



Mr. Ralph W. Ketner

September 20, 1920 - May 29, 2016

Ralph W. Ketner, whose generous spirit created, inspired and encouraged generations of philanthropy in Salisbury; and, whose business acumen created employment, wealth and security in our region and across the nation, went Home to God on Sunday, May 29, 2016.

Although a business icon, it was his kind, loving essence that made him so special and beloved by those who called him father, brother, hero, mentor or friend. Mr. Ketner's wit and heart sparkled through his eyes and smile, and he exuded something special that always sought the good in those he met.

Mr. Ketner was President, and the last of a trio of men who founded Food Town (later Food Lion) in 1957. He, his brother Brown and their friend Wilson Smith, wanted to start a grocery store in Salisbury, but they had no money. They called friends and strangers from the phone book, to invest \$10 a share, and ended up with 125 original investors. An original share of Food Town stock eventually split 19,440 for 1. Each \$28 of original investment created a million-dollar return during Mr. Ketner's tenure. Not only did the Ketners and Smith succeed, they made millionaires of their friends and neighbors.

This extraordinary success didn't happen overnight. In 1967, deciding that "you can't buy people's business – you've got to earn it," Mr. Ketner, a mathematics whiz, locked himself in a Charlotte hotel room for days,

determined to figure out a way to lower prices on grocery items. His book, “Five Fast Pennies,” describes his process of drastically reducing prices and profits and counting on dramatic increases in volume, or “five fast pennies instead of one slow nickel,” to be successful. Food Town had to increase sales by 50 percent to break even, so Mr. Ketner “bet the company” and convinced his board to take the risk. In combination with exceptionally skillful buying and operations, that risk paid off and Food Town/Food Lion became the fastest growing supermarket in the nation, with the stock outperforming Microsoft, Walmart, and even Warren Buffet’s company, Berkshire Hathaway.

In the 1970s, the grocery chain grew by 35 percent a year. It expanded across North Carolina and the nation. The Belgian company Delhaize purchased stock in Food Lion during this time period. That relationship continues today. Always looking for cost savings, when it became necessary for Food Town to change its name as it grew, Mr. Ketner came up with the name Food Lion — because he’d only need to buy two new letters for store signs.

Mr. Ketner’s philosophy was customers first, employees second, stockholders third and management last. Food Town/Food Lion had a profit sharing program for employees from day one. Twenty percent of pre-tax profits went into the plan and enabled many hourly workers to send their children to college and enjoy a comfortable retirement. True to his philosophy of “management last,” and unlike almost all CEO’s, Mr. Ketner never gave himself a stock option which would have made him a billionaire.

Mr. Ketner knew firsthand what he called, “the privilege of being underprivileged.” Born September 20, 1920 to the late George Robert Ketner - also a grocer - and Effie Yost Ketner, he lost his mother at age 5 and his father at age 11. His stepmother, Allene Ketner did the best she could during the depression, but young Ralph worked from an early age.

Mr. Ketner sold newspapers, learned how to pluck chickens from his grandfather, split logs with a wedge and mallet, worked in brother Glenn's "Ketner's" supermarkets and "hopped curb" at Dan Nicholas Ice Cream Parlor. As recently as this May, he still delighted in easily reeling off the 14 flavors of ice cream he sold as a youngster.

Having honed the skills in arithmetic he'd use the rest of his life, Mr. Ketner graduated from Boyden in 1937 and enrolled in Tri-State College in Angola, Indiana — the college farthest from Salisbury that had sent him a catalog. He later served as its commencement speaker in 1982 where he was awarded an honorary doctorate. Mr. Ketner, by then well known for his colorful language, presented a speech entitled: "Four-Letter Words, the Keys to Success: Home Work, Hard Work, Team Work, Good Luck, Good Lord, and a Good Idea."

Out of money in 1939, he dropped out of college and returned home to work in his brother Glenn's store in Kannapolis, and later worked for Cannon Mills as an auditor. He volunteered for the Army after the attack on Pearl Harbor, serving in North Africa and Italy from 1942 to 1945.

Upon his return from the war, Mr. Ketner did everything possible to stay out of the grocery business, working nine jobs he didn't like before ultimately returning to work for Glenn. When Glenn sold his chain of 25 stores to Winn-Dixie in 1956, Ralph and brother Brown worked briefly for that chain before starting Food Town with former co-worker, Wilson Smith in 1957.

