

## LEADERSHIP

# My Investment in Character

Max James, American Kiosk Management

### Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Mr. James Background: After graduating with honors from the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), Mr. James flew with the astronauts in the Astronaut Recovery Program at Cape Canaveral. He then volunteered for Combat Air Rescue duty with the Jolly Green Giants in the Vietnam War, followed by an assignment as a combat instructor pilot. After his time in the military, Mr. James earned an MBA from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. He then started his business career in the real estate industry as an international investment analyst, which led to a lucrative stint as a real estate sales executive and eventually a real estate developer. Along with a corporate partner, Mr. James' company built, owned, and operated eighteen hotels in California and Nevada. He became an Executive Vice President of Days Inns of America, CEO of Days of the West, and served on the Board of Directors of the California Hotel Association and the California Governor's California Tourism Corporation. Mr. James later returned to the world of real estate and developed several RE/MAX Real Estate territories in Northern California. The retail industry beckoned and Mr. James developed the world's largest chain of owner-operated kiosk retail stores. This involvement in the Specialty Retail Industry led Mr. James and his wife, Linda, into numerous product lines, ranging from his American Yoyo Company to the cosmetic world of Avon, Revlon, and Proactiv Solutions. Many other company product lines followed such as: Solar City, Hess Energy, ABCmouse, Harry & David, and others. Total revenues in just one of those ventures exceeded \$1.8 billion. Mr. James was selected as the first inductee into the Specialty Retail Hall of Fame. Currently, Mr. James who is attempting retirement, retains his position as the Executive Chairman of American Kiosk Management, LLC, which operates over a thousand retail kiosks in the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. He is the Founder of Camp Soaring Eagle, a camp for chronically and terminally ill children, now having served over 7,000 campers. Mr. James, a 1964 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, received the Academy's Distinguished Graduate Award in 2010.

**JCLD:** Thank you for your time to talk about your involvement with the Academy, the Journal of Character & Leadership Development (JCLD), and the Center for Character & Leadership Development (CCLD). Could you share a little bit about that involvement over the past few years?

**James:** In August 2007, Mark Hille, from the development office of the USAF Academy's Endowment Foundation, contacted me about making a major donation to the Academy. He didn't talk about an amount, but he very smartly asked, "If you were to make a major donation to the Academy, where would you want that money to go?" I told him that, in my view, the Academy had not invested enough in public relations funding to demonstrate to the general public, the graduate community, cadets and the Academy staff that character development was a major program at the Academy. The Academy had received bad press as a result of cheating scandals, sexual abuse reports, and other incidents that reflected poor character and morality among a few individuals in the cadet wing. Because of an increased emphasis on religious diversity, the chapel, which had been the primary place for morality instruction and training during the first decade of the Academy's existence, was no longer the beacon of good character that it had once been. New facilities were needed to house and emphasize character development programs, activities, and events.

I asked Mark the hypothetical question, "What is the most iconic building that you always see in photographs of the Academy?" Before he could respond, I said, "It's the chapel and its spires. It was under construction when I was there and opened in 1962. We were required to attend Sunday morning church service, stay awake and listen to morality teachings, and so forth. But today the cadets don't have to go to chapel. There is little or no morality teaching, and the only subject taught about ethics and character development is the honor code and classes in philosophy and ethics with a sprinkling of character issues presented in other academic classes."

I then explained that, based on the results, the honor code alone seemed not to be sufficient. Any honor scandal at the Academy makes the national headlines and many people will simply pounce on any character issue at the Academy and beat it to death. In my

opinion, the Academy isn't putting enough emphasis on teaching character *development*.

Then Mark asked, "Do you know Erv Rokke?"

I told him that I didn't, so Mark suggested that I come to the Academy, meet Erv and share my thoughts with him. I agreed to do so. I also told Mark that I wanted to know more about the Air Force Academy Endowment Foundation.

Mark said, "The Endowment Board includes some people I think you might know—Harry Pearce, Bart Holaday, and Bill Wecker. And there are other Founding Members of the Board who have had successful professional and military careers."

I said, "Mark, I'd be happy and honored just to sit at the table with those accomplished guys and learn something from them. So yes, I'd be willing to make a trip out to the Academy to find out more about the Endowment Foundation and to meet with Erv Rokke."

