



Simply Rich: Life and Lessons from the Cofounder of Amway: A Memoir

By Rich DeVos



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Few people embody the American entrepreneurial spirit as plainly as Rich DeVos. A prominent businessman, self-made billionaire, philanthropist, worldwide speaker, bestselling author, family man, and devout Christian, DeVos not only helped create Amway, one of the world's biggest companies, but he did it from the ground up with his deep faith in God guiding the way and keeping his hopes alive. Now after the success of his bestselling books in business, DeVos reveals his personal story.

Born to poor Dutch immigrants in rural Michigan during the Depression, DeVos learned about the importance of leadership and partnership. His grandfather, father, and teachers taught him valuable lessons and key principles about faith, optimism, and perseverance that would guide his entire life. In high school, he befriended Jay Van Andel, who later became his business partner. Together, they created a whole new way to sell products and established one of the largest, most successful companies in the world. DeVos also talks about his marriage and family, his experiences as a motivational speaker, his ownership of the NBA basketball team Orlando Magic, and his philanthropic, religious, and political endeavors.

Inspiring, fascinating, and full of heart, *Simply Rich: Life and Lessons from the Cofounder of Amway* is the astonishing rags-to-riches story that few can tell. Through his amazing accomplishments as both a businessman and generous soul, DeVos reveals the true meaning of success and how his deep faith helped him become a true American icon.

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Editorial Review

Review

"You will not want to put this book down. It's a fascinating story, full of advice, lessons, and inspiration for all who dream of a better life and who are willing to work hard to achieve it. (Thomas J. Donohue, President & CEO, U.S. Chamber of Commerce)

"Rich DeVos' words and actions have inspired millions of people over many years, and his newest book *Simply Rich* promises to inspire and inform millions more with his personal life story and insights about a remarkable life." (Joseph Mariano, Direct Selling Association)

"A riveting personal narrative from one of the most successful businessmen of our time." (Jeffrey Rosen, President & CEO, National Constitution Center)

"Rich DeVos is a man of integrity, and his life reflects his values. *Simply Rich* is a testimony to the responsibility he feels toward God, his family, and his company. A must read." - (John Perkins, co-Founder, Christian Community Development Association; Founder of John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation)

"A great book by one of the wisest men I know. Rich's book gives ten invaluable phrases we ought to keep on the tips of our tongues." (Chuck Colson, founder, Prison Fellowship and bestselling author)

About the Author

Rich DeVos is an American businessman, cofounder of Amway, and owner of the Orlando Magic NBA basketball team. DeVos served in the United States Army Air Corps in World War II. He and his wife, Helen, have four children, sixteen grandchildren, and two great grandchildren and live in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Vero Beach, Florida.

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Simply Rich

CHAPTER ONE

Growing in the Right Atmosphere

MY GRANDFATHER'S GIFT FOR the art of selling was almost magical to me. I don't know if I was a born salesman, but I remember as a boy being fascinated by my grandfather and other men like him in my neighborhood. Their livelihoods in those hard times depended on their talents for selling.

My grandfather would let me ride with him in his Model T truck as it sputtered and rattled through our streets, filled with the fruits and vegetables he bought from farmers in the morning and then sold door-to-door. He was a people person; housewives who interrupted their cooking and cleaning, wiping their hands on aprons or dish towels as they came out of their houses at the sound of his truck horn, seemed to be attracted as much by his humor, easy demeanor, and conversation as by the color and freshness of his produce.

It was on that route that he gave me my first opportunity to try to make a sale. I earned just a few pennies, but that memorable achievement was a definitive moment in who I became as a man.

I can't dismiss my roots as a kid growing up during the Great Depression in the ordinary midwestern town of Grand Rapids, Michigan. From the standpoint of money and material possessions, we were barely scraping by. But I remember my boyhood years as a happy time of rich experiences. Life was friendly and cozy and easy. Even the need for hard work and sacrifice during those tough times made me stronger and taught me important life lessons. I was fortunate to grow up in the right atmosphere.