Upon his retirement from Food Lion, Mr. Ketner embarked on a second career of philanthropy that has been nearly unparalleled in this community, both in his personal contribution and in his engendering that spirit in others. Catawba College became a frequent recipient of Mr. Ketner's giving. The Ketner School of Business opened at Catawba in 1989 and Mr. Ketner, Executive in Residence, established a third-floor office there where he provided services as

“LPCINC” (the Lowest Paid Consultant in North Carolina), providing free consultation to anyone seeking his counsel. He especially loved talking with students about their ideas, and never missed an opportunity to meet with classes.

In the early '90s, Mr. Ketner offered the North Carolina County Association a deal that they couldn't refuse: each year, he would give a \$10,000 cash award to the employee who came up with the best idea of how to improve efficiency of operations in state government. Twenty-five years later, the NC County Association estimated that Mr. Ketner's \$250,000 investment had saved taxpayers more than \$38,000,000.

Other entities which Mr. Ketner faithfully supported include, but are by no means limited to: Rowan Helping Ministries, Livingstone College, the City of Salisbury, Nazareth Children's Home, Trident Community Foundation, Charleston Interfaith Crisis Ministries, Queens University, New Horizons, 4-H, Happy's Farm Inc. and Duke University.

His list of awards and honors includes: National CEO Award (Wall Street Journal), USA Entrepreneur of the Year (Price Waterhouse), Who's Who in Supermarketing, Who's Who in Finance and Industry, Top Entrepreneurs in U.S. (Venture Magazine), Top Visionaries in the Supermarket Industry (Supermarket News), Lifetime Achievement and Entrepreneur of the Year (Ernst & Young and Merrill Lynch). He was the subject of numerous national magazine articles, among which were: “What's an LFPINC?” (Forbes, Feb. 16, 1981); “Making Them Rich Down Home,” (Fortune, Aug. 15, 1988) and “You Can Make A Million (Readers Digest, July 1996).

A lifelong member of the First Presbyterian Church of Salisbury, he served as both Deacon and Elder over his 83-year membership.

In 1989, he built 14 homes for low-income families, and did the same in 2002

for 10 families in Rowan County. He was N.C. Grocer of the Year in 1972-73; N.C. Retailer of the Year in 1977; received an honorary degree from Catawba in 1981; was Salisbury's Man of the Year in 1985; received the Adrian L. Shuford Award from Catawba in 1987; bought and renovated Salisbury's seven-story downtown anchor building, then graciously donated it to the City. Mr. Ketner was an original inductee of the National 4-H Hall of Fame in 2002; and was an original inductee of the Entrepreneurs' Hall of Fame at Queen's University in 2011. That same year, he was inducted into the Supermarket News Hall of Fame.

In 2015, Catawba and Food Lion produced the documentary "Lessons in Leadership: The Story of Food Lion Co-Founder Ralph W. Ketner." That same year, he received The State of North Carolina's top honor, "Order of the Long Leaf Pine," for extraordinary service to the state.

In the forward to his book, "Five Fast Pennies," Mr. Ketner wrote:

"Throughout my life, I faced an uncommon number of obstacles – orphan, child of the depression, no money. But I was blessed with an 'attitude,' a point of view. I saw 'problems' as 'opportunities in disguise.' I saw a 'lemon' and made 'lemonade.'" I started 'thinking' before 'starting to work.' I have never had ambitious goals for myself, but have always done my very best on every job." To this, a grateful family and community say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Survivors include: a daughter, Linda Ketner, of Charleston; a son, Robert (Leslie) Ketner of Greensboro; grandchildren Robert (Rebecca) Ketner Jr. of Winston-Salem, Andrew Ketner of New York City, Margaux Ketner of Philadelphia, and Madeline Ketner of Greensboro; sisters Virginia Petty of Greensboro and Dorothy Swing of Salisbury; his former wives, Ruth Hope (mother of his children) of Georgetown, S.C. and Anne Ketner of Salisbury; multiple nieces and nephews; and in-laws Wayne and Claudette Jones, and, Gary and Cathy Boggs all of Faith, NC.

Along with his parents, he was preceded in death by his brothers, Glenn, Ray and Brown Ketner.

The funeral will be held at 2:30 p.m., Sunday, June 5, 2016, at Keppel Auditorium, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC, Reverend James Dunkin of First Presbyterian officiating. A reception in the adjacent Crystal Lounge will follow. A private burial service will be held with immediate family.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to: Rowan Helping Ministries, 226 N. Long St., Salisbury, NC 28144; Hospice of Rowan County, 720 Grove St., Salisbury, NC 28144; Glenn A. Kiser Hospice House, 1229 Statesville Blvd., Salisbury, NC 28144.