Eventually, I became one of the first twelve members of the Founding Board of Directors of the USAF Academy's Endowment Foundation. My interest in character development up to that point had all been words and no action. But now, my commitment to act needed to be a leadership gift to start the ball rolling. I was blessed to be able to make the first seven-figure donation that the Endowment had received. My first gift was a restricted gift to be used only for the construction of a building for character and leadership development.

Soon, I was introduced to Lieutenant General (retired) Erv Rokke, a former Dean of the Faculty at the Academy. When we met in his office, we talked about the need for expanded facilities for character and leadership development, and it didn't take long to realize that we were on the same page. He showed me a very attractive brochure that had been produced and

presented to the Board of Visitors at their last meeting. It contained the mission statement that he envisioned for the Center for Character and Leadership Development. It was both a strategic and implementation plan for character and leadership development, one that would conduct research and share that research with Cadets and the Academy staff, as well as the greater Air Force and beyond. Erv explained that John viewed the home for character and leadership development programs much like the Kennedy Center, with a serious national and international appeal.

When I looked it over, I was very impressed. Erv asked me what I thought about it. I suggested creating a new structure at the Academy, one that people could relate to and appreciate, especially the cadets of course. It would be an important and relevant place where cadets would talk and learn about character and leadership development, instead of having the programs and the CCLD staff stealthily buried in Vandenberg Hall dormitories.

Erv said, “Max, that’s very interesting. John Regni’s office is right next door.” (John, a Lieutenant General, was then the Superintendent of the Air Force Academy.) “He’s already initiated plans for such a building.” Erv stepped next door into the Superintendent’s office and asked John if he had time for a brief conversation. The Superintendent came into Erv’s office and after a brief introduction, he confirmed that plans were underway and that the civil engineers had already preliminarily designed a building that would be located between Arnold Hall and Vandenberg Hall.

I said, “If you have an artist rendering of the building, I’d love to see it.”

He went back to his office and brought out the rendering of the building. It was a rectangular box, constructed with steel, glass and aluminum that looked like all the other buildings in the cadet area. I thought it was one of the ugliest buildings I’d ever seen,

it certainly didn’t represent the building’s purpose and significance, and I thought it was located in a terrible site. Probably in a somewhat unprofessional military manner, I said something to that effect.

John put his head back and said, “Really?” I could tell that he didn’t appreciate what I had said after all the work that had been done so far. He shrugged and sharply asked, “So what would you do?” I told him that I thought the building needed to make a strong statement. I added that architectural firms all over the world would be enthusiastically interested in designing the first new major building in the cadet area at the United States Air Force Academy. There should be a solicitation for design, a worldwide architectural contest. The building should be an *iconic structure*, one that would architecturally rival, but not overshadow, the Chapel. This new building would demonstrate that the Air Force Academy had a major focus and commitment to the development of character for the cadets.

John Regni decided the idea of an architectural contest was a good one. But he ingeniously modified that idea and presented it to Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, LLC (SOM), the architectural firm that designed and master-planned USAFA in 1954. Skidmore said that to insure that the design of a new building would complement the original plan for the Academy, the contest should be internal to SOM. The firm’s regional offices in Chicago, San Francisco, and New York City, were selected to produce competitive conceptual drawings for review by the Academy and presentation to a jury composed of members hand selected by the Superintendent.

A few weeks after the meetings with Mark Hille, Erv Rokke and John Regni, Gen Regni called me to ask if I would serve on the jury to choose the best design submitted from the architectural contest for the Center for Character and Leadership Development. I was truly honored to accept that role. Each juror was

given an advisory group to help choose the design. One of those on my advisory group was my classmate Terry Isaacson, who then chaired the Congressional Board of Visitor's Character and Leadership Subcommittee.

The design chosen was especially unique. It was selected for its iconic shape (a trapezoidal structure) which was unlike the other two competitive structures, one being a glass cube and the other a glass cylinder. The unique element was the glass trapezoid structure pointed directly to the North Star, better known as Polaris. Polaris appears to stand almost motionless in the sky, because its axis is virtually perfectly aligned with the earth's axis. All the other stars in the night sky seem to revolve around Polaris. Thus, it has been used for navigation by adventurers for centuries, often called the Compass in the Sky. For purposes of the CCLD building, it was presented as a symbol of a "moral compass" for character. When a cadet stands in front of the Honor Board, a panel of his cadet peers who have the responsibility of judging his honor violation, the North Star is visible up through the apex of the building. The symbolism is significant because one's moral compass must be consistent and ever present. Right is always right. The integrity of one's actions should never waver, just as the Earth and Polaris are never wavering in their relationship with each other. Character and one's actions should always be connected without variance.

