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THE AMERICAN DREAM has defined and reflected what is best in our country. In his new book, a distinguished journalist shares the stories of those who know its power first-hand.

They Live The Dream

By Dan Rather

IT IS THE phrase we reach for most often to describe this land of ours. It has reflected what is best in us as a country and a people. It is the American Dream, and it has filled me with awe for as long as I can remember.

Growing up in Houston during the Great Depression, it took shape for me around the radio, as I listened spellbound to Edward R. Murrow's World War II dispatches and dreamed of becoming a reporter myself. My neighborhood was not a place that led me to think I should be reaching for such a faraway star. Yet -- and this still gives me a thrill today -- within 20 years, there I was, a correspondent in New York City meeting Murrow, my childhood hero.

The American Dream, you see, holds me in its grasp because I have been blessed to live my own version of it. There is no typical American and no typical American Dream. For some, the Dream is one of freedom; for others, it is of fortune or family or service to one's fellows. Some place greatest emphasis on the pursuit of happiness or of keeping alive the innovative spirit. But however we define it, it defines us as a people.

The people you'll meet here are the result of my quest to discover the American Dream as your neighbors are creating it today. I think you will find them inspirational. I know I did.



Delores Kesler's goal wasn't to make millions, but when she did, she was determined to put that money to work for those in need.

DELORES KESLER

She started her company just to survive and retired a millionaire.

Delores Kesler's dream began with a \$10,000 loan she used to found a temporary staffing agency in Jacksonville, Fla., in 1977. When she retired 20 years later, her

plan to become a millionaire: Divorced and with a small child, she began her career at 22 with a series of dead-end jobs, struggling to make ends meet.

When she founded her company, there were few women entrepreneurs. But her father had often told Kesler she could do anything she wanted to do, and she was determined to succeed. As time went on, however, Kesler realized it was not just financial gain she was pursuing: She wanted to make a contribution to her community. And, as her business grew, she started requiring her employees to devote time to community service and insisting that her company contribute to local charities. And she didn't stop there. In time, Kesler's company was earning \$50 million a year, and a large portion was going back into the community.

When Kesler retired, she set a new course for her life. Today, the Delores Pass Kesler Foundation focuses on changing young lives through education, mentoring and children's programs. In 1997, she gave \$1 million to the University of North Florida to provide scholarships to students from Raines High School in Jacksonville. She cried before an audience of thousands when the principal thanked her. She told them that they didn't know how good it felt to be able to give that money away. "An awful lot of people benefited from what started with a \$10,000 loan," Kesler says.

Wayne Ward

Ford believes we

all have a destiny -- not a predetermined fate but a place that a higher power wants us to go -- and he's proof of it.



WAYNE WARD FORD

A troubled young man, he had an odd premonition about his future.

Wayne Ford was in eighth grade when a teacher asked the class to write their obituaries. How would they like to be remembered? Ford, who lived in a rough area of Washington, D.C., came up with a curious response: He said he would make his mark in the Midwest. He would be active in politics and in charge of a community center.

Wayne Ford would go on to get in trouble in high school. "I was doing drugs, robbing, breaking into apartments," he recalls. To get away, he accepted a football scholarship to a small, nearly all-white Minnesota college. Once there, however, racism threatened to throw him offcourse. Instead, he turned his anger to activism and founded the school's black student union.

"Then," he says, "it all started to come together. The worst things in my life were the things that had the potential to make me great." Ford devoted himself to academics. History especially gave him a new perspective." When I started reading it," he says, "I thought, 'My God, the world has gone through hell, not just Wayne Ford.'"

After graduation, Ford turned to politics. Today, he's living the dream he had as a

boy: He's the only black member of the Iowa State Legislature and the founder and executive director of Urban Dreams, a nonprofit community program for at-risk youth. Last year, he spoke before the Democratic National Convention. It was one of the biggest achievements of his life, but he says, "It wasn't the cherry on the ice cream. The best is yet to come."

