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## THE ECKERD ELIXIR

He thrived at business, flopped at politics and gave away millions of dollars.  
Now 90, Jack Eckerd draws spirit from the children whose lives he touched.

BY STEPHEN NOHLGREN ■ TIMES STAFF WRITER

*"People say they don't want to live to be 90. Of course, none of them are 89."*

STUDS TERKEL

Though a stroke has jumbled his speech, his inner fire still energizes a room.

He shakes hands with authority. He laughs, winks and gestures — and he desperately wants to convey something important, a passion that has shaped his life since he left the drugstores that bear his name.

He locks steady brown eyes on a visitor and stabs the air for emphasis. Words flow, intense but indecipherable, until he produces a satisfactory fragment: "the kids."

Don't forget the kids? he is asked.

He nods, relaxes and repeats, softly this time.

"The kids."



Corey Hill knows little about Jack Eckerd, but he knows this: Out of the blue, thanks to this stranger, he got a huge break.

By 17, Hill had blossomed into an accomplished crook. Auto theft, possession of cocaine, battery on a law enforcement officer. At a juvenile home in Volusia County, "I just learned how to be a better criminal."

Last July, a judge sent him to the Eckerd Youth Challenge Program, a spartan ring of dormitories and makeshift classrooms in the wilds of Hernando County. "We had to sit on logs. If one person did something, everybody had to sit down and talk about it."

Hill contemplated escape, "but I didn't know where I was. All I saw was woods. By the time I got ahold of a map, I was there three months and things had changed."



Times photo — CHERIE DIEZ

He hardly can speak, but hugs trump words. For his 90th birthday, Jack Eckerd visits one of his wilderness camps for troubled teens. Some are emotionally disturbed, most have broken the law, nearly all want to thank their benefactor.

Counselors taught him to curb his temper by slowing down and analyzing what was making him angry. They urged him to consider college — him, an errant 10th-grade dropout.

"I started thinking about my long-term future. What do I want to be doing 20 years from now?"

With a few months of intense study, Hill passed the GED test and entered Georgia Military College in Milledgeville, where he hopes to play football and earn a degree.

Eckerd Youth Alternatives is paying his way. "I've been to the bottom already," he says. "I can only go up."



The meandering link between Jack Eckerd, 90, and Corey Hill, 18, spans eight decades.

It begins with a boy sent off to boarding school because his mother died before her time. It encompasses a classic American suc-



Times files (1970)

Political races were family affairs for the Eckerds. Jack and Ruth hit the tarmac with their DC-3 during his 1970 campaign for governor.

cess story (young man works hard, hits it big), a colorful era in Florida politics (middle-age novice takes on pols) and a little-known legacy (retiree gives away fortune to help troubled kids).

Now the end approaches, the preparations in place. Jack and Ruth Eckerd's children vow they will pursue their parents' last big vision — saving children, one at a time. Wilderness camps and other Eckerd programs already have touched 50,000 youngsters in seven states.

But the old man in the wheelchair leaves nothing to chance. Once a detail man always a detail man.

Back in the 1960s, when pennies could make or break a business, he brought home van-loads of drugstore records to check the addition on every receipt. At Christmas-time, he visited every store in his empire, hundreds of them, chatting up employees and checking storerooms for overstocked inventory.

He's not about ease up now — not so long as lungs hold breath. Ask him about 90 years of accomplishment and his eyes moisten.

"The kids," he says.  
Don't forget the kids.



Some people navigate life without fully grasping the power of the adult-child bond. Jack Marion Eckerd's lessons came early.

In his 1987 autobiography, *Finding the Right Prescription*, Eckerd says he was never one to

look back. He devotes all of a single paragraph to the formative events that followed his mother's passing:

"When I was ten years old, living in Philadelphia, my mother died. My father could not meet the demands of his business and still be a full-time parent, so I was sent, at the age of twelve, to a prep school in New Jersey. Dad came up to see me a couple of times, decided the prep-school life was not tough enough for me, and transferred me the next year to Culver Military Academy. Culver was tough enough."

His father, J. Milton Eckerd, opened his first drugstore in 1898 and owned a dozen or so stores in the Northeast when he brought his son into the family business. Fair but firm, the father demanded that his son work harder than other employees so as not to embarrass the Eckerd name.

