

# *The Courage to Serve*



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# *The Courage to Serve*

by David A. Kelly  
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I stood there frozen with fear. I was about to go out in front of an audience that was not willing to sit still. They squirmed. They were talking amongst themselves. They were ready for a show and I was going to have to give it to them.

Why, oh why, did I agree to this? Was I crazy? Did I have a death wish? I was going to have to keep an audience of 25 entertained for up to half an hour. I wasn't sure I could do it.

Did I bring the right materials?

Would my voice hold out?

Would they like me?

"And now," I heard from inside the room, "boys and girls, please welcome Mr. Kelly!"

I walked around the corner to face that most volatile and hostile of all audiences.

Five-year-olds.

I didn't feel like I had much on my side. My giant stature caused audible gasps from the tiny people seated criss-cross applesauce on the rug depicting a map of the United States. As I strode to the front of the room, to the ubiquitous Reader Chair, my heart skipped a few beats. I was armed only with my shaky smile and a series of Dr. Seuss

books. I cleared my throat.

“Hi, kids,” I said. “I am Mr. Kelly from the Galleria Atlanta Kiwanis Club and I am here to read to you today. Does anyone like Dr. Seuss?”

A bunch of hands went up, some went back down, then up again, but it seemed like Dr. Seuss was going to be a good bet. Some hands remained up.

I pointed to a little girl on the front row, “Yes, sweetie, do you have a question?”

“I like Cat in the Hat” she said and she smiled a grin, minus some of her front teeth.

“Uh, okay, thank you for that. Does anyone else have a question?”

A little boy on the front row wearing a Deion Sanders #21 Falcons jersey had his hand up and I pointed at him. “We have three cats,” he announced proudly, putting his hand down.

I looked over at the teacher who was sitting in her desk with her head in her hands, in some sort of self-induced coma or hypnotic state, and I realized I was on my own.

“Well, I could keep taking questions, but I only have a half an hour with you and I brought three books and I want to make sure I have time to read them all. So, let’s hold all of the questions until I am done reading the first book and we’ll see how it goes,” I said.

By this time, the flop sweat was pouring off of me, but the kids agreed and I started.

“I am Sam”. Turn the page. “I am Sam”.

Next page, audience at rapt attention. “Sam I am”

“That Sam I am, that Sam I am, I do not like that Sam I am.”

I was settling into the same kind of groove that I had when I read to my daughter, Amanda, who was also five. I got several pages into the book: “I would not eat them here or there, I would not eat them...”

And the whole crowd shouted: “ANYWHERE!”

“I do not like Green Eggs and Ham, I do not like them...”

And again they got ahead of me... “Sam I am.”

We had a great time reading further about Sam, I am, green eggs, and ham. And thus began my commitment to read to kids sixteen years ago, a commitment that continues to this day.

I now read once per month to two first grade classes at an at-risk elementary school in Atlanta. While this chapter is titled “The Courage to Serve” there is no courage needed, just compassion and caring. A lot of these kids don’t have a positive male role model present in the home. If there is a male present, he may not be a positive influence. The kids see me, a man, come into their school and I am nicely-dressed, clean-shaven, smelling of nothing stronger than Crest, and I treat their teacher, usually a woman, with respect and attention. And I *want* to be there with them, to read to them, to listen to them go off on tangents unrelated to the story, to hear about how they get home at 3 pm and they have to lock all of the doors and stay inside because an adult will not be home until 6 pm. All this at 5 and 6 years of age!

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I learned a long time ago that opportunities to serve are all around us. As a child in the 1960s, I saw my father throw beer cans and cigarette butts out of the car window as he was going down the highway. I knew that was wrong. Then I saw a television ad with an Indian chief (this was before it was politically incorrect to call them “Indians”) looking at a pile of garbage and litter on the highway as a tear rolled down his cheek. I decided that I would help by picking up trash thrown out along the road by others. I was seven. I had found a passion in my life: community service.

As I got older, my service took on new avenues. I got involved in the Boy Scouts as a Cub Scout and my mom was the den mother. She was an example for me. Leading a group of small boys through the various requirements for badges, I got to see the heart of a servant.

I remember going to a nursing home at Christmas time in my Cub Scout uniform and singing carols for the residents. Not all of the residents were able to come down to hear us. As we were leaving, we had to walk past some of the residents’ rooms. I recall one elderly gentleman sitting in his room, in a chair near the doorway. His bald head was covered with bumps, kind of like pimples but not exactly, and he had his face in his hands. I was only eight or nine at the time, yet I couldn’t help but feel like I should say something to him. Maybe reach out and give him a hug. Try to make his life a little bit better.