There's a very important point to make when reflecting upon the need for the Academy's increased emphasis on character development. When my class entered in 1960, what the Academy and the Air Force expected and demanded of us was not far from the character culture that we came from. Who were our heroes? John Wayne, Chuck Yeager, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, even Roy Rogers, Flash Gordon and Steve Canyon.

However, many of today's young adults have heroes who are sports and entertainment celebrities who make

as much or more than \$50 million a year but think it's acceptable to assault their fiancées in an elevator or watch animals fight for fun and profit. Some of these kids come from an environment where cheating is acceptable even encouraged. For others, ratting on a friend for lying, cheating, or stealing is not judged as wrong. The gap between the culture in today's society and the culture needed at the Academy to prepare cadets to become "Leaders of Character" in the Air Force is wider than it has ever been. Most recently, as I write this, there have been numerous suspensions of members of the lacrosse team for improper conduct by some toward their team members for "hazing."

I've heard graduates complain that the Academy has changed and that the old standards from when they were cadets have been compromised. In my opinion, the Academy has changed out of necessity. The Air Force and the military, in general, had to change what they were focusing on in terms of character development. Those entering the Academies today come from a society with very different norms of ethics and morality than when I entered as a cadet.

Today there is a much greater need to focus on character development. The new, and very much *iconic* building—The Center for Character and Leadership Development—has made a significant impact at the Academy, not only on the physical landscape, but also on the Academy's ability to accomplish its mission as stated today:

The mission of the United States Air Force Academy is to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become Leaders of Character, motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our nation.

I'm fortunate to have been able to make contributions to improving the Academy's emphasis on character development. I have also been fortunate to be able to

continue to donate to several other programmatic initiatives such as the Journal for Character and Leadership Integration (now titled the Journal of Character and Leadership Development), the Editor-in-Chief for this journal, and an individual “character researcher” position.

Every nickel of the millions that I’ve given to the Air Force Academy has been donated for the improvement of character development. So, I’m proud to say, *“I’ve put my money where my heart is.”*

**JCLD:** That’s quite the investment. Thank you for sharing that background and context. You have had a lot of experience both in the military and outside of the military, why is character important when we start thinking about developing leaders?

**James:** The old expression is “Character counts.” And it counts both ways. Bad character creates destruction and good character creates success. If you have someone in a leadership position that makes decisions without thinking of what is right or wrong, what is good or bad, you are going to end up damaging whatever it is that they are leading. They don’t just damage themselves. I truly believe in a moral compass. There are grey areas always, but right is right and wrong is wrong. My experience in the military, when bad decisions are made – be it falsehoods or outright lies, even trimming the truth – can lead to death especially in a war. You just really need to know that the character of the people you are working with, and working for in particular, is not going to get you killed because they are going to trim the truth. In the business world, you can destroy a company in a hurry and you can certainly destroy departments. It can all be destroyed by someone who says, “You know, if I cut this corner, I don’t think anyone will find out. I think we can take a shortcut here.” It will blow up in your face and the next thing you know, you have lost the war, the job, the project, or the money. If you are in

a philanthropic area you have damaged the people you are trying to help. It’s rare, in my opinion that you get away with character flaws in action for very long. And even if you do, there’s guilt spread all around the area

where you have committed the flaw. Guilt, then causes all kinds of personal problems even if you aren’t the one who created the initial effort. If you were guilty by not saying something, then you are going to hurt. I don’t know how you can get away with becoming a good leader without having a solid base of good character.

**JCLD:** We seem to see a lot of leader failure now. Some of that is due to social media as we have access to videos of people doing things, both good and bad. Do you think it has gotten worse over time or has it always been there and we are better at recognizing it now?