Eckerd Senior was remarkably willing to let his son test his own mettle, staking their very lives on the consequences.

Young Eckerd learned to fly during the pioneering days of aviation, wearing goggles in an open cockpit trainer. For two years, he ferried his father in a four-seat monoplane to family drugstores from New York to North Carolina. During World War II, he flew supplies over "The Hump" of the Himalayas, between India and China.

Meanwhile, the drugstore business experienced a tectonic shift. The advent of commercial television and interstate highways created new kinds of shop-

pers. They were mobile, price-conscious and susceptible to brand-name hucksterism — the Speedy Alka-Seltzer generation.

Jack Eckerd wanted to ride that wave.

Traditional drugstores placed clerks behind counters, filling orders one-by-one from a limited selection of goods. Eckerd preferred "self service" stores, a California innovation that featured large stores with bountiful aisles, where customers could wander about, make selections and check out with a cashier.

His father, doing just fine with the old system, opposed the idea, but Eckerd forged out on his own. He bought three Tampa Bay drugstores in 1952. Within a few years, he had two more under his belt and a former Gasparilla queen on his arm.

Eckerd was several years divorced from his first wife, who stayed in Delaware with their two children.

Ruth Binnicker Swann was pure old Tampa — daughter of a prominent banker, petite, stylish, a Southern Democrat back when "if I had been a Republican, I probably would have been one of two Republicans in Florida."

The Swanns were citrus and cigar people; a well-traveled road in South Tampa bears their name. James Swann Jr. died of a heart attack, leaving Ruth with three young children. Two years later, friends arranged a blind date.

Ruth's middle child, James Swann III, remembers the tall, slender man his mother brought home in 1957.

"Mom always had suitors but we didn't care much for them. She brings this guy out to meet us. I was dangling upside down on a rusty old swing set.

"He said, 'I can do that.'

"I said, 'Betcha can't.'

"To me, he was an old man.

He gets up there, but when he gets ready to get down, he falls flat on his back. Mom rushes out to pick him up. We started thinking, "Oh, no, this one she cares about. We're in trouble."

Ruth Eckerd recalls instant chemistry.

"He was, and still is, a very wonderful looking man — tall, and he carried himself with authority, even at that time. He was a very unassuming man. I asked him what business he was in and he said, 'the drugstore business.'

I envisioned that he was probably a pharmacist."

They married six weeks after their first date. Two more children followed.



In 1957, a drugstore opening in St. Petersburg could qualify as a community happening.

About 15,000 people showed up when Eckerd expanded from Clearwater and Tampa into the new shopping center at Tyrone Boulevard and Ninth Avenue N. Attractions included 4-cent ice cream cones and free raffle tickets to win "a Swedish Volvo — sporty foreign automobile."

A sporty foreign automobile was just like Eckerd. He drove a succession of foreign convertibles — Karmann Ghia, Porsche, Mercedes. Jim Swann says his father liked to cultivate the tan on his balding head.

For the most part, he wasn't consumed by the trappings of wealth and power. He flew coach. His family drove around in well-worn station wagons.

His big break came in 1959, when the Publix supermarket chain invited him to partner in a flurry of strip mall construction throughout Florida. Before plunging ahead, Eckerd did something rare: He consulted his wife about business matters.

Ruth Eckerd was an adept behind-the-scenes partner. She ran the house and kept their children in line (no weeknight TV, early curfews, and you will show up on time for dinner). No matter how late her husband worked, she waited up to eat with him. He could work 16 hours a day and all-day Saturday and still count on enjoying family connection.

He was 46, she was 37. The Publix deal would cement their traditional male-female roles, and they both knew it. So he asked her permission.

"I knew he was never going to be satisfied with having five stores," Ruth Eckerd recalls. "He kept saying he wanted to go fishing, but I could tell he was never going to be a fisherman, and he didn't play golf. I just knew he wasn't going to stop with five stores."

Borrowing \$750,000 from a Tampa bank, Eckerd jumped from five stores to 10 with his first Publix deal. Profits led to



Times files (1965)

During the '60s, Eckerd hooked up with Publix supermarkets to build new strip malls all over Florida. His favorite conveyance, a sporty convertible, kept sun on his pate.

150 stores before the Eckerd-Publix marriage ran its course.