My foundation was built at home and the homes of friends, on the streets and playgrounds, in classrooms and church pews; from my parents and grandparents, teachers, and pastors. I learned how to run my own business as a paperboy. I experienced the rewards of that first sale from my grandfather peddling produce door-to-door. I wrote and delivered my first speech as senior class president in high school. My budding Christian faith was planted and nurtured during family devotions and in Sunday school. I was assured by the lasting bond and successful partnership of a loving mother and father. I gained a confidence and optimism from my father's constant encouragement, and first began to think of myself as a potential leader because of the kindness of a wise and thoughtful teacher.

The Grand Rapids where I was born on March 4, 1926, was nothing special as American cities go. Our claim to fame was being called "Furniture City" for the number of companies manufacturing home furnishings. I remember a postcard from my boyhood years: "Welcome to Grand Rapids, Furniture Capital of the World." The banks of the Grand River, which runs through Grand Rapids, were lined with brick furniture factories, their smokestacks printed with each manufacturer's name: Widdicomb, Imperial, American Seating, Baker, and others. In those days, electric streetcars rattled along the downtown main streets of Monroe Avenue and Fulton Street, the cars on the road were of the Model T era, and trains still rumbled across the trestle bridges over the river. Traveling a few miles east from downtown on Fulton Street, you came to my neighborhood: two-story, three-bedroom homes on quiet, treelined streets; a smattering of mom-and-pop retail stores; the nearby forested campus of Aquinas College; and plenty of parks to play in.

My family, like most others in Grand Rapids, was of Dutch descent. I can still hear the thick Dutch accents that were so common in my neighborhood: first-generation immigrants still speaking of family back in the "olt country," pronouncing j's as y's and s's as z's ("Yust put the dishes in the zink"). The Dutch who immigrated first to Holland, Michigan, and then found their way to greater opportunities in the nearby, much larger city of Grand Rapids, were hardworking, thrifty, practical, and strong in their Protestant Christian faith. They were lured to America not so much by economic necessity as by the promise of being free to be able to be whatever they could dream to be. Letters still survive of Dutch immigrants writing home to brag about the freedoms they enjoyed in America, which were unimaginable in the Netherlands of that time—where if you were born a baker's son, for example, you likely would always be a baker.

The Reverend Albertus Van Raalte, who in the mid-1800s founded Holland, Michigan (whose residents still celebrate their Dutch heritage annually by dressing in traditional clothing and wearing wooden shoes during Tulip Time), wrote in a letter to the Netherlands that most of the Dutch seeking work in Grand Rapids were unskilled and lacking in education. Fortunately, many of the men were able to learn to be skilled craftsmen in the furniture factories, and many of the young ladies were maids in rich people's homes. But there were many others who manifested another Dutch trait: having an entrepreneurial spirit. Three of the largest religious publishing houses in the nation were started by people of Dutch heritage in Grand Rapids. The Dutch established in Grand Rapids the headquarters of the Christian Reformed Church and founded Calvin College. The Hekman Biscuit Company started in Grand Rapids and later became the Keebler Company. And you may be familiar with a chain of Midwest superstores called Meijer and an international direct-

selling company called Amway, both founded in Grand Rapids by Dutch Americans. So I owe much to my Dutch heritage: a love of freedom, a solid work ethic, an entrepreneurial spirit, and strong faith.

I was born during the Roaring Twenties but have no memory of that volatile era when America was progressing rapidly to a seemingly ever-greater prosperity. My childhood memories are of the era known as the Great Depression. When I was ten years old, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to a second term and in his inaugural address he reminded Americans that he still saw a third of the nation ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed. A quarter of Americans—at a time when most homes depended on a single breadwinner—were out of work. My father was out of work, having lost his job as an electrician and needing to make ends meet with odd jobs for three years. We could no longer keep the house that he had built and where I'd spent several wonderful years of my boyhood.

My first house was on Helen Street, where I was born at home in the days when most families could not afford deliveries in a hospital. My second home was on Wallinwood Avenue, where I remember that polishing the floors was a satisfying chore because we were so proud to have hardwood instead of plain wood floors. The house had three bedrooms upstairs, and the only bathroom was downstairs, which was typical for houses in my neighborhood in those days.