**James:** I actually think it has gotten better. I’m not sure how far you want to go back. If you look at war, the reason we fought some wars was because of bad characters in leadership positions in the enemy organizations. There is also the bad character of our history inside this country...discrimination, lack of civil rights, prohibition, etc. One of my favorite authors is Zane Grey. He writes about how cowboys killed each other and rustlers. That was kind of the norm. So, for lots of reasons, I think that certainly for this country, the display and action of character has improved dramatically. I think it has improved at our Air Force Academy. We found ways to improve character within the cadet ranks as well as in the other professionals there...academic, athletic and so forth. We have found ways to harness bad character and eliminate it in many cases which is a positive result for the cadets. So, I would say, character in the United States has gotten better over the decades. However, there are notable and very public (because of social media) examples of bad character, whether it is in the entertainment

industry, the political environment, the business world or the military, but I think there is less bad character than there used to be.

**JCLD:** You brought up the Air Force Academy. How would you describe the value of the Air Force Academy?

**James:** First of all, I think there are a lot of advantages that the military academies, and the prep schools, contribute to our nation. Let me share a story. When I was selected, as an alternate by the way, to attend the Academy, there were three things that made me choose to accept the appointment. Number one was the honor. No one from my little home town of Humboldt, Tennessee had ever gone to a military academy. To be chosen to go to a brand new military academy with all of the spires and all of that, was a tremendous honor. Number two, it was an education. It was clear that the other military academies produced tremendous academic programs for their students and the presumption was that the same thing would occur and I would get a great education by going to the United States Air Force Academy. Thirdly, the reason for going was that flying jets sounded pretty cool and I could become a jet pilot like Steve Canyon in the comic strips. Those were my reasons, in that priority. In truth, they are totally upside down. If you are going to a military service academy, you should first want a military career to serve your country. Lots of schools have good academic programs and for lots of schools, it is an honor to go there. So, that's the first reason one should have for going to a military service academy. Secondly, it's because you get a great education. It's proven. Look at the stats every year when university rankings are published, they are always near the top in all the categories. That's the second reason you should choose to go. The third reason you should choose is that it is an honor to be selected to prepare you to serve

your country. You get a free education and in fact, they pay you.

Now, what convinced me was there was an article in *Life Magazine* when I was a senior in high school. There was a cover story about the United States Air Force Academy. There were all these pictures of airplanes, of the spires on the chapel, and it was modern and in the mountains. It just looked fantastic. But the one picture that really convinced me was the social center – Arnold Hall. They had a spiral staircase. They had these cadets in these stunning dress uniforms and sabers and beautiful women standing by their sides. I said, “I need some of that.” So, I went for all the wrong reasons to the Air Force Academy. But why is it important? There isn't an educational institution in the United States comparable to the military service academies that gives you the opportunity to experience growth, character growth, and an honor code. Where you can trust those around you to be truthful, and loyal and a chance to be a leader. You don't have to be the best at the Academy to get leadership experience. You can be an Element Leader, Squadron Exec, on an intercollegiate team, or an intramural team. It was a chance to experience growth in a controlled environment where character was critically important and you could trust that those around you wouldn't be taking advantage of this little farm boy coming out of Humboldt, Tennessee. There's a reason to take some of America's best, attract them into a military environment where they learn through experience as well as teachings and a professional education.

**JCLD:** With that in mind, how did your time at the Academy influence your trajectory over your life? What did you take away from that experience that has endured over time?



**James:** We have an expression that I have used in my companies that is, “Hire for Character...Train for Skills.” The predominant reason for hiring one qualified person over another is, what do you think about their character? If they are a little short on the skill levels, we ought to be able to teach them and they can learn through experience. But, character counts. We hire for character. People we could trust to do the things that we would ask them to do. The most successful business that we developed had remote locations without significant oversight. They weren’t on the manufacturing floor. They weren’t in an office building. They were out by themselves, a staff of three. There was one manager and two part-time people. We needed to be able to trust that manager. So, we hired for character and then we could train them to operate their particular retail unit. That was also true in the hotel business that I was in. There are 10,000 ways to take money out of the cash register. You need to be able to trust your people. Hire for character...train for skills. The Academy taught me that character, in people you had to depend upon whether it was a superior or subordinate, character counted, and you needed to know that it was going to work because they had solid character. I took that into the business world with me. If I couldn’t trust them, I didn’t want to work for them and I didn’t want them working for me.