Though Eckerd would come to attribute much of his financial success to luck — being at the right place at the right time — his stores thrived on innovation and risk-taking.

Eckerd and St. Petersburg's Doc Webb were among a handful of merchants who defied Florida's "Fair Trade" laws, which allowed manufacturers to enforce minimum retail prices for popular brands. Florida and U.S. courts struck down most such arrangements as illegal price-fixing.

The makers of Bayer aspirin and Phillips' Milk of Magnesia took another stab and sued Eckerd for undercutting their base retail prices. A 1953 Florida Supreme Court decision ended "fair trade" enforcement and earned Eckerd invaluable publicity as a price-warrior for consumers.

Early Eckerd stores featured lunch counters, which in the '50s and early '60s called for a decision on race. A newspaper account says Eckerd desegregated his lunch counters in



An employee badge from the Nebraska Avenue store in Tampa, early 1960s. Nelson's last name is *not* Bagboy.

1961, three years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 required it.

The transition wasn't always smooth. In 1962, an assistant store manager in St. Petersburg refused to serve a black couple. Demonstrators descended on the store the next day. To discourage them, the manager turned off the lights. Corporate headquarters had to remind him of the integration policy.

Eckerd's most profitable innovation was photo processing. The photo counter took little space and required no inventory. Two prints for the price of one, now a commonplace come-on,

brought customers by the droves.

"So many people here came from somewhere else," says Stewart Turley, who succeeded Eckerd as head of the company. "They have friends and family up north. We told them they got one to keep and one to share."

Eckerd writes in his autobiography that his stores became the nation's largest consumer of Eastman-Kodak photo paper.

Eckerd was a demanding boss — readily firing managers he felt weren't up to snuff — but he maintained close relationships with lower-rung employees, popping into stores, calling clerks by first names and soliciting ideas for improving the product.

To fuel expansion, he took his company public in 1961. He also set up a profit-sharing plan so employees could buy stock from his personal stash at below-market value. Two decades of expansion throughout the East made Eckerd one of the nation's largest drugstore chains and the most profitable. An employee who bought \$1,000 of stock in 1961 could have sold it for \$158,000 in 1986.

Customers were coddled. Senior citizens received discounts on drugs. Eckerd maintained a personal listing in the Clearwater phone book, which connected to a special phone his children called "the nut line."

"When it was ringing, it would be somebody just furious that their Popeil Pocket Fisherman didn't work, or something like that," recalls Nancy Eckerd Hart. "Dad expected you to handle it — take a message, take all the information and get back to the right person. If you answered that phone, you had to follow through on it."

The nut line wasn't the only way Eckerd family life flowed with the rhythms of the business. Summer vacations consisted of driving from store opening to store opening to cut ribbons and pose with beauty queens.

Jim Swann would wake by 6 a.m. so he could share a cup of coffee and squeeze in conversation before his father left for work.

"Dad wasn't a fuzzy guy. There weren't a lot of hugs," Swann remembers. "But we would talk about everything."

There was a right way to do things and a wrong way. Out with friends, Nancy sometimes called herself Nancy Williams. "I didn't want to embarrass my parents by doing anything bad that would call attention to me and the name Eckerd."

The family lived in a bayfront home in Belleair and had a "summer home" on the posh northern spit of Clearwater Beach, but the children never thought of themselves as wealthy or entitled, Nancy says. Their father never let them work in the stores, and they were oblivious to the extent of his reach.

"When I went to college, I told a girl my father was a druggist, because that's what I thought he was," she says. The girl informed Nancy that Eckerd was a huge national chain.

"I said, 'I don't know what you are talking about.' I know it sounds crazy, but back when we were growing up, we didn't have the bombardment of media and attention people have now. I think we just thought we were kids."

Media attention was around the corner.



By 1970, Jack Eckerd was 57 and casting about for new direction.

"He had really proven he could take the drugstore business and build it," says Turley. "He wanted to prove he could do that in some other arena."

His gaze landed on the bombastic, flamboyant Claude Kirk, Florida's first Republican governor since Reconstruction. Editorial cartoonists often drew him in a clown suit.

"I was offended by his public behavior and chagrined that he was a Republican," Eckerd wrote. "So I threw my hat into the ring."