I did nothing.

I was afraid.

Here was a man, clearly hurting, and I sensed it. Yet, I did nothing. “What if he wants to be left alone?” I asked myself. “Maybe he doesn’t like singing”, I thought. I will never know, because I never reached outside of myself and opened myself up to the opportunity of service.

What about you? Have you ever seen an opportunity to serve and avoided it? If you didn't avoid it, did you ever ignore it? Was it out of fear? Service is a zero-sum game after all. You put a piece of yourself out there to help someone else and they may reject your overture, or worse yet, take advantage of you. You rarely get a positive return from your service efforts, so why bother?

We should bother because we are called to serve. Consider the earliest stories of human history in the Bible. God created Eve so that Adam could have a companion, someone to serve him. OK, not a good example from a feminist perspective, but go with me on that. Noah responded to God's call to build an ark in order to save humankind. All were welcome, few came. Abraham was so intent on serving his God that he was willing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, until God showed him there was a better way. These examples continue on and on throughout the Bible and human history and culminate with the ultimate act of service as Jesus told his followers, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to offer His life as a sacrifice for many." (Mark 10:45)

Service is innate within our being. So, why is it such a hard thing to do? Because society is telling us to "Just Do It" and get ours. We have many demands on our time and it is hard to go to those places where people need to be served. Oh really? Here's one for you: how about the ground at your feet?

I spoke at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in the Fall of 2007 in New London, Connecticut. After the program, one of the cadets offered to take me on a tour of the facility. She was Second Class Cadet (equivalent to a college junior) Tory Stevens. I had plenty of time before my flight and I love to see college campuses, so I quickly agreed. I had a taste of the campus the night before as I stayed in the guest quarters usually reserved for people

like Admirals, Congressmen, and people way more important than me!

The tour included the Coast Guard museum with some great artifacts like mastheads, navigation devices, and more. I saw a monument to Douglas Munro, the only Coast Guard Medal of Honor recipient, and the man for whom the building I had stayed in was named. We also visited the Administration building, which, in the center of it, has an actual deck with a ship's wheel. Above the deck is inscribed the honor code of the academy: "Who lives here reveres honor, honors duty." I also got to see some of the barracks, classrooms, and other unique areas of the facility.

As we went on the tour, Tory would periodically stop and almost ritualistically, as if at attention, reach down and pick up pieces of garbage and put them in her pocket. After she had done this several times, I finally asked her if this was something that was expected of her as a cadet, something that was part of the honor code. "Oh no," was her answer, "I have always done this. I figure if I pick up at least one piece of garbage per day, then that means that there will be 365 less pieces of garbage in the world every year."

Wow! Is that an example of a servant or what? She has since graduated from the Academy, served her first two-year stint with the U.S. Coast Guard and recently re-upped for a second stint. This is someone who really knows what service to others is all about.

I am not asking you to change your life by enlisting in one of the armed services. But I am asking you to have the courage to serve on a daily basis. I recently went to lunch with my wife and daughter. As we were getting out of our car in the shopping center, I noticed a woman about thirty feet from my wife's side of the car get out of her vehicle and set a Styrofoam soda cup on the ground. She then



proceeded into the store for her shopping, *walking right past a garbage can!* I started to lose it, but my wife calmly went over, picked up the cup, gingerly took it to the garbage, and disposed of it. No muss, no fuss. She did not confront the woman, she did not call her any of the names running through my head, and most importantly, she did not ignore the opportunity to serve. She simply had the courage to do what was right, without making a big deal out of it.

So, what can you do? Will you make a commitment to be like Tory Stevens or my wife? Can you serve in quiet? When you see a need, will you step up? If you can do that once every day for a year, how much better will the world be? Call it the Servant 365 Project. There are a few things to know, however. There is no website or blog for this, no forms to fill out or dues to pay, and probably very little glory for you, unless you can get some love on Facebook. But, you will feel different and the example you set may influence someone else to do something even bigger.

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The courage to serve requires you to step outside of yourself. Just a little. And sometimes just a little more. There will also be times when you have to separate yourself from the crowd. As I mentioned earlier, I am a member of a Kiwanis Club, which is a civic group dedicated to community service. A few years ago, I attended the Kiwanis International Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. Thousands of Kiwanis members from all over the world were in attendance. I have lots of Kiwanis friends from all over and it was fun to get together with them at this event.