When my father, Simon, lost his job, I had to move with him and my mother, Ethel, and my younger sister Bernice back to Helen Street into the upstairs rooms of my grandparents' house, where I remember sleeping under the attic rafters. My father rented out our Wallinwood house for twenty-five dollars a month. While the move was hard on my parents, I remember viewing it as kind of an adventure sleeping in an attic. It was also a fun way to spend more time with my grandparents. While I didn't realize it at the time, that experience gave me perspective and a much greater appreciation in my later years when I achieved a level of success that afforded me and my family a very comfortable lifestyle.

We lived there for about five of the worst years of the Depression. We were poor but no poorer than most of our neighbors. We didn't think it unusual to get our haircuts from a neighbor who had a barber chair in a bedroom of his house. Ten cents was a huge sum in those days. I remember a teenager coming to our door selling magazines and crying because he couldn't go home until he sold the last one. My father had to tell him honestly that we didn't have a dime in the house. But those weren't bad days for me as a boy. I felt safe and secure in our tight community. We lived in a Dutch-American ethnic neighborhood, so I also felt a sense of belonging. I grew up in a community on the eastern edge of the city called "the Brickyard," named for three brick factories that were built next to some clay hills that were mined to make bricks and tiles. The factories employed the hardworking new arrivals from the Netherlands, most of whom did not yet speak English but found a welcoming and familiar community in the Brickyard.

Our community was close not only because of our common Dutch ancestry and because so many extended families lived together, but also because of physical proximity. The houses were tall and skinny, mostly two stories and built very close to each other on small lots separated by very narrow driveways. The houses on narrow streets and alleys were so close together that neighbors could borrow from neighbors without ever leaving their houses. They just stretched a little and passed whatever was borrowed through a window.

In addition to my grandparents, my cousins lived in the neighborhood. I remember growing up with family discussions around the dinner table and plenty of playmates in the backyard. Few grandparents today live with their children and grandchildren, but I have fond memories of the benefits of their love and wisdom. Despite some struggles, I recall much more love than worry. I believe we are more a product of our homes than of any other single influence. Later in life, as a young father of four children, when I traced my development in the home and the influence of my parents, I remember being sobered by the enormity of the

responsibility. What seemed so natural and easy as a child takes on a whole different dimension as an adult when you finally grasp all the conscious effort it takes to create a home life with the right atmosphere.

Before today's diversions such as television, computers, and video games, we had to be inventive in making our own fun. Some of the best times I remember were spent inventing activities for my sisters and playmates to enjoy. The younger of my two sisters, Jan, still remembers me as a great fudge maker who created a lot of different types of flavors of fudge. I even rigged up a string system to pass fudge from our kitchen window to a window at our neighbor's house.

I loved sports, but with few resources, I also had to be creative to be able to play. I built my own basketball hoop, and I flooded a vacant lot in the winter to create a frozen pond where we went ice-skating. I remember the echo of Ping-Pong balls off the concrete floor and brick walls of our dark basement, where I taught my sisters to play on a table next to the old coal furnace. Jan still recalls my wicked left-handed spin.

I also have fond memories of playing baseball with my cousins in the street. In hard times, there were fewer cars on the road. Our ball would get so beat up that we'd have to wrap yarn around it and stick rags inside because we couldn't raise enough money in those lean times to buy a new one. Playing ball in the street could be hazardous to neighbors' windows, and we likely broke one or more. I do remember one irate neighbor woman—we must have been intruding on her property too much for her taste. She ran from her house wielding a butcher knife and yelled at us to get off her lawn.

The best part of the day was listening to shows on the radio like *The Green Hornet* and *The Lone Ranger*. On Sunday afternoons our family would work jigsaw puzzles while listening to a mystery program on the radio. When we finished one puzzle, we would swap it for another one from our relatives. I remember walking to a relative's house about two blocks away, carrying five boxes of puzzles and trading them for whatever puzzles they might have. My grandparents had a card table in their home that always was covered with puzzle pieces and a puzzle in progress. Everybody in the house would stop by and put a piece in until the puzzle was eventually finished. I also read books, but because of the expense and lack of new books, I had to settle for whatever was on the bookshelf in our house. These were usually older books, so by default I was reading *Tom Sawyer* and other classic literature. A real treat for me was the penny I got each Saturday, which I usually spent on candy.

