A Tribute to John Walton

At the edge of a fault line between two tectonic plates, the Grand Teton towers some five thousand feet over Jackson Hole below. There, near his beloved family home, John Walton, a risk-taker of the kind seldom witnessed within the world of large-scale philanthropy, died tragically on June 27, 2005, while flying a small, experimental plane. His memory will be held dear not only by his family and friends but also by thousands of low-income families, for whose children he helped find better schools. For more than two decades, he devoted much of his heart, time, intellect and charitable resources to finding a way to put children first so that genuine equality of education opportunity could be secured for all Americans.

John Walton’s father, Sam, discovered that placing the consumer first was the key to creating a worldwide retailing system that gave working people access to quality products previously beyond their means. John committed himself to doing much the same thing for the education system, seeking to redesign its very framework so that parents, regardless of means, would be in command. Motivated by a faith that gave deep roots to his simple, strong values and tenacity to his vision, he believed that his country’s renewal depended on the reform of its schools.

Sam’s accomplishment, while one of the great commercial triumphs, was in some ways less impressive than his son’s intrepid struggle, if only because the marketplace for retailers was already woven into American practice. John’s daring drive to transform the country’s schools challenged both conventional wisdom and a thicket of entrenched interests.

From the beginning, however, John Walton understood the magnitude of the task. He realized that without markets systems do not change. He knew that putting families and children ahead of vested interests would provoke relentless resistance that even might have endangered the company on which the family fortune rested.

But Walton, who had worn the Green Beret, felt no goal worth pursuing if risk were not attached. Not for him the safe philanthropy expected to enhance a corporate image. No, his concern was always focused on the consumer: in this case, the poor children who needed better schools if they were to experience the American dream.

Focused on the goal, Walton was flexible as to means. He gave great sums to privately funded voucher programs, hoping that those funds would spur public action. When this seemed insufficient, he came up with more direct political strategies, especially the mobilization of poor, inner-city, minority families whose plight, if articulated clearly, might win over public opinion. When charter schools appeared on the reform horizon, he was quick to explore ways to increase their numbers and make them more effective. Always, he understood that gains could be achieved only by maintaining a strategic vision, forming broad alliances, ignoring the temptation to micromanage, and allowing others, with less at stake, to take most of the credit.

To Walton, commitment, not ceremony, was what counted. Just as he avoided formalities and fashion in favor of shirtsleeves and jeans, so he avoided press releases, public pronouncements, and platitudes in favor of quiet discussions about what really mattered.

True, he wanted to move quickly and decisively, entering the fray with the impact for which Sam Walton had been well known. But as he discovered that the framers of the American Constitution had created a system that could change only slowly, he acquired a more patient strategic vision.

The full range of his accomplishments is yet to be tallied. Yet even a preliminary assessment is remarkable, beginning with John Walton’s major contribution to the nationwide Children’s Scholarship Fund, which revealed to a broad public the desire for school choice among low-income families. That was only the most visible of the Walton contributions. In addition, he provided support and guidance to the successful efforts to secure publicly funded voucher trials in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in Florida, and in the District of Columbia; aided the litigation that resulted in the constitutional validation of school vouchers by the U. S. Supreme Court; helped extend the charter school movement; and became a key founder and trustee for the newly formed Alliance for School Choice.

Tectonic change builds mountains, but it does so an inch at a time. John’s mortal remains now rest in a mountain’s shadow, but his spirit continues to guide us toward the distant summit.

— The Editors