SHAWN CARLSON

His grandfather's struggle to be accepted inspired him to encourage others.



Shawn Carlson says his dream and his passion - the Society for Amateur Scientists, which he founded - was inspired by his grandfather. "I've been privileged to know some of the greatest scientists alive today," says Carlson, who has a Ph.D. in nuclear physics. "And no one had a greater raw scientific talent than my grandfather." But, he adds, his grandfather's work was consistently rejected "because he didn't have the letters 'Ph.D.' next to his name.

"Amateur scientists," he says, "are overflowing with passion," and his aim is to teach them standards and procedures so the larger scientific world will take them seriously. He and his wife, Michelle, sank their life savings of \$10,000 into starting the Society for Amateur Scientists in 1994 and endured several tough years. Then Carlson was awarded a MacArthur "genius" fellowship, which allowed him to keep the Society afloat.

Although he has been criticized by some in the scientific community, Carlson continues to pursue his dream of opening scientific innovation to everyone. "The ability to come up with something original and be respected because you are a maverick - that's very much part of the American tradition," he says.

OSCAR CARLOS ACOSTA

Everything he wanted was within his grasp. Then, it seemed, it was gone.

As a boy in tiny Elida, N.M., Oscar Acosta had a talent for throwing a baseball that brought him a college scholarship and a chance at athletic glory. Getting to the Majors was his dream, and he neglected everything else - his schoolwork and his wife and children - to get there. "I became consumed," he says. He made it to the minor leagues, but when a torn rotator cuff ended his pitching career, his life spiraled out of control. His wife took the kids and left. He was broke. He lost any belief in himself. "I'd just given up," he says. "I thought I was destined to go back and be a cowpuncher the rest of my life."

When he got a second chance - an offer to coach in the Texas Rangers' minor league system - Acosta says, he realized it was time to change. His identity, he swore, would never be tied exclusively to baseball. He reconciled with his wife and for the next 11 years built back what he'd lost, taking his blessings as they came. "I told my

daughter, if God wants me to be a minor league instructor, that's what I'm going to do," he says.

Acosta did make it to the Majors - as a pitching coach for the Chicago Cubs. Now 44, he lives not far from where he grew up. Recently, Acosta watched his son play in a Little League game on the same field where he'd learned to pitch. "This was a big deal," Acosta says. "It was like watching myself - like my life had started all over."

CURTIS G. AIKENS SR.

His dream -- and his future -- were on hold until he finally decided to ask for help.



Curtis Aikens, who grew up in rural Conyers, Ga., puts a face to one of those literacy statistics we hear but sometimes cannot believe: He went through high school and five semesters of college without learning how to read. One of the millions who fall through the cracks and keep falling, Aikens believes that he would have disappeared completely if he hadn't, at 26, finally asked for help. Of his literacy tutors, Aikens says, "They didn't change my life. They saved my life."

Aikens put his new skills to good use. A lifelong lover of cooking and food, he started his own produce company in his hometown, became a food columnist and began to focus on his version of the American Dream: "I said to myself, 'I'm going to become a celebrity.'" But it wasn't fame alone he was pursuing, he explains. "It was so, when I talk about the fact that I couldn't read, other nonreading adults will say, 'If he can do it, I can too!'" Today, Aikens has three cookbooks to his name and appears on *Calling All Cooks* on the Food Network. But, he says, he hasn't reached his goal. "I'm still trying to obtain the American Dream, because I want to give everybody the ability to read. I know that sounds hokey, but there it is."

YOU MAY SENSE A COMMON THREAD

running through many of these stories. The American Dream affords us opportunity and the freedom to seize it. It has also created, in my experience, some of the most generous people in the world. Americans who find their own dream make the dreams of their fellow citizens possible as well. For them, and for the rest of us, the Dream remains both a hope and a promise, even as we add to its meaning with each new chapter of our lives.