Summersett Funeral Home is serving the Ketner family. Online condolences may be made at www.summersettfuneralhome.com.

Previous Events

Service- Keppel Auditorium, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC,

JUN 5. 2:00 PM (ET)

Summersett Funeral Home

1315 W. Innes St.

Salisbury, NC 28144

(704) 633-2111

<https://www.summersettfuneralhome.com>

Tribute Wall

GS

“ Loving memory, deep appreciation and sympathy are expressed to the Ralph Ketner family in connection with his passing. Ralph leaves a storehouse overflowing with positive, successful, serving and productive examples that benefited our country, countless communities and individuals. I cherish the memory and friendship of Ralph and Ann.

Grant Shrum, President National 4-H Council (Retired)

Grant Shrum - June 06, 2016 at 02:32 PM

AH

“ So very sorry for your loss. My husband, Bob and I send our deepest sympathy. I believe that I am a very distant relative. My grandmother was Fannie Ketner, married to Frank Ernst. They had three children, Alice Ruth -- known as Ruth -- Dr. Ed Ernst and Rita Rehkopf. I am the eldest daughter of Ruth Warren, along with sisters Mary and Martha, twins, and brother, James Raymond Warren. From what I understand my grandmother had brothers and sisters and I was wondering if Ralph was related to Fannie. I believe that Fannie was a nickname. Ruth and Ed both passed on in the early 60's or late 50's. Rita is now around 85 and living in San Antonio, TX with her children and great grand children. I am now 75 years old and live near Charles Town, West Virginia. If I am a distant relative please contact me at hillmur@frontiernet.net or call 304 728 0692.

Again, our hearts go out to you in this time of sadness.
Alice Hill-Murray

Alice Hill-Murray - June 05, 2016 at 12:27 PM

LH

“ *Linda Headley lit a candle in memory of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner*



linda headley - June 05, 2016 at 11:30 AM



“ *To Mr. Ralph Ketner's daughter Linda Ketner my mother Jackie Cherry sends her condolences and she is sorry she couldn't make it to the funeral today*

Mary Suggs - June 05, 2016 at 11:27 AM



“ *Ralph Ketner was the most kindness and generous man I have ever known u will always be in my thoughts my condolences goes out to the family and his daughter Linda. Jackie Cherry and Family*

Mary Suggs - June 05, 2016 at 11:20 AM

KW

“ *To The Ketner Family,*

Mr. Ketner is a great man. He has helped so many, and has shared so much of himself with others. He is wise, generous, loving, kind, and compassionate. He is missed so much.

My thoughts and prayers are with the Ketner Family.

*God bless,
Pastor Kathy White*



Kathy White - June 04, 2016 at 12:26 PM

KW

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Mr. Ketner is a great man. He has helped so many, and has shared so much of himself with others. He is wise, generous, loving, kind, and compassionate. He is missed so much.

My thoughts and prayers are with the Ketner Family.

*God bless,
Pastor Kathy White
Gateway Freedom Center*

Kathy White - June 04, 2016 at 12:19 PM

HF

“ *Dear Robert,*

Condolences to you and your family on the loss of your father. He was a great and good man and helped many people in his life. You were blessed to have him for so long a time; we know you will miss him terribly.

The peace of the Lord be with you all.

Henry and Gayle Fellers

Henry Fellers - June 04, 2016 at 07:49 AM



“ *Peaceful White Lilies Basket was purchased for the family of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner.*



June 03, 2016 at 11:10 AM

AS

“ *Light This Candle. In Momery Of Mr. Ralf Ketner God Bless You We Will See You Heaven One Day Love You Lind,Audrey*

Audrey Skipper - June 02, 2016 at 06:53 PM

AS

“ *Audrey Skipper lit a candle in memory of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner*



Audrey Skipper - June 02, 2016 at 06:48 PM

AS

“ *Audrey Skipper lit a candle in memory of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner*



Audrey Skipper - June 02, 2016 at 06:43 PM

FC

“ As a sales manager at WSOC-TV..in 1975..I met Mr. Ketner for the first time at his Food Town office on Julian Road. He told me about his goals for Food Town and LFPING and I told him about the FRED principle(frequency,reach,efficiency and delivery). He seemed to be impressed, but did not buy a schedule. We kept working and in 1979 Mr. Ketner reluctantly agreed to be the spokesperson for Food Town in a television commercial. He later said that a woman told him "that anyone who looked that bad on television had to be believable".That commercial with Mr. Ketner was one of the most effective ever aired in behalf of Food Town(Food Lion).