**JCLD:** Is that a common approach in the business world?

**James:** No.

**JCLD:** At the Academy, our mission is to develop leaders of character. In order to do that, we have things like the Air Force Core Values. What were your experiences like regarding character in the business world? Was that a novel approach in the environment you were in or was it pretty common?

**James:** Both, actually. Which probably isn’t a surprise. Fortunately, most were good character environments, but some were not. In corporate America, you can find the same percentages that I found in my business world. There are large corporations that are hugely successful where the CEO goes to jail. It is destructive to employees, shareholders, all stakeholders. The guy may have gotten away with it for a time, but the whole thing implodes and hurts everyone. There are also companies out there where character is at the top of the list. You can think of companies where leadership at the top sets the tone and if you violate character or morality, you are not going to last and they will let you go. I had partners once, that I didn’t choose, in a multi-million dollar enterprise who pulled a policy from what had been promised. It resulted in damage to people that worked for me. They did it without my consent. I confronted them about it and we couldn’t settle it. They said it had to be done, so we agreed to disagree and I left. All of those partners, and their executive team but one, went to jail. There is an example of where your commitment to doing it right requires you to follow through and it can cost you personally. You hope eventually, that bad character will be punished. But it isn’t always. To answer your question, I see both in the world of business. Because of social media, a lot more of the bad is being exposed and appropriately punished or eliminated from their negative influence on the people they are responsible for.

**JCLD:** To that point, you see a lot of larger organizations having a focus on character through leadership centers or leader development activities as part of the organization. It seems like they are starting to recognize their role in character.

**James:** In fact, there is a whole industry that is going to continue to grow of consultants who do just

that. They go in to large organizations and examine areas that need to be improved upon in terms maybe of accountability, to remove the temptations or to discover violations. A classmate of mine from the Graduate School of Business at Stanford, when he graduated went right into that...corporate responsibility. He has continued that since 1971. So, for however many years that is, that is all that he has done. He works for large corporations and a lot of municipalities to help them make sure that corporate responsibility is something that everyone understands and understands why and he teaches that character aspect. Then he helps them put that into policies and guidelines to help people easily, without temptation or the threat of punitive action against them, do what is right.

**JCLD:** It sounds like the Academy had a very real effect on you and you have certainly made significant investments of time and money over the years. What is it about the Academy that resonates with you today in terms of your continued support and involvement?

**James:** One of the things that the Academy has been changing successfully is the appreciation of what you have experienced and learned at the Academy. For a lot of us, the bond that kept us going at the Academy was ego. We were too proud to quit. We didn't want to go home and face friends and neighbors and know that they would say to you, "He couldn't make it." So, it was ego, I'm going to tell you. Secondly, another old trite expression was that it was "the common bond of misery." We are all in this together. We will stick it out, support each other, and somehow we will make it through. I enjoyed the Academy, but that doesn't mean you like everything that you had to put up with. I had some bad experiences there which I have written about before. I was one of the guys, that when I got out, I didn't care anything about coming back here right away. I was

tired of that way of life. I loved the freedom of going to bed when I want and getting up when I wanted. That said, I loved the military. I loved what I did, I loved the flying, and the mission I had in Vietnam. Somewhere, along the way, most of us begin to look back and appreciate what that Academy experience really did for us. Whether it was self-discipline...I have to make this bed every morning...I have to shine these shoes or whether it was the benefit of following good rules and being a team member. That had been imbued in us and stuck with us, and we started to realize, something like this happened to us at the Academy.

The most important lesson that I learned at the Academy was that you can delegate authority, but you cannot delegate responsibility. It happened to me as a senior at the Academy. A third classman, gave some physical punishments, unauthorized and unattended, to a fourth classman. I was the third classman's superior cadet officer. I was the Squadron Commander. The result of that action of the sophomore against the freshman, resulted in my being removed from command. They took away my sabre, gave me a rifle, made me march in the back of my squadron, and moved me out of my squadron area into an isolated area. These punishments resulted because of an action taken by a sophomore against a freshman while I was in my room shaving.