As I reflect on the childhood activities that filled my life, I really think in many ways it was a blessing that circumstances forced me to be innovative in creating fun and engaging others in the process. It certainly helped shape my ability to think creatively and come up with new ideas, and it also helped develop my social skills. Kids today—including my own grandchildren—are too focused at times on computers and electronics and not enough on personal interaction.

I grew up even before the age of television, when parents in the evening read their books and newspapers, spent time with their hobbies, or took walks, and children played under the streetlights. Long before the existence of backyard patios and decks, people spent more time on front porches and conversed with neighbors passing by. Before air-conditioning, the sounds of neighbors talking, or their radios, wafted through the windows on the summer breeze. Those were days when you could still hear the clip-clop of horse-drawn wagons on the streets, the chugging of Model T cars, the calls of peddlers, the clinking and clanging of the milk and ice deliveries, and the clatter of coal tumbling down chutes into coal bins.

My parents instilled a strong work ethic early on in my life. One of my chores was to keep our furnace stoked with coal every morning and evening. Our coal deliveries were dumped onto our driveway, so I first had to transport loads of heavy, dusty, and dirty black coal into our basement and then open the creaking

cast-iron door and shovel coal onto the glowing embers in the furnace. The work kept us from freezing during those harsh Michigan winters, but our house still remained cold by today's standards of forced-air furnaces. My sister Bernice still remembers that house being so cold that we had to stand over a furnace register while getting ready for school. For heat we had coal, and for refrigeration we had ice. Neighbors would post signs in their windows with the number of pounds of ice they wanted delivered. I once joined a friend on his ice-delivery route and remember lugging fifty- and hundred-pound blocks of ice up stairs and wedging them into people's iceboxes after making room by rearranging their milk and food. Each icebox had a drip tray for the melting ice, and I recall many a time when I'd pitch in with my sisters to mop up a flooded kitchen floor because we forgot to empty the tray.

With my parents as role models, I accepted work as part of life and essential to a successful home and family. My sister Bernice may have remembered later in life hating to dust the rungs on all the dining room chairs, but I don't recall her ever as a young girl complaining or refusing to do simply what was expected of her as a contributing member of our family.

In our Dutch-American community, Sundays mostly meant going to church and Sunday school. Going to church was not optional. We were part of the Calvinist, Dutch Reformed tradition. We lived by a clear set of rules: honor your parents, set aside money for the Lord's work, give to others, be honest, work hard, and strive for good mental attitudes. We did not share a meal before first giving thanks for it in prayer, and when the meal was over we'd read a portion of scripture.

Nearly every business closed on Sundays. Alcohol was frowned upon, and dancing and even going to movies were suspect or considered by some of our church members a waste of time. The two main denominations in our community were the Reformed Church in America, introduced by Dutch immigrants in colonial times, and the Christian Reformed Church, which separated from the Reformed Church in America for reasons that few members still recall. Our family attended the Protestant Reformed Church, which broke away from the Christian Reformed Church, and is the strictest and most traditional branch of the three. Members typically attended both the Sunday morning and evening services in our big redbrick church.

I've known the feel of the wooden church pew from my earliest recollection. For a young, rambunctious boy who enjoyed being active in sports and playing outside with friends, sitting on hard church pews and trying to grasp a pastor's rather lengthy prayers and solemn sermons was not always easy. By the time I was old enough to ride to church with a friend in his car, we would occasionally grab a bulletin from the back of the church and leave without attending the service—later showing the bulletin to our parents as proof that we had been in church that morning.

While I did not become a professing member of the church until after I was an adult, I eventually came to appreciate why faith and church membership are important and taken seriously in our Dutch culture. Even as a boy, I never doubted that one's faith matters. I cannot remember a time when I did not believe in God. By the time I was in high school I saw a difference between people who were Christians and those who were not. I just sensed a general atmosphere among Christians—greater warmth, a surer sense of purpose and meaning, and a deeper bond among those who share a faith. I made up my mind that the Christian group was where I belonged.