Eckerd figured a successful entrepreneur could apply business principles to government, surely voters would understand that. But his speeches could be dull and rambling. Worse, he spoke his mind.

"He wasn't a sound bite guy at all," says H.E. "Buz" Rummel, who wrote some of Eckerd's speeches. "Most politicians are always thinking how to make this sound better, or whether this is the politic thing to say at all.



Times files (1964)

The Eckerds examine ticker tape during his company's first trading day on the American Stock Exchange. In 1986, the company bought back all the stock to ward off corporate raiders.



Times files (1978)

Former president Gerald Ford, center, stumps for Eckerd and running mate Paula Hawkins in the 1978 governor's race. Eckerd ran the U.S. General Services Administration under Ford.

Jack always tended to say what he thought."

A fiscal conservative, his positions on education, transportation and the environment sounded suspiciously liberal, and he was trying to unseat a sitting Republican governor in a Republican-only primary.

Eckerd's wealth also hurt. Uncomfortable with asking for contributions, he spent more than \$1-million of his own money. Today, that might buy a Miami-Dade County judgeship, but in 1970, eyebrows arched across the state. Editorials and sneering opponents portrayed a rich man trying to buy public office.

Four years before the election, his drugstores stopped selling *Playboy* and other prurient magazines. Eckerd invited PTAs, ministers and the news media to join him in a "war on smut." In his view, smut encompassed anything proscribed by the Catholic National Office of Decent Literature, including *Zorba the Greek* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*.

During a televised debate late in the campaign, Kirk waited until his closing statement to pull a book from his pocket that he said advocated legalizing marijuana. He said he bought it at an Eckerd drugstore. If Eckerd couldn't control his own stores, how could

he run Florida?

Eckerd denied the book came from his store, but Kirk was way ahead. He had taken a reporter along to the store, a reporter who just so happened to be a panelist on the debate. The reporter piped up right on TV, confirming the purchase. Eckerd looked foolish.

Kirk beat Eckerd but lost the general election to Reubin Askew.

In 1974, Eckerd won the Republican primary for U.S. Senate and ran against Secretary of State Richard Stone. The timing could not have been worse. President Richard Nixon had resigned in disgrace and President Gerald Ford had pardoned him. An angry electorate thrashed Republicans nationwide. In Florida, a third-party candidate from the right, John Grady, pulled a surprising 16 percent of the vote, mostly from Eckerd's natural constituency. Stone won by less than 3 percentage points.

Eckerd's final bid for office came in 1978, when Askew was leaving the Governor's Mansion.

Of the Democratic contenders, only one gave Eckerd's political consultant pause, Jim Swann recalls. "This is the guy we don't want," the consultant said, pointing to a photo of state Sen. Bob Graham. A millionaire himself, Graham had little name recognition and used his "work days" to portray himself as an average Joe.

Eckerd hurt his chances by refusing to share an increasingly important part of his life: his camps for troubled kids. He had started the first one a decade earlier. By 1978, he had four.

"Chief Jack" and "Chief Ruth" frequently visited the camps to mingle with the kids (all adults were called chiefs). Hundreds of campers and counselors would celebrate Christmas at the Eckerds' home with dinner and carols. It was photo op stuff that most campaigns would die for.

"We begged him to use those things more, but he felt strongly he didn't want to exploit those kids," recalls Rummel, the speech writer. "It was not a very good political position to take."

Elected office was not to be.

"It took him a year or two to get over" the last race, says Les Smout, the Eckerd family's long-time financial adviser. "He is a good poker player and doesn't let emotions show on his face. But all of us put a lot of effort and



(Times photos - CHERIE DIEZ)

Mark, a four-legged Eckerd, snoozes as Ruth and daughter Nancy Hart talk over old times in the Eckerds' home on Clearwater Beach. The Eckerds moved permanently to Clearwater Beach when their youngest child, Rick, left home. They spend summers in Highlands, N.C.



Ruth, 81, and Jack, 90, have been married 46 years after a courtship that lasted all of six weeks. Between them, they have seven children, 18 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

money into it. It was something he didn't do casually."

Eckerd did have his stint with public service. Under President Ford he ran the U.S. General Services Administration. In Florida, he chaired a government efficiency committee that saved taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. He put prison labor programs on a profitable footing. He led two successful fights against casino gambling.