There was a Lieutenant Colonel who said to me, "Max let me tell you a story. I was a Squadron Commander in the China/Burma/India Theater. We were short of supplies as well as fuel and pilots and we were suffering significant casualties. They sent me two wet behind the ears Lieutenants from pilot school. They were good and they did really well on our combat missions. We came back one day and they didn't land right away. They stayed up and practiced aerial combat. When they got



on the ground, I chewed them up one side and down the other. We can't stand this. We have maintenance problems, aircraft problems, and you can't spend those valuable assets. They said okay. We went on some more missions and they were fine. Then a bit later, we came back from a mission, and they did it again. Unfortunately, they ran into each other in a midair collision, killed them both and we lost two airplanes. I was the Squadron Commander. I was relieved of command, sent back to the Pentagon, and that's why I have this Lieutenant Colonel's leaf on my shoulder instead of something of a higher responsibility. Max, you can delegate authority, but the responsibility for anything that goes on in your command or your business environment is your responsibility."

Everything that I have ever done, I have recognized and tried to teach, and share with others, that you are responsible for those people that work for you. That has been a key I think, to the success that we have had. So, what I have taken away from the Academy, lessons like that that were critical and that you needed the people below you to believe you and trust you, and that you would back them unless they violated character. In which case, it wasn't going to work...the team wasn't going to function that way.

**JCLD:** It sounds like some of those lessons that you learned, you didn't recognize them as you were going through them.

**James:** Not true of that one! I cried. I lost my command. My ex-roommate announced from the tower "Cadet Colonel Max F. James, is hereby reduced to the rank of Cadet First Class." That was announced to the entire Wing. Then the Squadron, that I think appreciated my leadership, suddenly lost their leader and someone else had to take over. I hated it. But, it has proven to be an extremely important principle.

**JCLD:** At what point did you realize that lesson? Did it take some time to think through that? Clearly that example had an immediate impact, but when did you learn the lesson from that?

**James:** I believed that Lieutenant Colonel, who was the Group AOC. I got it right then. It made what I had to go through following that a lot easier. This was a principle that, in the military at least, I was going to stick by. If something happens in your command, you are going to be responsible. You are going to pay for it. You don't just get away with it. So, you better watch out, lead, and be involved in everything that is going on as much as you can. Another business motivational leader has written that you need to walk the factory floor. You can't just sit in the second floor windowed office and watch. You have to get down and be fully observant. There is another example. It resonated. Did I think it would be a major part of my leadership philosophy later on? Probably not until I ran into it somewhere along the way in the military. But it happens more often than you want to admit. Things don't always go right within your organization and you have to step up and say, my bad. I didn't know. In business, I have seen a mistake of six million dollars because something happened in my organization. It wasn't because of a lie or because it was illegal, but it was a mistake. A six million dollar mistake. I said to the people that made the mistake, my fault. I should have asked more questions and been more involved. The point is, you are responsible. What did President Truman say? The buck stops here. And it does. So, yes, I learned it in more ways than one.

**JCLD:** At the Academy, we talk about it being a leadership laboratory and we talk about it being an opportunity for people to try things and make mistakes. What do you think the role of allowing people to try and fail fits into the idea of developing future officers?

**James:** I think that the changes made at the Academy in character development have been positive from when I was there. Somebody asked me once in an interview, what was the most courageous thing I have ever seen at the Academy? I assumed they were probably asking me about physical courage. Someone saved someone from falling off a building or something similar. My response was a bit different than what they were probably looking for. There was a classmate who was engaged. He and his fiancé had plans to be married after graduation. Prior to his graduation, she became pregnant. So, at the time, the Honor Code was used, far more than it is now, to enforce regulations. The Academy would ask you if you violated a rule or if you stayed out too late and you were honor bound to tell them the truth. However, there was a thing called tact. You remember tact? For example, if you were in a receiving line and the senior officer and his wife are there and she has on a hat, and the officer says, “Don’t you think my wife’s hat is lovely?” Unfortunately, it could be the ugliest hat you have ever seen in your life. You say, “Yes sir. I think it is nice.” Which is a lie. It is called tact.