Even as we enjoyed fun and games as kids, we could not escape the fact that we were living through tough times and that my father was out of work. He was taking whatever work he could find to keep the family going. During the week he sacked flour in a grocer's back room, and on Saturdays he sold socks and underwear in a men's store. But he never complained. My father was a very positive man. He believed in the power of positive thinking, and he preached it even though his own life wasn't as successful as he would

have hoped. He read the same authors I talk about today—Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie. He only had an eighth-grade education, but he was interested in learning through those positive-thinking books. He would always tell me, “You’re going to do great things. You’re going to do better than I’ve ever done. You’re going to go farther than I’ve ever gone. You’re going to see things I’ve never seen.”

Looking back, I think my father probably felt a lot of stress during the tough economic times of my childhood, even though he didn’t let it show. When I reflect on his amazing example of leading our family with such a positive and optimistic attitude, I hope in my younger years I somehow expressed my admiration and appreciation to him. Even more so, I hope I’ve been a similar example to my children. We shouldn’t try to live through our children and grandchildren, but to this day I try hard to play a role in helping my children and grandchildren fulfill their potential for successful, meaningful lives. I can truly now appreciate how my father wanted the same for me.

Having lost his job, my father encouraged me to go into business for myself. His experience was that he had no control over being employed or unemployed. His destiny was in the hands of his employer. More important, he convinced me that being a business owner was not an impossible dream. He always taught me to believe in the unlimited potential of individual drive and effort. Any time I’d say, “I can’t,” he’d stop me and say, “There’s no such word as can’t.” He impressed on me that “I can’t” is a self-defeating statement. “I can” is a statement of confidence and power. My father always reminded me, “You can do it!” Those words stuck with me and guided me for the rest of my life.

Likely because I was the oldest child and only son, my father showered me with attention, playing sports with me, reading to me, and sharing his hobbies. He influenced me in so many areas that later would have a tremendous impact on my life. He liked to “putter,” as we said in those days. I remember watching him in the basement, tinkering with anything mechanical that he could fix. He was also a visionary and an adventurer, a lover of new ideas and dreamer of places he would like to see. Because of the expense of travel, he could not go to the places he only saw on maps, but I do remember our family once piling into our only car for a road trip to Yellowstone National Park, which was a big adventure for us.

Dad was also ahead of his time in his interest in nutrition. He talked about organic gardening before most people even knew what that was, preached the benefits of a healthy diet, and allowed only whole-wheat bread at our table, which my sisters hated. His unique opinions and practices in the area of nutrition no doubt influenced my receptiveness to later becoming a Nutrilite distributor with my future business partner, Jay Van Andel.

I also was fortunate that my mother was a good influence on my life. She did not work outside the home and could always be there for my sisters and me. Unlike my father, my mother admitted that she was not very positive during those years. Yet she was a stabilizing force, ensuring a well-kept home and meals on the table, with a practicality and thrift that got us through those lean years. She was a warm, loving lady who was supportive and helpful. She taught me how to make fudge. She helped instill my work ethic, insisting that each child do household chores. You had to set or clear the table or do dishes. I usually ended up having to dry the dishes as my mother washed them, and it was our routine that allowed us to spend time together each evening and chat—something I think is often lacking in today’s culture.

She also was clever in making the most of the little we had. For example, every year she would rearrange the furniture; because we couldn’t afford new furniture, rearranging the furniture at least gave a different look to the living room and the appearance of something new. She also was instrumental in my education about money. She gave me my first “penny bank” to save coins I earned doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. I dropped as much as I could spare into that cast-iron bank, and once a month my mother would walk with me

to the bank to make a deposit into my own savings account.

Needing to earn money during these hard times, I started delivering newspapers—which essentially was my first business, when I think about it. Delivering the Grand Rapids Press taught me responsibility, accountability, and all the principles of the rewards of hard work. Every day a bundle of papers was dropped near my house for the area paperboys. I counted the number of papers needed for my route and sat along the street with the other paperboys, folding paper and sticking them into the big cloth bag that I strapped across my shoulder. I had thirty to forty customers and learned to serve them well. I walked my route for several months, but I quickly set a goal to save enough money to buy a used bike, a black Schwinn racer, to make my job easier and the delivery process more efficient. I still remember the thrill of buying that bike as a result of a goal I set and the money I earned and saved—another valuable lesson I’ve carried with me my entire life about the rewards of work. I also perfected throwing papers from my bike so they hit the porch, and occasionally getting off my bike and retrieving any that missed and landed in the bushes. My excellent service paid off each Christmas when many of my customers would give me an extra twenty-five or fifty cents or, on rare occasions, even a dollar.

