

# CHANGE AGENT

*In a conversation with Kiwanis International CEO Rob Parker, University of Georgia President Mike Adams describes how past Key Club and Circle K experiences equipped him to make a difference through leadership*

*In November of 1969, 21-year-old Circle K International President Mike Adams didn't hesitate for a moment when the offer came for him to visit the war zone in Vietnam. After spending 10 days meeting with frontline soldiers, dignitaries, and the president of South Vietnam, this young leader came home and boldly shared with Circle K members his thoughts about the progress of the war. Nearly 40 years later, University of Georgia President Michael Adams still speaks his mind, calling for change and making a difference in the lives of others.*

With 55,000 students, the University of Georgia in Athens has a larger population than many cities and towns in the world and faces some of the same complex challenges. Calling on a lifetime of leadership development experiences, including his early days in Key Club and Circle K, Adams still is on the front lines shaping the lives of men and women. On a rainy night in Georgia (OK, maybe it was late afternoon), Adams met with Kiwanis International CEO Rob Parker to talk about leadership, courage, change, and how to get things done.

**Rob Parker (RP):** In 1969, you traveled to a war zone and came home to speak your mind about it. Are

**you still doing that kind of thing?**

**Mike Adams (MA):** I've been accused of a lot of things over the years, but not being direct is not one of them. While I hope I'm always respectful, I haven't been afraid to fire a rhetorical shot across the bow to keep things moving. To turn a ship this big sometimes requires more firepower than many university presidents are willing to use. Shortly after I arrived here, we proposed six major academic changes, and I am proud to say we've completed five of them so far.

**RP:** Key Club and Circle K exposed you to servant leadership. Yet most people describe you as a bold, direct

**leader. How do you blend those two approaches?**

**MA:** I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. Servant leadership relates primarily to relationships. One thing I've been able to do is to hire and retain great people, which requires investing in relationships. The real test for me is if the people who really know you best believe you're genuine.

**RP:** In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins emphasizes the need to solve the "who" part of equation before focusing on the "what." It sounds like you've taken the same step by getting the right people on the team.

**MA:** One of my mantras is: When somebody leaves, replace them with somebody better. Sometimes that's difficult, but we've hired some really first-rate faculty in the past 10 to 11 years who have established themselves with national reputations.

**RP:** What do you do when there's difference of opinion or a clash or dreams?

**MA:** Listen. Hear them out. The sad thing is when there are more good ideas than there is money. That means you have to prioritize. It's tough message when a good idea doesn't fit into the available resources.

**RP:** What's the best way to foster change at an organization like Kiwanis?

**MA:** The world has changed a lot from the service club mentality of the 1960s and '70s. I'm not sure service clubs have changed enough to keep

up with the changing world. For example, there are probably some comparisons between universities and service clubs in the area of diversity. One thing I had to deal with in '69 and '70 as CKI President was the issue of opening membership to women. I made a pitch to the International Board, and they were not supportive of the change. We didn't want to go against the (Kiwaniis) International Board, but we also knew that change was inevitable.

**RP: What's your biggest leadership challenge?**

**MA:** The hardest thing for me to keep under control is my patience. And I've probably had times when I don't pay attention to process. It does slow you down, but if you stop and work the process, you end up with a better product.

**RP: You came to the university with a reputation and credibility. But you needed some early wins. Tell us about those.**

**MA:** I did two or three fairly visible things right off the bat. I closed down a parking lot. I created a strategic gathering place. And, in the second year, I taught a class. A UGA president hadn't done that in a long time. What the professors do here every day is extremely important. It's not all about administration or budgets or legislature.

**RP: You're exceeding your fundraising goals. What inspired people to get involved in this challenge?**

**MA:** Three things contributed to our success. First, we started with a strong, committed support base. Second, we painted a vision that most of our support base could buy into. Third, we've hired a lot of good people. We are at the US\$550 million mark on a \$500 million campaign, and by June it should end up at the \$650 million range.

**RP: How do your experiences in Kiwanis' high school and college leadership programs continue to resonate with you?**

**MA:** I don't know how many people believed me at the time, but I've always said Kiwanis' (Service Leadership) programs were its greatest asset. I had a great Key Club experience. I had a very positive Circle K experience. I was from



a relatively small liberal arts school, so I had to work hard to get elected. The whole campaign process taught me some things. I believe in those programs. They continue to build leaders out of high school and college students.

**RP: Our clubs depend on 8,000 incoming leaders who need education every year. What counsel can you offer club leaders with one year to do make an impact?**

**MA:** I'd tell people to do some real soul searching to figure out if they're willing to commit the time and resources. At the club president level, that should

be the primary outside activity. If you're going to lead, you have to say to people: This is my commitment for this year. There ought to be enough commitment for someone to see you walk down the street and to say, "Here comes the Kiwanis club president."

*University of Georgia president Michael Adams is scheduled to address the House of Delegates at the 2008 Kiwanis International Convention in Orlando, Florida, June 26-29. For more of his conversation with Kiwanis International CEO Rob Parker, visit [www.kiwanis.org/magazine/june08.asp](http://www.kiwanis.org/magazine/june08.asp).*