If nothing else, the campaigns brought the family closer. During the first race, Eckerd went through seven traveling aides in seven weeks until Jim Swann, who could deal with his father, took over.

Swann was campaign manager in the 1978 race and Nancy Hart took a year off from college to cruise coffee shops and Kiwanis clubs with a sister-in-law and a pit bullterrier named BJ for protection. Almost every night, no matter how late, Eckerd flew home in his DC-3 to sleep in his own bed.

They uniformly felt, and still feel, that the press never gave proper due to the man they love, casting him as a tycoon trying to buy his way in.

"I don't think any article about him ever started without saying *drugstore magnate* Jack Eckerd,"

Ruth Eckerd recalls. "They never did say *great philanthropist* Jack Eckerd or *good businessman*. It was always that *drugstore magnate*."

Eckerd, who resigned as chairman of Jack Eckerd Corp. three years before the 1978 campaign, joked that "drugstore magnate" probably would lead off his obituary.



Sharing wealth came naturally to Jack and Ruth Eckerd. Their gifts often were anonymous and usually personal.

Jim Swann remembers three children from a poor family who attended elementary school with him in Clearwater. One was disabled, the others towed him to school in a wagon. Swann mentioned it to his mother and soon afterward, the disabled boy came to school in a new wheelchair.

"I said, 'What happened?' He said, 'Some lady drove up to our house in a station wagon, pulled out a wheelchair and said, 'I hear you might want one of these.'"

Years later, a donor who didn't want to be named gave Neighborly Care Network a \$1-million matching grant to help the elderly. Few knew that Ruth Eckerd

delivered Meals on Wheels.

Two family causes are hard to keep private, they are Pinellas landmarks.

In the early 1970s, Florida Presbyterian College in St. Petersburg was innovative, respected and \$1.5-million in debt. President Billy O. Wireman asked board member Jack Eckerd to give \$10-million — and his name.

"His endorsement for a college known as quite liberal would give it a stamp of approval from a conservative business leader," Wireman told him.

Eckerd agreed to the money, telling Wireman to pay off the debt before 2 p.m. to avoid another day's interest. But he was reluctant about the name change, recall Wireman and Les Smout, then a Florida Presbyterian financial officer.

"We felt if Jack was behind it, a tough businessman like him, everybody else would support it," Smout says.

Instead, donations dwindled, maybe because people viewed the Eckerd pocket as bottomless; why should they contribute? After that, Eckerd limited most of his philanthropy to matching grants or seed money, to leverage every dollar.

In the early '80s, Clearwater arts patrons, including Ruth Eck-

erd, were raising money for a new performance center on McMullen-Booth Road. Unbeknownst to his wife, Jack Eckerd opened his checkbook and secured naming rights.

"He said it was my birthday present," recalls the namesake for Ruth Eckerd Hall. "He said, 'How would I like a hall for my birthday?'"

The wilderness camps sprang from an article he read about one in Texas. Eckerd visited and was captivated. Now 18 Eckerd camps serve teenagers in seven states. Campers live in groups of 10 or 12, in open, pine-pole and canvas tents they build themselves. Counselors live with them and supervise around the clock.

They study as a group and frequently plan and cook their own meals at their campsite. They organize field trips, often canoeing on Florida rivers. If they plan pancakes every morning but forget to buy syrup, as happened once, they eat their pancakes dry.

Big "ready logs" around the camps provide settings for impromptu discussions. They "huddle up" 15 to 20 times a day. No topic is too small; last month, a group huddled up about a camper who took his sweet time passing the condiments.



(Times photo – CHERIE DIEZ)

The Eckerd clan gathers for Jack's 90th birthday dinner at Carlouel Yacht Club on Clearwater Beach.

**BACK ROW, FROM LEFT:** Jessica Swann, granddaughter and daughter of Jim and Jonnie; Kathy Brooks, daughter; Bill Eckerd, son; Nancy Hart, daughter; Jack and Ruth Eckerd; Jim Swann, son; Rosemary Lassiter, daughter; Terrell Clark, daughter; Rick Eckerd, son; Cheryl Ernst, granddaughter and daughter of Bill and Ann; Pete Ernst, husband of Cheryl.

**MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT:** Bob Brooks, husband of Kathy; Ann Eckerd, wife of Bill; Ed Hart, husband of Nancy; Jonnie Swann, wife of Jim; Ted Lassiter, husband of Rosemary; Joe Clark, husband of Terrell.

**FRONT ROW, FROM LEFT:** Jennifer Poole, granddaughter and daughter of Kathy; Tim Poole, husband of Jennifer; Allison Hart, daughter of Nancy and Ed; Charlie Hart, son of Nancy and Ed; Christine Wentz, granddaughter and daughter of Rosemary; Melissa Nerlinger, granddaughter and daughter of Rosemary; Kevin Nerlinger, husband of Melissa.

What kind of counselor lives under the stars for \$20,000? The same youthful souls who are drawn to the Peace Corps. It's intense and personal; two years is a long stay.

Cortlandt Florence was an All-American running back until he was charged with concealing firearms in his car. A judge sent him to the Eckerd Youth Challenge Program, which uses the same group dynamics, in dormitories rather than tents.

"At the juvenile detention center, they are there to discipline you," Florence says. "At Eckerd Challenge, they are all about helping you, about making better choices in your life."

A senior at Tuskegee University, Florence is projected as a high NFL draft pick next April. He returns to Eckerd Challenge often, to share his success with those who follow. He took Corey

Hill under his wing and give him the football he carried when he set Tuskegee's all-time rushing record.

Now Hill is the role model. His GED photo, with cap and gown, graces a "Hall of Fame" table in his old dormitory.

"Corey is our big brother," says 15-year-old Joseph, a current dorm resident. "He went off to college, he left a month and a half ago. I heard he got straight A's and is on the football team."

Last year, the average camper stayed 11.4 months and progressed 1.2 years in reading and math. A year after leaving the program, almost 90 percent are still in school or working.

Eckerd Youth Alternatives spent \$67-million on the camps and other programs last year, mostly from state juvenile justice and mental health grants. The balance came from the Eckerd

family, in the form of interest on a \$35-million endowment.

Eckerd money offers more flexibility than other programs. When Corey Hill went off to college, EYA paid the way. When a camper in North Carolina outgrew his glass eye and wouldn't look up, EYA paid for a new one.

EYA chairman Jim Swann, an influential Cocoa developer, says he and his siblings want to expand their youth programs into a national model. They want lawmakers to know that a second generation of Eckerds will carry on. In part, that's why a pressy family agreed to discuss intimate details 16 years after Eckerd left his drug company and sold all his stock.

The Eckerds are reluctant to pinpoint their wealth. In 1975, *Fortune* magazine estimated his wealth at \$150-million. The public philanthropy of Jack and Ruth

Eckerd includes \$20-million to Eckerd College, \$10-million to Ruth Eckerd Hall, the Eckerd Youth Alternatives endowment and the Eckerd Family Foundation, which is designed to give away roughly \$30-million over the next decade, primarily to children's initiatives.

All seven Eckerd children sit on the foundation board; their twice-yearly meetings double as family reunions.

"It's kind of like having dinner together regularly," says son-in-law and foundation president Joe Clark. "It's important for family members to stay in touch. I think he thought this would be a way to further strengthen common bonds."

Eckerd always referred to children's programs as "investments" that society would recoup. A religious man, he believes God uses him to make



Times photo — MAURICE RIVENBARK

Teacher Amy Whatley, right, reads to teens on “ready logs” at Camp E-How-Kee. Eckerd wilderness camps all begin with *E*, not for Eckerd but for “his” or “hers” in Miccosukee.

the world better. For years, he lobbied for prison reform with Watergate felon and evangelist Charles Colson. His passion feeds on the notion that good people can make mistakes.

After starting his first camp, he got a first-hand lesson with his son Bill.

In the 1950s, when Eckerd divorced his first wife, fathers rarely ended up with custody of children — much less fathers who moved to Florida and worked seven days a week. Young Bill and his sister Rosemary stayed with their mother in Delaware and visited Jack and Ruth during the summer.

At 24, Bill Eckerd was charged with selling heroin, to a police informer who begged him for some. At the time of the arrest, he already had entered a rehabilitation clinic to fight his addiction. His father, unaware of his problem until then, returned to Delaware and hired a good lawyer. By trial time, the judge noted that Bill had been clean for a year and gave him probation.