Every Saturday morning I had to go to each house and collect their subscription money. After each customer paid me I’d punch the little card they hung on a nail by their door. This first business venture taught me all the basics—I learned that I had to go out and get business, how to take good care of my customers, and how to collect money and make change.

The job also gave me a new sense of freedom and mobility—not to mention the means to earn a little money. I delivered papers to some of the nicer homes in my area, but I never felt I was a “have-not” in the world of “haves” and never resented or was jealous of these customers. I could see they lived better than my family, but instead of envying them I remember having the attitude that what they had, I, one day, could get. I believed that by working hard I could get where they were someday.

The other key introduction to the world of business was through one of my grandfathers, who gave me the thrill of my first sale. Both my grandfathers lived in our neighborhood, and both were businessmen.

My grandpa DeVos owned a little store that sold groceries, a few dry goods, and household items and clothing that he ordered for customers from a catalog. He also sold penny candy from a big counter at the front of the store. The store was right across from a school playground, and I remember the schoolkids coming in to buy candy from my grandfather, carefully scanning the array of colorful choices behind the glass before deciding how to get the most for their one or two pennies.

He also lived above the store, so if customers came in when he was having lunch or occupied elsewhere, he would hear the doorbell ring. If he was praying before a meal and a customer came in, he would stop midsentence and yell, “Yust a minute!” finish his prayer, and then go downstairs to wait on the customer. He also drove a horse and buggy through the neighborhoods, taking and delivering orders.

My mother’s father, Grandpa Dekker, was an old-fashioned “huckster,” a term that comes from an old Dutch word meaning “to peddle.” He drove his Model T truck to the public market each morning and bought vegetables that he then sold door-to-door to customers along his neighborhood route. He arrived at each home, rang a bell or honked the horn or called out, “Potatoes, tomatoes, onions, carrots . . . ,” and the housewives would come out of their homes to buy his produce.

That batch of onions left over after my grandfather finished his route was my first sale, but it was just the beginning. After that, whenever my grandfather had leftover vegetables, I sold them. It took salesmanship

and persistence, but I loved it. Those experiences and lessons from my paper route and household chores were the foundation for becoming, at a young age, a diligent worker with a sense of responsibility, an eye toward detail, and an appreciation for pleasing customers. When I was just fourteen, I got a job at a neighborhood gas station. In those days, drivers relied on their small, nearby gas stations, typically owned by a neighbor with mechanical skills. Most of these gas stations had two pumps out front and a single stall for tuning up and repairing cars. Many attendants wore uniforms, with caps like those worn by police officers and their shirt collars fastened with bow ties. In addition to pumping gas, washing the windshield, and checking the oil and water, these stations provided other car-care services, and I got a taste of them all.

I worked all day on Saturdays just washing cars. This was before the days of car washes and heated garages, so customers relied on their gas station to wash their cars in the winter. Washes cost a dollar, and my cut for each car was fifty cents—so even in winter, I bundled up each Saturday morning and washed as many cars as possible. Many roads were unpaved, and cars had a lot of dirt around the windows and door frames. I wiped everything clean and built a reputation for thorough car washing. Using what I learned from my father, I also helped the mechanic find car parts and do simple repairs like replacing generators.

I became so dependable that the owner put me in charge of running the station when he had to be out of town—even though I couldn't have been more than fourteen years old. That was a real confidence booster, to know that people trusted me at that level. I learned at a young age what it meant to be responsible for a business, another important lesson that would serve me well in life.

I also was still a teenager when I got an after-school job as a salesman in a men's clothing store. I was really doing an adult's work, but I liked the opportunity to deal with customers in a more professional setting, and I discovered I also was pretty good at sales. I would have rather played sports after school like many of my friends, but I needed money to pay my parents for room and board and because each family member was expected to help put bread on the table.