In 1980, I started my own company and was assisted and inspired by Mr. Ketner. My television advertising contract with Food Town(Food Lion) was negotiated with Mr. Ketner, who was more than fair.While working with Food Town(Food Lion) for the next 16 years, Mr. Ketner and I became good friends. We spent many hours together playing cards, golf and discussing business, pleasure and family. He was like a second father to me.

I know that Mr. Ketner loved his family, but he had a special bond with his children..Linda and Robert. He was and always will be a special man, whom we were all very fortunate to share for 95 years. He was a true southern gentleman.

Our best thoughts are with the Ketner family..especially Linda and Robert..during these trying times.

Pat and Fred Collins

Fred Collins - June 02, 2016 at 03:20 PM



“ *Magnificent Life Spray was purchased for the family of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner.*



June 02, 2016 at 09:30 AM



“ *I remember the first time I met Mr. Ketner. During the first week of December 1982, he walked the entire warehouse in Salisbury shaking hands and passing out annual bonuses. He insisted on finding everyone of us and thanking us for a great year. I got 17 of those annual bonuses, but none were as special as the one that let me meet Mr. Ketner. He was truly a great man and my life has been better for knowing him.*

Dale Dyson

Dale Dyson - June 01, 2016 at 10:24 PM



“ *Dear Linda and family,*

I know how much you loved your father and respected him. He was a great man and a great role model. You followed in his footsteps and honored him.



You will be in my thoughts and prayers in the lonely days ahead.

Love to you all,

Betty Everhart

Betty Everhart - June 01, 2016 at 07:48 PM

BE

“ Dear Linda,
I know how much you loved and respected
your father. He was a great role model and
you followed in his footsteps with honor.
You will be in my thoughts and prayers in the
days ahead.
With love to you and your family.
Betty Everhart



Betty Everhart - June 01, 2016 at 07:21 PM

TF

“ To : The Ketner Family
From: Mya, Mikayla and Michelle Woodhouse

Although it has only been a year since I met Mr. Ketner, he has
been a true inspiration
to me. His light will continue to shine through the lives of the many
people he has touched. We will keep you in our thoughts and
prayers.

The Woodhouse Family - June 01, 2016 at 12:20 PM

MJ

“ Mikayla Woodhouse Jackson lit a candle in
memory of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner



Mikayla Woodhouse Jackson - June 01, 2016 at 12:10 PM

MW

“ *Mya, Mikayla And Michelle Woodhouse lit a candle in memory of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner*



Mya, Mikayla and Michelle Woodhouse - June 01, 2016 at 12:09 PM

AS

“ *Linda and Robert you have my sympathy. Your father was a one of a kind man. He will be missed but not forgotten. I went to work for him in 1977 and I know how great he was. He was kind, concerned, caring, nice, a gentleman, but also stern. A perfect father example as far as I am concerned. I have so may fond memories and will never forget him. I sing his praises everytime I can. Have comfort in knowing he was so loved. God Bless you all.*

Andre Seaford - June 01, 2016 at 09:38 AM

HN

“ *My deepest condolences to both Linda and Robert and their families on the loss of their dad who was one of the most influential men in my life. He was one of the most brilliant men that I have ever met. He was smart and also a Duke fan who actually sat in front of me my first year as a season ticket holder at Duke. Food Town gave me a shot as a manager trainee that has changed my entire life. Ralph had a memory like no other as he could come into any one of my stores and if he ever met you, he could recall your name whether it was last year or five years ago. I tried to emulate that in every store I supervised for him. He truly was a North Carolina and national treasure and most important always a gentleman. May he rest in Peace with God. herb neubauer*

herb neubauer - May 31, 2016 at 03:02 PM

MM

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Mike Myers - May 31, 2016 at 09:55 AM

BH

“ Mr. Ketner will truly be missed by all. I can remember when we got our first Food Town nearby on Charleston Highway in West Columbia, SC, all due to his wisdom. My family shopped there often. It was the best grocery store we had in my youth. Without his vision, we would not have the local Food Lion in the Gaston, SC community today. He was truly a great businessman and humanitarian. May his light continue to guide the path for others.



Betty Hooker - May 31, 2016 at 07:20 AM

PC

“ Patricia Loeblein Cress lit a candle in memory of Mr. Ralph W. Ketner



patricia loeblein cress - May 30, 2016 at 07:06 PM