

Write Your Own Book

By James E. Rogers, Duke Energy Chairman, President and CEO
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Experts say that to really get people's attention, the speaker should give something away. So let's try this. Starting over here – we'll count off, and every 10th graduate will get a brand-new, electric-powered, Tesla sports car.

Are you all for doing this? Does this work for you?

Of course you know I can't do this – I am not as wealthy as Oprah.

And I believe most of you already have gadgets like iPods, iPads and smart phones.

So how's this for excitement? How about a book? Stay with me now. It's not a book about me, or written by me. And it's not a motivational best-seller – not the seven secrets of success, or the colors of your parachute, or how to network your way to the top. I'd say it's more of an adventure story. It's called "No Limits" – and the good news is, you get to write it yourself.

Did you know there's already a book out there about you?

The first few chapters have already been written. It may have been written by others based on real-life observation of how you work, how you talk, how well you play with others. You may have "consciously" contributed to these early chapters.

Maybe not.

But, with your degree in hand, I challenge you to take the chore of writing the rest of the book. You may need to reinvent and redefine yourself over time. Don't be limited by the current "book" on you.

Become the strong, central protagonist in your own story. It is your narrative. It is your story. Don't be surprised if you have to re-write a chapter or two along the way. The most successful people I know have done just that. And by successful – I don't necessarily mean financial net worth.

I mean people who know how to pursue life without limits.

Who aren't satisfied with just being satisfied.

Who put the needs of others ahead of their own, and in the end, get so much more than they put in.

I would like to share with you the stories of two people from my own company, who have inspired me. One of those people is Carol Hardison. Carol built a successful career in Information Technology at Duke Energy over 18 years.

She had a very bright future with us. She could have stayed on the management track for another decade or so – and left with a nice retirement.

But instead – in the year 2000, Carol turned the page, and began a new chapter. She left a job she loved, to fulfill her lifelong passion for helping people in poverty. She became the leader; CEO, of the nonprofit Crisis Assistance Ministry in Charlotte.

Every year, that organization helps thousands of people – in Carol’s words – “to gain stability and have hope.”

The interesting thing is that she still has close ties with Duke Energy. She syncs up our special assistance programs with people who need help with their power bills.

When she changed careers, Carol didn’t really redefine herself – but she did redefine her limits. Since college and as a Duke employee, she was a regular volunteer helping the homeless and others in need of a helping hand.

Meanwhile, she was developing a solid set of business skills in management, strategic planning and customer service. What she didn’t know was – she was preparing for an opportunity to help people in financial crisis move toward self-sufficiency.

Carol’s life’s work evolved from changing computer operating systems – to changing lives. Duke Energy’s loss was a gain for the low-income citizens of our community.

Another person I admire – who knows no limits – is Rye Barcott. Rye is not much older than you. He is 32 years old.

He spent part of his summer break from college living in Kibera. Until I met Rye, I’d never even heard of Kibera. It’s an urban slum in Nairobi, Kenya. More than 200,000 people live in squalor, in an area about the size of New York’s Central Park.

We’ve all read about places like Kibera. We’ve seen the pictures that remind us of how good we have it here. But Rye did something to change it. He is a doer.

He made an initial investment of \$26, and co-founded a nonprofit called Carolina for Kibera.

It started with a soccer program, and in time, a medical clinic. It grew into a grass-roots movement to help the people of Kibera help themselves. After graduating from college, he served five years in the Marine Corp. Rye continued to help lead the effort in Kibera while serving as a Captain in the Marines in Bosnia, Iraq and the Horn of Africa.

After his tour of duty, Rye got two master’s degrees from Harvard. He currently works for Duke Energy. But right now – he’s on a nationwide tour promoting his book, “It Happened on the Way to War – a Marine’s Path to Peace.” (In Rye’s case – he really did write his own book!)

My point is not that Rye’s a high achiever – which he certainly is. He just doesn’t let anyone else’s idea of what “one person” can accomplish get in his way.

The limits we face in life are often self-imposed. Sometimes they are based on fear. Sometimes they can stem from low self-confidence, from small aspiration, or from belief in the “book” that others have written about us.

Busting out beyond the limits involves a certain amount of risk. At the time, you never know for sure which were the right choices, or the wrong ones – which were the good breaks, or the bad ones in your life.

You may only know when you look back on them years later. Just like you don’t know what happens until you reach the end of a book.

But never, ever give up your pride of authorship as your own story plays out.

Teddy Roosevelt referred to it as being “in the arena.” T.R. is one of my heroes. This quote has been my “North Star” since my 20’s.

He said:

“The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.

Who ... if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Teddy Roosevelt was a doer.

My wish for each of you is that you have the courage to “get in the arena.”

With that thought, I’d like to turn the focus to the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and your friends in the audience; the people who are here for you today.

Have you asked them about their journey and the “book” they are writing?

You should ask them to think back for a moment – to when they were the same age as you.

You should ask them:

What were you most afraid of?

What limits did you face?

How did you overcome them – or did you?

What would you have done differently, if you could go back and do it again?

I really encourage you to talk to them about these questions before you go off to make your own way in the world. I bet many of you have already done this. I have learned – we all need mentors at every step along the way.

Now, let's all fast-forward to 60 or 70 years from now, at a time when you are hopefully reminiscing from your rocking chairs on the front porch.

I hope your life stories will not be tinged with regret for what you might have done, should have done, could have done – but didn't.

Instead, I hope they are stories of adventures pursued, achievements that mattered, lives fully lived, differences made in other people's lives and obstacles overcome.

I firmly believe in the power of one person. One person with passion and conviction can change the world – or at least a small part of it.

The best graduation gift that I – or any of us – can give you, is the copyright to your own story. Begin writing it today. Write it with passion and purpose. And write it without limits.

Thank you, and congratulations to the Class of 2011.