We had a thing called the non-marriage certificate. Before you could graduate, you had to sign a certificate that said you were not married. So, this classmate of mine could not do both; get married to his fiancé and graduate. He wanted to marry her as soon as they discovered that she was pregnant. He could have gone ahead with the marriage and graduated and lied on the marriage certificate. They could have gotten married and he could have said they weren’t married. He chose to resign in order to give his wife and child legitimacy and not sign this little piece of paper and lied by saying he wasn’t married. He wanted to fly so badly. He was a warrior to be. He had busted his hump to pass all of the academics. He had fought his way through the Academy and made it this far. He gave it up for his

honor. That was the most courageous thing I saw in my time at the Academy. They got married, and it is 50 some years later and they are still married. After resigning from the Academy, he went to ROTC and became a navigator. He lost his eyesight qualification and couldn’t be a pilot. He served his country proudly. And he is proud of the time he spend at the Academy. But that is the most courageous thing I saw at the Academy. Today, I don’t think he would have been tossed out. I think he would have gone in and said, “Here is the situation and what I chose to do. If you want me to serve an extra 6 months or year or something, fine but what can we do?” I believe that today someone would have at least listened with heart, instead of saying that rules are rules and we don’t want to talk to you. You must be out of here tomorrow because you had 24 hours to pack your bags and leave.

Brigadier General Wakin, who was at the Academy for 50 years, has seen all that has gone on in culture and how it has affected cadets of today versus cadets of my time. The additional temptations and problems that they have to deal with that we didn’t. The culture I came from was honorable, and a good old Southern environment. A rough dad who was disciplined and had a strong sense of right and wrong. So the gap between where I was morally, culturally, and character-wise and what the Air Force needed me to be, via the Academy’s honor system, that gap was not that great. The Academy did a good job of closing the gap. I got it. The culture that today’s applicants are coming out of, with things like social media and changes in morality, that gap from where these future cadets come from and the standard that the Academy needs is huge.

I recognized the gap 10 years ago and wanted to do something about how we could effectively close that gap. How can you close that gap in 4 years? So, I wanted to research the development of adolescent

character and see if we could come up with things to close that gap. Now it's not huge for everyone, don't get me wrong, but for the culture in general, it is. Now you can think of examples of heroes that people worship that don't have good character. Professional athletics comes to mind, but it's true in the business world as well. Look at the Madoff's of the world where lack of character has hurt so many people. So, the one thing that stands out in that change is second chances at the Academy. Depending upon how egregious the violation of honor is. That's what the honor process is all about. It gets investigated and then a decision is made. Are there grey areas to developing character? Yes. Are there grey areas to developing honor? Maybe not. Maybe right is right. That's why the CCLD building is called Polaris. That's why it points to the North Star. It's a moral compass. Right is right and wrong is wrong. But in the development of character, you are going to make some mistakes. That is what Brig Gen Wakin was saying. If you really want to develop character, the only way you are going to do so is to let them experience character temptations that you can't teach on a white board. You have to teach it through experience. I disagree with Gen Wakin to this extent. I think you can do both. But I do think that experiencing and living in an honorable environment, where character is key, where you learn to trust up and down and you learn that doing the right thing is much less painful than doing the wrong thing. If you do the wrong thing, you are going to carry around guilt. But the bottom line is that, if they have had a great education and a chance to experience what is right and what is wrong, they are going to be better off leading than if they never had that chance or experience. So, do I think we are doing a better job? Yes, I do.

A great challenge today is toleration and people tolerating those honor violations among their comrades. It's a tough one because there is an innate conflict with

teamwork or loyalty in a sport, e.g., where you see someone violate their honor, and you have to decide whether you are going to report it or keep it so that the team will continue being successful or winning. That's a tough one and not just one that occurs at the Academy. What do you do with the person that tolerates that behavior? We need to understand that if we believe we can teach aspects like honor and character, then that should have an impact on how we deal with violations. If we want to let them experience growth, then we need to have the space for them to do so. If that is a valid effort to teach character, then we ought to be the best in the world of doing that. We have a crucible in which testing on how to achieve that can be accomplished in the best way. We need to do more research on how you teach and how you develop adolescent character. That's my opinion.

**JCLD:** Could you talk a little bit more about that research, what that might look like and what role that CCLD has in facilitating that research.