Our high school baseball coach once said to me, "I see you're a lefty. Would you like to play ball?"

I said, "I'd like to, but I can't. I go to work every day after school, so I can't practice."

LIFE TOOK A QUICK turn on an unusually warm Sunday afternoon in early December 1941. I was peddling my Schwinn bicycle when a neighbor boy called to me from down the street, "Did you hear the news?"

I said, "What news?"

And he said, "We're at war! The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor!"

That's how I found out about the war on December 7. Of course, from then on we all listened to our radios and picked up from the newspaper what was going on in the war. That was always the news of the day. Lowell Thomas became famous as a reporter for his fifteen-minute news broadcast every evening on the radio and his narration of movie theater newsreels. I'll never forget his distinctive, melodic voice, which gave each story an added air of urgency and excitement and a sense of romance about faraway places that many Americans had never heard of before the war. World War II created new shortages in addition to all we had been sacrificing because of the Depression. No cars were manufactured after the 1941 models came out. Materials ranging from paper and rubber to metal and food were in short supply because so much was needed for the war effort. We planted Victory Gardens so farm crops could go to the war effort and used ration stamps for groceries and gasoline. People did a lot of canning of the fruits and vegetables they grew in

their gardens. I remember helping my mother and the glass jars of tomatoes, pickles, and other canned goods that lined the wooden shelves in our fruit cellar. The war first really hit home in our neighborhood when a doctor who lived near us lost a son who had gone overseas to fight as a Marine gunner.

I was starting high school, which was another turning point involving lessons of hard work, accountability, and sound decisions. When I was a fifteen-year-old freshman, my parents sent me to a small Christian high school in our city. Like most teenagers, I never appreciated that a private school costs money and that my parents had to sacrifice to pay my tuition. I just goofed off, flirted with girls, and paid little attention to homework and grades. Somehow I managed not to flunk any classes that first year. My Latin teacher gave me a barely passing grade—just to keep me from taking her class over again! At the end of the academic year, my father said, “If you’re just going to fool around, I’m not going to pay all that extra money to keep you in a private school. You can goof off in a public school, and it won’t cost me anything.”

So the following year he sent me to Davis Tech to learn to be an electrician. At this trade school I was labeled as “not college bound.” I was miserable that whole year. It was a wake-up call about all I’d lost by goofing off in school. I told my dad that I wanted to go back to the Christian high school.

He said, “Who will pay for it?”

And I said, “I will.”

I found odd jobs to earn the money, and the second time around at Grand Rapids Christian High School I was a better student. I learned that you appreciate what you earn much more than what is given you. I also learned that decisions have consequences. My decision to goof off in school had negative consequences, and my decision to return to Christian High had positive consequences that followed me the rest of my life.

Grand Rapids Christian High also was where I began to learn and develop leadership skills that would enhance my success in business. Even though work prevented me from playing sports, I found another outlet. Our school had no organized cheerleading squad at basketball games, so I decided to lead cheers. I just stood courtside and started yelling cheers and doing cartwheels the length of the basketball court to stir up the crowd. At that point I was starting to wear apparel from my job at the clothing store and I remember doing some of my cheers in a suit and tie. My antics must have really put a strain on the seams of my clothes, because one time, in front of the whole student body, I did a cartwheel and ripped the seat of my pants. I walked red-faced and backward off the court. But I didn’t let that embarrassment stop me.

I loved getting the crowds and the team fired up. Cheerleading has carried over to the rest of my life. I still refer to myself as a “cheerleader” because I keep encouraging others to have confidence and to use their talents to follow their dreams. It’s been one of the most important reasons for my success and my helping others succeed.

Unfortunately, I had less success in the classroom than on the gym floor. Getting up and motivating people, making friends, and socializing suited my personality much more than sitting in class. While my grades were better, they were still somewhat marginal, and I had no goals. Somewhere in the back of my mind was a fuzzy notion of one day being a business owner, but I had no clear idea of when and how that might happen. I don’t remember how my name got on the ballot, but for some reason I was in contention for senior class president. I had been away at Davis Tech for a year and thought I’d been forgotten, but maybe my fame as a cheerleader and ability to make friends boosted my popularity. Even some of my teachers were pulling for me to win. One day our teacher left the classroom for a few minutes, returned, and said to me, “You won! I was so excited and hoping you would win that I had to leave and go find out.”