One day, after a busy morning of Kiwanis business, workshops, and activities, I joined with a group of my friends to go to lunch. It was a weekday, so downtown Indianapolis was pretty busy. The restaurant my friends wanted to go to was about 10 blocks away. Although Indianapolis

has a series of skywalks to get through downtown, we decided to go “old school” and walk along the streets. Our little group included people from Arizona, Montana, Indiana, Georgia, and Ohio. As you might expect from a group of long-time friends, we were chatting and cutting up as we made our way through downtown, from traffic light to traffic light.

A couple of blocks into our journey, we came across an older couple, who we could tell were also in town for the Kiwanis Convention. The husband was in a wheelchair, pushing himself backwards by shuffling his feet along the sidewalk. He was talking with his wife, who walked alongside of him, when he looked up and saw us. He recognized the Arizona folks from our group because that was where he and his wife lived. Greetings and introductions were made and it turned out that they were meeting people at the same restaurant to which we were heading. Our newly expanded group continued to move through downtown Indianapolis.

It very quickly struck me that no one was offering to assist the gentleman in the wheelchair. Surely someone could help him by pushing his chair? But then I hesitated. I just met this man. Maybe he is very independent and does not want anyone to push him. After all, his wife was walking alongside of him. If she was not helping him, maybe no one else was supposed to, either. None of my friends, who knew this man better than I, were helping. Maybe I shouldn't offer.

I used to live in Indianapolis, so I knew that we still had seven or eight blocks to go and I just could not stand by and not offer to help this man get to his destination. If I was going to be rebuffed, so be it. At least I would know that I tried to do the right thing. At the next red light, we all had to stop for traffic. I leaned forward. “Sir,” I said, “we still have seven or eight blocks to go. Would you like me to push your chair for you?”

The response seemed to come in slow motion. Did I offend him? Had I broken some sort of etiquette?

But he said, “That would be great! My legs are really getting tired and that is a long way to go.”

He turned his chair around and I positioned myself behind him with my hands on the push grips. We chatted along the way about Kiwanis and our various service experiences. The rest of the group followed along, talking about whatever was on their minds. I never thought that I was doing anything special—just what was right.

When we got to the restaurant, I shook the man’s hand and everyone said goodbye to him and his wife as they met their friends. Then came the most unexpected of reactions: my friends all started thanking me for pushing the man’s chair and patting me on the back. I did not do it for recognition and, in fact, what I really wanted to say was, “Why didn’t one of you step up and offer to push his chair? Some of you actually know the guy, yet it took a total stranger to do the right thing. Oh and by the way, we are members of a community service organization!”

The courage to serve does not mean you have to put yourself in harm’s way. Just be willing to put yourself in “good’s way” and good will come to you! Full disclosure time—I did let my friends buy my lunch that day, but I swear, my intent to serve was pure!

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The courage to serve is also about developing a lifetime commitment to serving others. That can start no matter where you live, what stage of life you are experiencing, and no matter how old (or young!) you are. I am proud that both of my daughters got involved in serving others at a young age. My oldest daughter, Amanda, started going

to service projects with my wife, Dia, and me when she was just four years old. The first one that I remember was an information fair that our local children's hospital was putting on at the local mall. Dia and Amanda helped pass out information at one of the tables in the center of the mall. They got volunteer t-shirts! Amanda was very excited about that.

She went with us here and there as we did community service with our Kiwanis club and with the college students in Circle K (a collegiate service organization affiliated with Kiwanis for which my wife and I volunteered on the state-wide level). When she was seven, she started the "Secret Service Club" at her elementary school. She was the Chief Executive Officer. She and her friends would clean up the playground and other areas of the school—but they did it in secret because they did not want anyone else to know what they were doing. I never really understood why they wanted to serve in secret, but the principal learned of their work and she had a video made of the club and showed it to all of the students in school.

Amanda continued her involvement in service with us and then joined a service club in middle school that did clean-ups, bake sales, and nursing home visitations. You can imagine how proud I was of her for doing the latter, given my earlier experience (and previous hesitation) to serve in a similar situation. She joined her high school's Key Club (also sponsored by Kiwanis) and was involved in a number of projects. She also served on the state (district) board her sophomore and senior years and helped to raise thousands of dollars for the Georgia Sheriffs' Youth Homes.

