

The Legacy of Jack and Ruth Eckerd – Helping more than 12,000 youth each year succeed

In 1957, Jack and Ruth Eckerd married just six weeks after their first date. It was the second marriage for both. Together, they brought five children into the marriage and produced another two in a blended family. The Eckerd's happiness and love for their own children, combined with a desire to share their good fortune with others, is what first sparked their interest in helping youth.

The Birth of Eckerd Youth Alternatives (EYA)

Their passion to help kids came into sharp focus in the 1960s after Jack read about the Dallas Salesmanship Club's outdoor therapeutic program for youth in Texas. He became captivated by its effective and holistic approach to helping youth with emotional or behavioral problems.

When the couple opened their first outdoor therapy program in Brooksville, Florida in 1968, some doubted it would work. Instead of the prevailing approach of restricting youth to hospitals or detention centers, the EYA program gave them freedom to experience personal growth through high-interest, therapeutic recreational activities. As a remedy to anger and hostility, it advocated unconditional regard, support and nurturing.

EYA's approach to behavior management is also unusual. The Eckerd philosophy for youth development does not use points, levels, demerits or other externally based systems to promote behavior change. The Eckerd's believed that such reward/punishment systems do little to promote long-lasting changes in youth because life does not always provide such guides for good decisions. EYA programs teach kids to actually think differently, to problem solve by themselves and with groups, and internalize good decision-making to guide them for the rest of their lives.

Both Jack and Ruth Eckerd frequently visited the programs to spend time with the children and participate in cookouts. In addition, children and youth counselors were often invited to the Eckerd's home to celebrate Christmas with them.

In the 1960s, the Eckerd's did not have a strategic plan to grow EYA into the leading nonprofit youth services organization that it is today. They simply saw a need in their local community and stepped up to help.

The Legacy of Jack and Ruth Eckerd

When Jack Eckerd passed away on May 19, 2004 at the age of 91 and Ruth Eckerd died on July 18, 2006, they left behind a monumental legacy. Tens of thousands of youth have been helped. Countless families have credited EYA for reuniting them with their once-troubled teen, and even for saving their children's lives.

At Jack's memorial service, former Florida Governor Reuben Askew called him "a rare and remarkable man...who didn't want his philanthropy to be known, although some of it is known."

The headline for the St. Petersburg Times article announcing his death stated that Jack was "A Giant Of Generosity," while the Tampa Tribune headline noted "He Was A Rare And Reputable Man." Virtually every media story that was written about Jack and Ruth after they died celebrated their passion for helping children nationwide.

Every decision at EYA is still guided by Jack's over-riding mandate that "the kids must always come first." Of that legacy, Jack and Ruth would be most proud.

