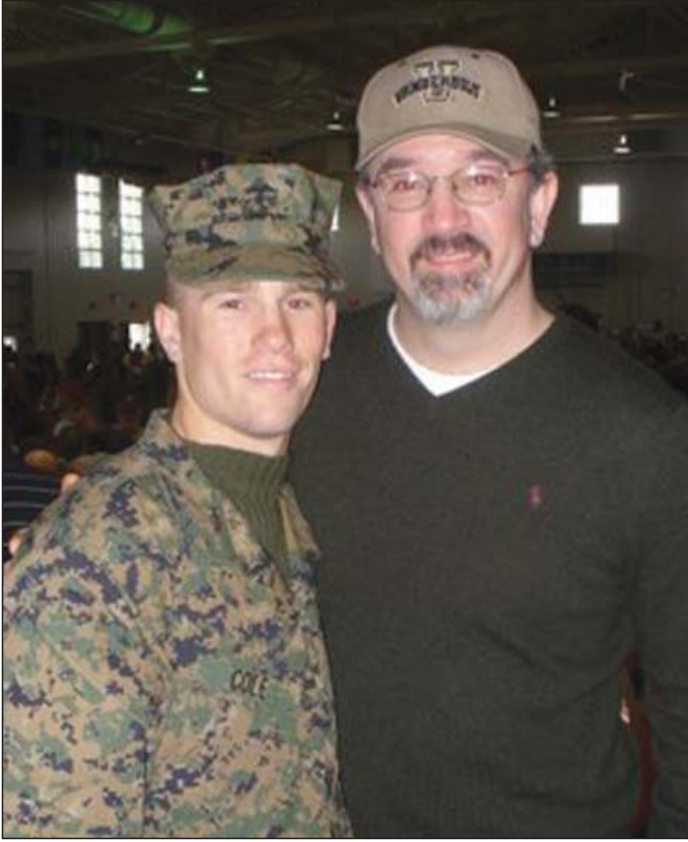


Completing The Circle — It's A Family Affair

By Kenneth B. Cole, Jr.,
A&S '81, Law '84



Kenneth Cole (right) with his son, Zachary.

“Dad, I’ve decided to be a Marine.” I knew this day was coming but was engulfed by conflicting emotions. Fear for my son’s safety, pride in the fact my son wanted to be one of the best this country has to offer and realization that this kid was willing to give in a way most people only wish they could. I knew Zachary was about to embark on a journey the likes of which he could not imagine, and my job was to give him all the support I could.

Since then, I’ve had time to reflect. Sometimes, we get so involved with the “busyness” of life that we lose focus on the “business” of life that means the most — God, family, country and relationships that mold us into who we are. I’ve thought about the 31 years since I first arrived at Vanderbilt as a wide-eyed freshman — son of a retired army sergeant with no business being at a school like Vanderbilt. I wouldn’t have been there except for the football scholarship that paid the way. But I wanted to play linebacker in the SEC and get an education, so Vanderbilt actually was the perfect fit for me. What I didn’t realize was how much I was receiving, and being a “receiver” meant multiple “givers” made it possible.

I ended up getting an English degree. One of my friends jokes I’m the only Vanderbilt English major whose favorite author is the western writer Louis L’Amour. Studying and practicing didn’t leave much free time, and it wasn’t easy. Mom and Dad were always there, however, being supportive during tough times. Dad encouraged me by saying, “The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer.” Mom was in the stands every Saturday. She didn’t understand football, but she knew her son needed her there, cheering even when we didn’t win all those games. I also had to adjust to the student body, from so many states and so smart it intimidated me.

But I discovered I actually did belong at Vanderbilt. I found I could compete academically, making the freshman honor societies and

having students who thought I was just another “dumb jock” asking me if I could tutor them. I discovered I could succeed in football and the classroom when I made the Academic All-SEC team. Then, even though I always thought I would coach and teach, I went to law school because the young Vanderbilt lady I was dating thought my competitive spirit might make me a good lawyer. After serving on the Vanderbilt Law Review, it was time to hone my skills as a trial lawyer in the real world.

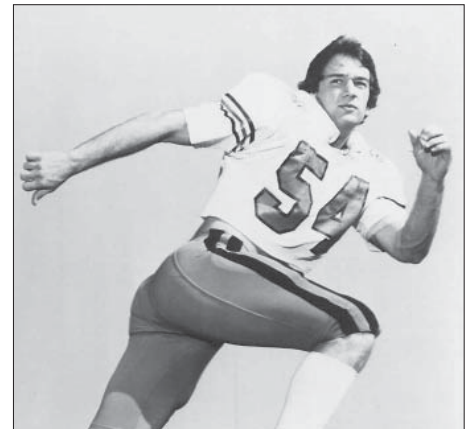
Many Vanderbilt law graduates spend their careers with big firms or companies. Not me. God’s plan was different, and I left the security of Fulbright & Jaworski to represent hurt people, widows and orphans. In my cases, we are Davids against Goliaths. To put it in SEC terminology, we are Vanderbilts who go up against Alabamas and Tennessees. Although I didn’t realize it as a naïve freshman, those long, hot, difficult days on the gridiron were God’s plan to prepare me for my life’s work. It’s not easy to use lawsuits to change the safety mindset of big companies in this country. But my cases have made trucking, explosives and pizza delivery industries just a little bit safer. I am thankful that God allowed me to do so.

I also realize that all the “accomplishments,” all the “diplomas” and all the “trophies” really don’t matter. You see, an institution like Vanderbilt is the collective spirit of the people who have been there, who are there and who will be there to carry on the traditions. What you really get out of college are the relationships with individuals who mold you into who you are. People like Roy Gottfried, who taught me a lot about English but more about life and compassion for others. People like Ray Barnes, who encouraged me in his unique way by saying, “God knows you ain’t big enough, fast enough or strong enough; but you’re gonna play a lot of football for me ‘cause you got a lot of heart.” People like the friend who encouraged me to use my competitive spirit in the courtroom. People like Don Hall, who taught me respect for the law and the desire to help the less fortunate. Each of these Vanderbilt people helped me become me. They gave to me in a special way when they didn’t have to. These relationships are the ultimate value which Vanderbilt offers.

Given the lesson from Zachary about giving unconditionally, I knew giving to my Vanderbilt family was a must. It is difficult to imagine giving back to Vanderbilt what Vanderbilt gave to me. Maybe it’s impossible, but Dad said we should do the difficult immediately, and the impossible takes a little longer. So, my wife, Jill, and I recently funded a McGugin Scholarship to pay for a football player to attend Vanderbilt for one year. The school named it in honor of my mom and gave this precious lady a plaque in front of thousands of Vanderbilt fans. It was a joy to give back to mom and my alma mater. I am grateful to partially complete the circle that began in 1977 when someone gave to Vanderbilt so I could be there.

Perhaps one day, the young man we helped will complete the circle by making it possible for someone else to receive such a scholarship.

If you are reading this article, then you are part of such a Vanderbilt circle. Perhaps now is the time for you to complete your circle. I can assure you, when you give you will find that what you get is much more valuable. ■



Kenneth Cole lettered at Vanderbilt in 1978 and 1980.