During her junior year of high school, she brought up the idea of going on a mission trip with our church. I asked her if she had any idea of where she would like to go. She said she thought St. Lucia, in the eastern Caribbean, would be an interesting place that would allow her to use

some of the Spanish she had learned in school. I was eager to go on this trip with her, so I made the arrangements. We had a great time putting on a leadership retreat for the island's youth. The focus was on "The Heart of a Servant" and Amanda helped to facilitate a group of seven Lucian students.

During one of the small group sessions the students were asked to name someone who exemplified service that they personally knew. My heart soared when I overheard Amanda say, "My dad." It is really cool when you can set a positive example and have someone recognize it.

Oh, by the way, Spanish is not one of the languages spoken on St. Lucia! I guess we were just meant to be there. We have been back four times since and have a continuing commitment to support and participate in the St. Lucia mission efforts. I believe that Amanda is realizing the lifetime commitment to serving others.

My other daughter, Katie, has also learned servant leadership from my wife and me. From the time she was only a few weeks old, she started attending Kiwanis meetings with us. This lasted until she went into Pre-K at the age of 4. The members of our club joked that Katie had a better attendance record than most of them!

Katie has literally been around community service all of her life. When Katie was two, Dia wanted to find ways to involve Katie in even more service opportunities. Enter Meals on Wheels at our church. The county's senior services department takes care of this most of the year, but they are closed on holidays so our church takes over several meal routes when those days fall on a week day. Katie has helped cook food, prepare plates, and deliver meals to grateful seniors. One day, after knocking on the door, shouting "Meals on Wheels", and handing over the meal, she got a solid kiss on the cheek and an orange from a sweet Russian woman who didn't speak a lick of Eng-

lish. While Katie didn't know what to make of this complete stranger's show of affection, I am sure the experience will stick with her for many years to come.

Katie has been involved in a lot of service projects including making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless, local outreach efforts to apartment complexes, and "Souls for Soles". The latter program is about collecting gently used shoes for needy individuals. When Katie heard about it, she drew a flyer to be distributed to our neighbors asking for their gently-used shoes. She collected 50 pairs, the second most of any one amongst the kids in our church!

Seeing my daughters have a commitment to service is gratifying as a parent. But, to know that they care about others and are willing to serve shows me the character they have as individuals. You can develop this level of character as well by showing your concern and interest in other people. Plus, it can benefit you in other ways. My wife told me after we started dating that she always thought she would marry someone she met in Kiwanis, because as a member dedicated to service, that told her a lot about who I was.

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Service to others can grow and develop into servant leadership. I believe, like the modern day leaders of this movement, that true leadership emanates from serving others. If you come to leadership in any other way, then you are coming from a point of "me first" rather than "others first". As a servant leader, you put yourself out there, maybe getting out of your comfort zone, and demonstrate that you are willing to put the team or the organization first. In doing so, you rise to a level of responsibility and leadership because people trust you and they see within you the heart of a servant.

This leads you to the most courageous thing of all: becoming a leader. The courage to serve includes leading others. Do you have the courage to take on a leadership role? Is this something you want? Is it something that is being thrust upon you? Ready or not, here are five tips to help you become a better leader and to have the courage to serve others:

1. **Get outside of your comfort zone.** Toss aside your own ego and concerns about what people will think about you and get involved. It was a little scary reading to those kindergarteners for the first time, but I am so glad that I did it. I always come away from my reading time feeling energized, renewed, and excited about serving others.

Don't concern yourself with being rejected. Remember the man that I did not reach out to in the nursing home? What is the worst that would have happened had I said hello or even hugged him? He may have pulled away or I suppose he could have smacked me. It would have been worth the effort because decades later I can still remember how I felt doing nothing. But when I think about pushing the wheelchair in Indianapolis, I feel glad that I made a little bit of a difference in someone's life, even for just a few moments.

Reaching out to someone else to show that you care may be just what they (and you) needed.

2. **Little things mean a lot.** Small efforts at service can make such a huge difference to other people, like the cadet picking up trash, my wife disposing of the soda cup, and the insurance company commercial that shows a positive chain reaction of small acts of service. This makes me think of a cold night in 2004, three days before Christmas, when we were woken up by a fervent knock on our front door at four in the morning.

As I reached the door, I looked out the side window and there stood a frantic police officer yelling at me.

“FIRE!” he shouted.

I thought he meant our house was on fire and I yelled to Dia to get out of the house and ran into Katie’s room to grab her. In a moment of clarity, I realized that the front of the house was not on fire nor did I remember seeing anything as I ran through the house. I looked out of the front window and just at the end of my driveway, maybe 20 yards away, two of my neighbor’s homes -- connected patio homes located on a circle -- were engulfed in flames.