Now a 55-year-old financial adviser with no further record, Bill says he and his father didn’t talk

much about the roots of his addiction. “We didn’t sit down heart-to-heart. But I remember one comment. I remember he looked at me and got very tearful and said, ‘Do you think this is anyway my fault?’ ”

If personal experience fuels Eckerd’s passion for children, daughter Nancy Hart offers another possibility:

“I wonder if some comes because his own mother died when he was young, and he realizes that the adult-child relationship is what it’s all about. That’s what we are learning in our camps. Somehow, the kids who are not making it have a breakdown in that relationship, and Dad, at a real key time in his life, didn’t have that.

“He didn’t really talk about it that much, but I think that always left kind of an ache.”



When Jack Eckerd turned 90 last month, he, Ruth and 24 children, grandchildren and in-laws celebrated in the cool, carpeted privacy of Carlouel Yacht Club. Beyond plate glass windows, spoonbills worked the mud flats



Times photo — CHERIE DIEZ

The girls at Camp E-Nini-Hassee, near Brooksville, help “Chief Jack” celebrate his 90th birthday. It’s time to leave, but one girl stops him for a hug, then another and another ...

off Moonshine Island.

Two hours north, another family awaited.

Florida has 135 residential programs for children who break the law. The Department of Juvenile Justice rates Camp E-Nini-Hassee the second most effective. The 60 girls who live there were told that if he was up to it, “Chief Jack” might visit. They practiced welcoming

songs, wrote letters of thanks, then fell asleep in humid canvas tents.

Ruth Eckerd knew that hours in the car would tire her husband, but this was payoff time. These were “the kids.” Forget the stroke, forget the wheelchair, this was a birthday blessing no money could buy.

As the Eckerds entered the camp’s stone and wood-panel eat-



Times photo — CHERIE DIEZ

A stroke has short-circuited his speech, but Jack Eckerd finds other ways to communicate during his birthday trip to Camp E-Nini-Hassee. In years past, he would take questions from campers. The first question usually was, How much money do you have? He would pull change from his pocket and say, Oh, about 40 cents.

ing lodge, young faces gleamed up from packed picnic tables. Voices rose, sweet and strong:

“Happy Birthday to you . . .”

“Oh beautiful for spacious skies . . .”

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound . . .”

“I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.”

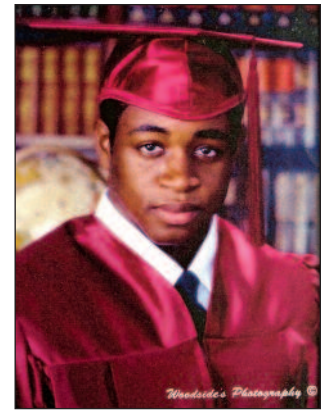
The guest of honor waved

and sang along. His lyrics made little sense, but who could tell? Reverberation drowned out individual voices.

At lunch, Ruth wandered the tables, hugging and reaching out to girls like grandma home for Christmas. Her husband wolfed down a hot dog, slaw and kraut from a well-worn plastic plate.

During a drum performance, Eckerd juked his shoulders in rhythm and pounded the table with a dinner knife. And so the circle of drummers widened, to admit Chief Jack with a drum of his own.

The beat began slowly, then picked up — pounding, clapping, faster, louder, until he signaled that his hands could take



Woodside’s Photography

Corey Hill’s old Eckerd dorm-mates display this photograph to celebrate his success.

no more.

Outside, campers, staff and family splayed across a lawn for an obligatory group photograph. Time to head back to Clearwater.

One girl approached Eckerd for a parting hug. Then came another, and another. A line formed, 20-deep, and he was stuck.

There was Melinda, who wrote in her birthday letter: “I am happy because I get a second chance.”

Nicole, who wrote that “camp taught me . . . that I am worth something.”

Mercedes, in for grand theft auto, who raised her reading level from second to 10th grade. (“My chief told me I could do amazing things.”)

One by one they came, their arms around his neck — sweat, tears and ponytails crushing against withered skin.

“Thank you, Chief Jack.”

“I love you, Chief Jack.”

“Thank you.”

— Times researchers Caryn Baird, Kitty Bennett and Barbara Oliver contributed to this report.