring Southeast Asia refugees to Iowa in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

"He literally saved thousands of lives and impacted hundreds of thousands of others," the current governor says. "One thing a lot of people don't see is how revered he is in the Asian-American community. They still have a great deal of respect for him."

**KEN QUINN**, executive director since 1999 of the Des Moines-based World Food Prize Foundation, worked with Ray on the resettlement programs and concurs with Vilsack's assessment.

Quinn, a career State Department diplomat who served six years in Vietnam through the fall of Saigon in 1974, came back to Iowa to work for Ray in 1978 through a loan program with the State Department.

During the first wave of Vietnamese who came to the United States following the war, several thousand came to Iowa. When several thousand Laotians asked to settle as a group in one place rather than be



scattered around the country, Ray invited them to Iowa, with the state serving as their official sponsor.

In the late 1970s, an international crisis cropped up when thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese tried to escape the country in rickety boats.

"Bob Ray led the charge to help these people by saying the state of Iowa would take more of them," says Quinn, appointed as ambassador to Cambodia by President Clinton. "He provided global leadership."

In the end, about 5,000 of the so-called "boat people" ended up in the state.

Later, Ray visited Thailand and took pictures of the hundreds dying each day from starvation and illness. The pictures were printed worldwide, leading to massive relief efforts. Ray started Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation (SHARES), which collected \$600,000 in the last month of 1979 alone to send food overseas.

"Once again," says Quinn, "Bob Ray was at the forefront. He and Iowans reached round the world to save lives. He was a force to bring about change in the world."

**FOR HIS PART.** Ray says all the relief efforts were simply part of what he saw as his humanitarian duty.

"People were dying. We couldn't sit out here in the land of plenty and watch people die. We couldn't turn our backs on them," he says. "The rewards have been enormous. The refugees who came here are hard-working people with family values.

They've done a lot for the state of Iowa."

Ray, who retired in 1997 after 14 years as a chief executive officer for insurance companies in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines, says he stays as busy as ever. Indeed, he doesn't find time for the yard work he loves or for his photography hobby.

"We don't even watch television," says his wife, Billie, also an active volunteer who heads the board of the Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines.

The couple first met at a summer church camp in ninth grade when Billie was named queen and picked Bob as her escort.

In sum, Ray says he's satisfied with his life.

"I've always felt an obligation to help. And thank God, I have had the opportunity to be involved with a lot of others in good works."

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## PLANNING TO WIN



Tim Roncevic won the \$10,000 first prize in Chapman University's business plan competition for his idea for a golf-practice center. He spent more than 100 hours shaping his plan.

## AKPsi senior wins entrepreneurial competition

By Jan Norman

FIRST-TIMER TIM RONCEVIC, the project began as an assignment in his entrepreneurial-management class at Chapman University in Orange, Calif.

It ended in a \$10,000 first prize for the best business plan in Chapman's Emerging Entrepreneur Contest.

In between, Roncevic, a 22-year-old senior, mapped out the next few years of his life.

Chapman, like a growing number of colleges, strives to infuse its entrepreneurial programs with real-world experience, whether that means writing a plan for a real business or teaming business majors with executive mentors.

"You don't learn entrepreneurship by sitting in class. You learn by writing business plans, working with and talking to entrepreneurs," says P.K. Shukla, director of the Ralph W. Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics.

For the past four years, Chapman has sweetened the practical business-plan experience with cash prizes.

"This year's field was the best quality yet," Shukla says.

Initially, the Emerging Entrepreneur Contest was limited to Internet and high-tech business ideas. But eligibility was expanded after the dot-com collapse. This year, dozens of students initially explored the contest's requirements; 18 submitted full plans. Perhaps reflective of a weak economy, the entries tended to be practical, tangible businesses, Shukla says.

Six finalists gave oral presentations of their plans. Roncevic proposed Fairway Views, a golf-practice center in Temecula. His competition comprised Eric Harris' Harris Music Group, retail stores for expensive guitars; Willie Lie's Tropical Indoseafood LLC, a seafood importer; Antoinette Naddour's Remote Management Technologies, security cameras for multi-location businesses; Bernard Steinmann's Onyx Elevators Inc., home elevators for the elderly; and Jonathan Strietzel's Pika Media, advertising over wireless phones.

Steinmann captured the \$3,000 second prize and Strietzel, the \$1,000 third prize.

"I noticed a lot of these plans were not contest-driven; they actually believed in

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