We ran outside and away from the house to where our other neighbors were gathered. In those few short moments, two more homes had gone ablaze. I thought for certain the whole circle was going to burn down in a chain-reaction fire that would move too quickly for the firefighters. A police officer offered his warm car to me, my wife and daughter, and two single women who had been watching their homes burn to the ground. As we were sitting in the car, I didn’t know what to do amongst the crying and shaking, so I asked everyone to hold hands. We prayed for safety for the firefighters, for the remaining homes, for the pets of one of the ladies, and for restoration of their lives just as soon as possible. I didn’t know what their faith was or if they even prayed, but it was something that I could offer to do. That seemed to calm everyone down and we continued to hold hands.

We were able to see that the firefighters had contained the blaze to four homes and by the light of the fire, it was apparent that the houses were a total loss. The officer came to the car and told us that clearance had been given for us to go inside one of the homes con-



sidered to be safe and closer to the entrance of the circle. As we piled out, he gave Katie a fuzzy white stuffed bear, one of the trauma animals many police officers carry around that are donated through many organizations. Katie and Dia named it “Lemke Bear” because it had been given to her by Officer Lemke.

Our neighbor Phil was the one who had opened up his home to us. His sister had been visiting him for the holidays and she is a Catholic nun! Yup, his sister is a Sister, and that became her name: “Sister Sister”. Phil cooked up eggs and waffles and anything else he could find. Dia had been serving as our homeowners’ association president and she decided to stay outside to provide any help requested by the police or firefighters and deal with the media who had arrived to cover the early morning blaze. She was particularly concerned about protecting the affected homeowners so they wouldn’t have to deal with cameras in their faces at such a traumatic moment.

I stayed inside with Katie and the others. There were a couple of other young kids on the circle, none of whom lived in the devastated homes. The children were running around as other homeowners were talking, comforting the victims, and detailing how they had all been roused from sleep. It was then that I noticed Mr. Baird, who was in his mid-70’s, sitting by himself. Mr. and Mrs. Baird had moved into what was supposed to be their retirement home just seven months earlier and they lived in the house to the right of the home that ultimately was determined to be the starting point of the fire. Theirs was the second house to catch on fire. Mrs. Baird was in the kitchen talking with some of the other neighbors. She was in pretty good spirits considering the nights’ events, expressing thanks that no one was hurt. But Mr. Baird just sat in a chair by himself staring into space with a look of total devastation on his face.

I felt bad for him. I couldn't think of any words that could possibly ease his pain. I didn't want to leave him by himself, but didn't know what to do. Finally, with some trepidation, I walked over and sat in the chair next to him. He looked over at me with his sullen eyes and I reached out and held his hand. He looked down at our hands and started to tear up. I squeezed his hand in a way that let him know I was there for him and he was not alone in this. His sadness appeared to turn into some relief and I think he relaxed for the first time since having to flee his home.

No words were exchanged. None were needed.

By 9 am the fire was basically out. There was still some smoldering in the wreckage of the homes, but not enough to concern the fire department. About that time, two of the pastors from our church showed up. They had just been at our Kiwanis Club's holiday breakfast meeting because Dia and I had previously arranged for them to give the annual holiday message. Prior to the meeting, Dia was able to reach one of them by cell phone to let them know what was going on and told them to go on to the Kiwanis breakfast. They had tried to get to us in the pre-dawn hours, but the authorities were not letting anyone near our subdivision. At the breakfast, they led the Kiwanians in prayer for our neighborhood and then got to us as quickly as they could after the meeting. They prayed with us and several neighbors and offered the assistance of the church in any way that was needed.

Dia took the lead in dealing with all of the offers for help. Several local restaurants offered food and gift cards for the victims. She collected and distributed them. Our church agreed to accept donations (some people need tax deductibility to open up their check-books) and to take up a special collection on Christ-

mas Eve. The community really turned out and provided over \$25,000 in assistance which helped take care of our neighbors' immediate needs and insurance deductibles.

The homes were eventually rebuilt. The two single ladies that lost their homes moved away, but the others stayed. Mrs. Baird even became a member of our church. She told Dia shortly after the fire that my small gesture meant so much to her husband.