As class president, I was expected to speak at our commencement ceremony. America had just survived the Great Depression and was fighting against the Nazis and Japanese in World War II to protect and preserve our American way of life. I eventually would go on to speak to crowds of thousands about the greatness of America—its opportunities superior to any other country in the world. Even at this young age, I was filled with hope and optimism. I focused my commencement speech on the strength of our country and the optimistic outlook for its future.

I titled my speech “What Does the Future Hold for the Class of 1944?” My father helped me rehearse in front of a mirror, coaching me on diction, gestures, where to pause, and which words to emphasize. I dedicated myself to delivering a speech that I hoped would inspire my classmates who, along with me, were commencing new lives. Many would be joining the fight for freedom in Europe and the South Pacific. I delivered the speech at the Coldbrook Christian Reformed Church in downtown Grand Rapids. I don’t recall being nervous, but I remember thinking my delivery was good and recall the crowd applauding. After the speech, a mother in the audience even told me, “You were a lot better than the preacher.” This was high praise in our Christian community, where the only oratory most people experienced was a Sunday sermon.

One more experience in high school would forever change my life and the way I saw myself. When I graduated, my gentle, scholarly Bible teacher, Dr. Leonard Greenway, wrote a line in my yearbook that I never forgot—just one simple line of encouragement: “To a clean-cut young man with talents for leadership in God’s kingdom.” His line was simple but a great source of inspiration to a young man who was not a good student and had been told he was not college material. But a teacher whom I admired had seen me as a leader! Wow! I’d never thought of myself in that way before.

Years later I met Dr. Greenway again at a high school reunion. I was emceeding the event, and I sort of put him on the spot by asking him in front of my classmates if he remembered what he had written in my yearbook. He stood up and repeated the line perfectly after all those years. I was impressed. He recognized something in me that he must have sensed I had not yet seen in myself. He was wise enough to understand the power of a positive line of encouragement in helping shape a young person’s future. To this day I remember his kindness, and in tribute to him and what he did for me, I continue to try to encourage others with the power of positive phrases.

So, I was blessed to grow up in the right atmosphere. I had the love and encouragement of a close family, the positive attitude of my father, and the selling and business examples of my grandfathers. I inherited the best traits of the Dutch: their faith, thrift, practical lifestyle, work ethic, and appreciation of freedom and opportunity. I honed my talents for speaking and leadership as senior class president. My faith was nurtured and strengthened in my church and at Christian High. I learned the value and rewards of work as a paperboy and from the odd jobs I did to pay my school tuition. Even in the depths of the Great Depression, I was surrounded by people of persistence and hope. I was encouraged by supportive teachers. And I was a cheerleader, an optimistic and enthusiastic role I continue to play today.

After I became known as a motivational speaker, one of my key speeches was “The Three A’s: Action, Attitude, and Atmosphere.” Too many people fail to act because they are frozen by fear and doubt. But nothing happens until we act. Our actions stem from a positive attitude. And a positive attitude is developed when we are in, or choose to put ourselves in, the right atmosphere. My atmosphere was the love of my close-knit family and community, which, through strong faith and hard work, found happiness despite the Great Depression and held on tightly to hope for a better tomorrow. Whether with my own children, my NBA Orlando Magic players, or millions of Amway distributors worldwide, I continue to emphasize the necessity of the right atmosphere. If you are surrounded by friends who are negative, leave and find positive friends. Stay away from places and situations with potential for negative behavior and incidents. If a negative

atmosphere pervades where you live or work, go elsewhere. Seek out friends, business associates, and mentors with positive attitudes who share your goals and best interests.

A positive atmosphere nurtures a positive attitude, which is required to take positive action. Because of my atmosphere, I had a tailwind while still a high school student and was confident of one day achieving my stated goals. But as influential and important as all my childhood experiences were in shaping my future, nothing would be as significant as one person I would meet before I graduated from high school, and who would be instrumental in changing my life in ways I never could have dreamed. And it all started with a simple ride to school.

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