**James:** To answer that question, I have to reflect back a little bit on how I got to the point that I did in supporting CCLD. When I was asked if I wanted to donate back to the Academy and, if so, what I would be interested in donating to, I explained that my interest would be in continuing to develop a stronger base of honor and making the code work better so that we didn't end up with the Academy's reputation being tarnished by the scandalous behavior of a few cadets. That has an impact on the pool from which we draw men and women of great potential as it gets smaller if the reputation is not be as good. I wanted to see if we could fix that. So, I said to the people that approached me that I wanted to help the Center. To help them and support them in some way to eliminate scandalous, dishonest behavior in the Wing. So as I said earlier, I went back and spoke to the person that was writing

the mission statement for the Center for Character & Leadership Development, Gen (ret) Erv Rokke. He had returned to the Academy to work for the Superintendent (Gen Regni). Gen Rokke had written a great pamphlet explaining the mission that they were looking for and I bought into it immediately. He said we are going to have a separate facility because we can't keep promoting this program with offices scattered within the dorms. We don't have a central place. I told him you needed an iconic structure, which was the first time that term was used. Not to reiterate what I already said about my investments, but if developing leaders of character is that central to the Academy, then I truly felt that you need to say it in a building. So, I said I was in. As a result, I was able to make a 7 figure commitment to the facility. A restricted donation to help build that building. After looking at several options, we settled on the current design. After nine long arduous years, we got it built. It was the first jointly funded project between the military and the civilian world. We had a monetary goal for donations, and we far exceed that. Why do you think that was? It's because the Long Blue Line, and others outside of the graduate community believed that we could do it and that character was important enough. To do what? To continue to build a strong core of Air Force officers that had experienced character development. That they are taught that character development is important. It was a tremendous journey. A tough one to fight. But we did it. I believe it is serving its purpose and it continues to have an even more important impact as we continue to do research and testing of theories around adolescent character development. We implement what we learn and then spread it to other organizations and universities.

**JCLD:** Along those lines, what message do you hope that carries to those outside of the Academy?

**James:** When they look at the Academy, I want them to say, "Wow, this must be important." They have a Center (and building) focused solely on character and its development. A place where they welcome others to come and learn and collaborate on character and leadership development. Why is this building important? It is visual recognition of what we are doing...emphasizing character. To show that cadets are moral men and women who have an honor code. So important, that they built a special building to highlight that commitment.

**JCLD:** It's interesting that not only does it have the internal message to cadets and the external message to other organizations and universities that we value character and leadership, but it is also a reminder to the Permanent Party personnel at the Academy about our mission, our charge, and what is important to us.

**James:** Absolutely. Sometimes you live in an environment for so long that you just passively accept what is going on around you. That can happen with this building if we don't have events there that draw attention to its purpose. As an example, the athletic directors of other universities had a major conference there to find out what we are doing to uphold high standards of character in our athletic teams and take what we share with them back to their universities. Those kind of events are critical. Otherwise, it is just an iconic building at the Air Force Academy. People can come here to learn about character and they can take it back to their units in the Air Force, their universities, etc. That is a worthwhile expenditure of effort, time, and money. Obviously, a lot of people agree with that as they are donating their time, effort, and money to character development. Do I feel good that we got it done? Absolutely. Do I hope that we see more and more demonstrable success coming out of the results of having done this? Absolutely.

**JCLD:** Along those lines and doing a little visoneering toward the future, what would success look like to you 10 years from now?

**James:** It's not just the building, but this Journal as well. There are journals for industries and professions that are absolutely accepted as the best for that industry. I would hope that this building and the support that we have gotten so far, that it will produce results that will be written up in our Journal and that there will be additional researchers that will come to CCLD for a sabbatical or a specified time, that will contribute and collaborate. That we can continue to find ways to improve character development in adolescents. That we will be recognized as the keystone of that research, development and application. There just aren't that many places where you have a group in a controlled environment where you can see the impact of different programs and practices. Ten years from now, when a discussion of character, or adolescent character, comes up they will say, "What is the Air Force Academy doing about this?" or "What does their research say about this?" It would be the natural reaction

that when you talk about character development in adolescents, to think about CCLD and USAFA. People would say, "Did you read this new article from the Academy?" That's my vision. That we are making a major contribution to character development for the Air Force and the world. That the Air Force Academy Center for Character and Leadership Development will have researched adolescent character development, applied it to test it, discovered what worked, and implemented it throughout the Wing, and then spread the beneficial results to the Air Force, other universities, and the world. That was also my vision 10 years ago and it hasn't changed.

**JCLD:** Thank you for that vision, your investment, and your time.

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