As I relate this story, I can see many little things that ended up meaning a lot:

- A police officer allowed some displaced, bare-foot people in pajamas sit in his warm car
- People held hands and prayed
- Someone donated a stuffed bear to the police department...
- ...which Officer Lemke ultimately offered to my daughter
- Our neighbor Phil opened up his home and refrigerator
- Dia took the lead with the media and the authorities
- I held Mr. Baird's hand
- Our pastors did not give up on trying to get to us and offered prayer for us
- Our church offered its professional staff to help with finances and counseling services
- Our neighbors, the business community and people in the area offered food, money, clothes, and services to help the victims

Most of these small acts of service, and many more not mentioned, were done without much thought or planning. But they certainly made a big difference in a very traumatic situation. When you make servant-hood a natural part of who you are, then servant lead-

ership comes easily.

3. **Begin with the baby steps.** You may want to save the world, but don't get overwhelmed. While it is important for you to make community service a habit, start out with small efforts that do not require a lot of planning or even a lot of people to complete. There are many things you can do such as reading to elementary school kids, tutoring, picking up trash, visiting animal shelters to play with and exercise the animals, or visiting a nursing home.

When you are ready to take on something a little bit bigger, there are agencies where you live that already have materials and resources to help you get started. For example, how about organizing a "Christmas in July" food drive for a local food bank or homeless shelter? Lots of groups do things like this around the end-of-the-year holidays, but hungry people need food all year long! You can also collect wholesome books and magazines for homeless and recovery shelters. My Kiwanis club supports a men's residential addiction-recovery center. One of the program requirements is that the residents must either have a job or be actively seeking a job. While they do keep busy with work and recovery programs, they still have a lot of downtime. Sports, entertainment, and celebrity magazines are great to help them fill that time.

Ask around to see what is needed in your area. It can be disappointing to put in a lot of effort on something that is already being taken care of by someone else. We wanted to collect food for the men's shelter, but we found out that what they really needed were magazines and men's clothing! The guys needed something decent they could wear, like khakis, dress shirts, and ties, to job interviews. Since most of our members are men, it was easy to collect gently-used clothes to donate.

Many Ronald McDonald houses collect aluminum can tabs for recycling. They recycle the tabs just like they would the whole can yet the tabs are pure high-quality aluminum and they are easier to store and transport. My wife donated a bunch of our tabs to a local elementary school teacher last year so the students could count the tabs out as a math project and at the end of the year the class donated all the tabs to an Atlanta Ronald McDonald House. How simple is that project?

Here's the point: if you make servant leadership easy and integrate it into your normal course of life, you will naturally find ways to serve in small and meaningful ways. My wife recommends a different secret service mission each month to the members of our Sunday School class at church. A recent suggestion was give in to the urge to do something nice for someone else. What could be easier than that?

Sometimes, leadership is more about getting started than what you actually do. Get out there, do something, and see what paths of leadership open up to you.

4. **There is always time for service.** It is amazing what I can make time for. ESPN's SportCenter is repeated throughout the morning, yet I will leave it running as I sit in a hotel room and watch the same home-runs, slam-dunks, and boo-yah's over and over again. I have seen every episode of Seinfeld at least 20 times, The Blues Brothers and Ocean's 11 movies more than that, and heard Craig Ferguson declare that it is "a great day for America" hundreds, if not thousands, of times. And I still get sucked in every time they are on TV. I make time for Facebook and Twitter. I make time for lots of things. I also make time to serve others and I have helped lead college students to perform more than two million hours of service.

What about you? Do you have a couple of hours in your week that you could give to helping someone in need? Do you have time to volunteer at an agency that serves people in your community or on your campus? What skills do you have to bring to servant leadership? I'll bet there is someone nearby who needs what you can offer.

During my time as the District Administrator for Georgia Circle K, I had many outstanding student leaders. They were dedicated to community and campus service and willingly gave of themselves to make the organization better so that more college students in our state could become involved. One student really stands out, though. Her name is Katie Hunley and she was a student at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. She had been a member of Key Club in high school and came into Circle K eager to make a difference. Her chapter had been struggling a little before she got there. She immersed herself in the group's activities, recruited new members, and initiated new service projects. She attended meetings of the group's sponsoring Kiwanis Club, traveled around the state to visit other Circle K clubs, served as club president for two years, and was on the district board every year she was in school, including a year as Governor. She also helped her mother, who advised a community service group in the middle school where she taught. Katie was an exceptional student with great grades, was involved in other campus and professional organizations, and worked as a project manager for an Atlanta engineering firm while she was in school. This was clearly a very busy person!

In addition to all of the above, Katie found time to perform annually more than 400 hours of verifiable community service *just through Circle K alone!* She even planned a weekend road trip that involved students from middle and high schools, colleges, and people in

the community that accumulated hundreds of hours of service in several communities in north Georgia. Katie has been honored numerous times by a variety of organizations for her community service work, dedication to others, and her exceptional leadership. She never complained about not having enough time for all of her activities and certainly never said she did not have enough time to serve. All of this and she was a great example to others as well. That is being a leader!

So, no excuses! Time is a-wastin'...

5. **Be willing to take risks.** I think the willingness to take risks is an important trait for all leaders. I do not mean crazy things like jumping out of airplanes, riding Ferris wheels, or battling spiders (OK, those are a few of my phobias), but risks that can take an organization to a new level, achieve a milestone, or just as easily set the group back months or years. Leaders take chances. Your experiences help shape the type of leader that you will be. Some of those experiences may be considered failures, defeats, or setbacks, but many more could be successes. Oh, you could play it safe. But where is the fun in that? The reality is that if you never attempt anything, you will never achieve anything.

During my time as Circle K Administrator I was stunned at some of the students who never stepped up to take on a leadership role. Many of them were talented, out-going, and already exceptional leaders. Somehow, though, a formal leadership position scared them as much as me riding a Ferris wheel at the state fair. I asked these students why they were unwilling to step up and I heard over and over: "What if I fail?" "What if I am not any good?" "I don't know anything about this." "I'm afraid I'll make mistakes." Despite my assurances that we would train them and show

them the ropes, I could not overcome the fears of some of those students. Some I did and they turned out to be great leaders. Some I did and they were total duds. I am fine with that. Student leadership is not about perfection. A large part is the learning experience and what is taken away from it.

Each year at the district convention, I would conclude my remarks of retirement to the outgoing board with this:

“Our board is made up of elected officers and committee chairs. This year’s board has worked hard and accomplished much. To the board seated before me, I want you to think about this past year, your goals and expectations. Some of you will realize that you did more than you ever thought you could. Others of you may think you could have done better. You may have encountered obstacles and challenges. Sometimes you may have gotten your way, sometimes not. I hope that you will look back fondly on your year on the district board regardless of what you personally may have or have not done. Being a district officer in Georgia should provide some sort of course credit for your leadership experience, learned communication skills, and the etiquette lessons that you received. You have all grown as a result of this experience and somewhere down the road, you will use what you have learned this year. For Circle K is not just an extracurricular activity, but also an educational experience.”

I wanted each member of the board to realize whether they were a superstar or did not do much at all, they had personally gained something from the experience. They had taken a chance and the result could only be positive.



“Oh sure, Dave, this is easy for you to say. You have a long list of leadership positions in different organizations. What have you ever risked?”

Just this: Everything.

None of the stories that I have shared in this chapter would ever have happened if I was not willing to take a risk at a moment in time that, in retrospect, turned out to be the pivotal moment in my life. Wherever my life was going before that moment changed in an instant. It was in that instant that I did something bold and took a risk.

I raised my hand.

OK, I understand that a little background information is required here. When I was growing up, I wanted to be a leader. I ran for positions in student council, band, and other organizations and I never could get elected. I guess I wasn't popular enough, or didn't wear the right clothes, or who knows what. I remember near the end of my junior year a friend of mine who was one of the class officers and on the student council asked me what senior class office I was going to run for. “None,” I told her. “What's the point? I won't win.”

Whoa, those are NOT the kind of words one would expect from a future speaker and expert on student leadership!

About that same time, I attended the Wisconsin-Upper Michigan Key Club District Convention in Green Bay, WI. I had run for offices in my Key Club and, in fact, had just lost for club treasurer. I had no idea what was going to be happening at this convention, but it sounded cool to get away and spend a weekend in Green Bay.

Our advisor took four of us in his car to the Ramada Inn near Lambeau Field. On the way up to the convention, I read over the material about activities and events. I saw they had an oratorical contest. “Maybe I should enter that,” I said.

“No,” was the reply from our advisor, “the contestants have been practicing for weeks, you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Ok,” I responded as I shrugged my shoulders and wondered if the hotel had a pool.

We got to the hotel and I was blown away. There were over 600 high school students at this convention. A bunch of them had posters up indicating they were running for positions like District Governor, District Secretary, District Treasurer, and Division Lt. Governor. I didn’t know what these were, but they sure sounded important.

The convention started at around 7 pm on Friday night. Seated at the two-tiered head table up front were a bunch of high school students who already held those important titles and they were leading the sessions. Some of the candidates got up and gave speeches about what they would do if we elected them. It was all pretty cool. Then we broke up into different meeting rooms for divisional caucuses. A division is a group of clubs geographically close to one another and we were in Division 3 with nine other clubs. We were sharing a room with Division 8, which had about the same number of clubs.

The District Secretary was running our caucus and soon the candidates for Governor, Secretary, and Treasurer were coming in one by one, sharing their platforms, passing out literature, and answering ques-

tions. They were very impressive, had lots of experience, and it sounded like their ideas were good. After a few of these “big office” candidates, it was time for the students running for Lt. Governor of our respective divisions to come forward. This is where I learned that the Lt. Governor was in charge of over-seeing the clubs in the division. There was one guy running for Division 8. He had been appointed about half-way through the year for both Division 3 and 8 and now wanted a full term with Division 8 where he went to school.

No one was running for Division 3.

Division 3 had not had its own Lt. Governor in years, we were told by the District Secretary.

“Won’t someone run for Division 3?” the District Secretary begged.

The begging went on for a while as other candidates came in the room. During a break, my advisor nudged me and said, “Why don’t you do it?”

“Me? How can I do that? I don’t even know what that Lt. Governor thing is. I can’t even get elected to office in our *club*! How can I be on the state board?”

But then I thought about: *I’ll raise my hand. I’ll get up there to answer their questions and they’ll see that I am not any good and don’t know anything. Then somebody better will step forward and get elected.*

As you can probably tell, confidence was not a strong suit for me at this point in my life. But, I raised my hand and said, “I’ll do it.”

The sound of relief rushing out of the room was audible. They didn’t say “Whew”, but I know that every

other eligible student in that room was thinking it. So, I got in front of the room in my dad's suit coat and my clip-on tie and did the best I could to answer their questions. I guess I wasn't a total loser because they elected me. They really didn't have a choice!

After the convention was over, I went home and read everything I could on how to be a good Lt. Governor. I got more involved in service projects with my club and even put together a divisional service project. My club even created a position for me to serve on the board of directors now that I was a VIP!

At the end of the year, I was one of two Lt. Governors (out of 14) named outstanding by the district and then I received the Outstanding Lt. Governor Award from Key Club International. My interest in community service was continuing to grow and my interest in leadership was growing even faster.

When I got to college, I joined Circle K and worked my way up the organizational leadership ladder. By the time I was a senior in college, I ran for, and was elected to, the position of International President. It was an incredible experience. I got to travel all over the country, the Caribbean and Europe, learned a lot about leadership, met a number of great people (many of whom I am still friends with today), and performed a lot of community service.

After I graduated, I wanted to continue serving, so I joined a Kiwanis Club. As a result of that, I met my wife at a Kiwanis training conference (she is also a former Circle Ker) and together we have led this journey of service that I have been sharing with you: a journey that never would have gotten started if I had not been willing to take a risk. I don't know where life was taking me before that night in Green Bay, but none of what I have done since would have been pos-

sible without *that* moment in time.

Do you have the courage to serve? Perhaps this is *your* moment in time.

Just raise your hand and say, “I’ll do it.”





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## **David A. Kelly** ***America's Leadership Trainer<sup>sm</sup>***

David A. Kelly is a professional speaker, author, humorist, team builder and trainer. An expert on student leadership success, campus clubs and organizations, goal attainment, and motivation, he has addressed groups across the United States, the Caribbean, and in Europe. A former stand-up comedian, he infuses his presentations with humor.

After being told in his early 20's that he would never make it as a professional speaker, Dave cast his dreams aside and entered the work world as a professional mortgage broker. While he was extremely successful at what he did, he secretly yearned for a life of professional speaking.

In 2002, Dave rekindled his dream and began working in earnest to live the life he knew he loved. He now speaks to thousands of people every year encouraging them to pursue their passions with the power of boldness and empowering them to serve.

A native of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Dave is a graduate of UW-Oshkosh. A Kiwanian since 1988, he served as the District Administrator for the Georgia District of Circle K International for nine years and has been working with college students for over 20 years. Because of his volunteer work through Kiwanis, Dave was selected to participate in the Olympic Torch Relay in 1996.

An avid Green Bay Packers Fan and shareholder, Dave is a sports enthusiast. He has been married to the other love of his life for 18 years, has two daughters, and six cats.

Visit Dave's website at [www.gonzospeaks.com](http://www.gonzospeaks.com) or contact him at 770-552-6592 if you are interested in having him rekindle the dreams of people you know!

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