

American Century Championship

Saturday, July 13, 2024

Lake Tahoe, Nevada, USA

Edgewood Tahoe

Gary Quinn

Kettja Bennett

Terri Upshaw

Nancy Harrison

Gene Upshaw Memorial Scholarship
Fund Award

THE MODERATOR: This is the Annual Gene Upshaw Memorial Scholarship Fund Award. It started in 2009, following Gene's untimely passing. It does honor his memory, while also lending some assistance to a deserving student.

This is the second year that we've been working with the Lake Tahoe Community College.

Let me introduce our special guests today from left to right: Gary Quinn, NBC VP of Programming and General Manager Owned Properties; Terri Upshaw; and also our winner, Kettja Bennett, our award recipient; Nancy Harrison, Director of the Community College Foundation. And also in the audience is Mark Thomsen. He's Lake Tahoe Community College Marketing Director.

Gary, provide an overview on the Gene Upshaw Memorial award, how it started.

GARY QUINN: This is one of my favorite moments because I get a chance to connect with Terri and get a chance to help a deserving candidate in Kettja.

I've said this story over and over again, I can't say it enough times how much Gene meant to me and this tournament. There's so many building blocks that go into 35 years of success, and he was really instrumental in the first 15 years of this tournament, in not only believing in it and participating in it, he also lived in the community and loved it, but for some reason he took a liking to me. As I grew up through my career, through this event, I think he was just a role model, inspiration of leadership.



We would sit down and he would take time out of his day -- why, I have no idea -- but he said if you're going to be managing this event, gave me tips on leadership and was such a great example.

I was always just overwhelmed at how kind and how much time he gave to me, and he made me a better person, and he helped me as a leader and a manager of this event.

So his untimely passing, obviously shocked us all, the first thing that came to mind was how do we keep his legacy going in this community because he's been a fabric of it for years and I wanted that to continue. And I wanted people like Kettja, who might not know that he was an unbelievable Hall of Fame football player and leader of the NFL Players Association, to do research on why this is named after Gene Upshaw and to do that homework and at least carry on his legacy, was most important.

Like we talked about earlier this week with Tim Wakefield's passing, and his wife, it's very important for us to continue to embrace the legacy of the people that have meant so much to us and be a part and fabric of this community because this community has embraced us, and we want to embrace it back.

It does my heart good to be able to do something like this for somebody like Kettja, who's worked so hard and she's been an inspiration and to get a chance.

Thank you to Nancy for facilitating all of this. It's a wonderful opportunity for me to reconnect with Terri and again remind the community of how great Gene was.

THE MODERATOR: Terri, thank you for making the trip. Tell us about what this means to you.

TERRI UPSHAW: Thank you, Gary, for those kind words. It's always special to come back to, first of all, to Tahoe, which was a really special place -- still is -- in my heart and for Gene. This was his place to escape from work and all the pressures of his job to be in a community that he loved. He absolutely loved Tahoe, loved the people of both north and south of the lake and really embracing the community here.



When he started working with Gary back in the day on this prestigious event now, it was just who Gene was. Gene would give his time to anybody and everybody because that's just who he was. He was kind of a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy and always wanted to be a part and help in any way to be a leader in many ways.

So to be here, it's special. For you, this is quite an honor to be able to stand next to you and hear about your accomplishments, where you're going, and Gene was about paying it forward, leadership, and taking the time to give to others, and I can see that with you. And you've got a bright future ahead of you.

THE MODERATOR: Nancy, give us a little background about Lake Tahoe Community College and then tell us a little bit about Kettja and what she's been doing and where she's headed.

NANCY HARRISON: In my role as the foundation director, I am honored and fortunate that I get to work with generous individuals and organizations who want to support our bright, hardworking and very deserving students.

So like NBC is awarding this \$10,000 scholarship to Kettja to continue her educational journey, this is our single largest award that any student is receiving. So it is such an honor to Gene's legacy and what he stood for and that we're continuing that, and we're working together to support these students to continue Gene's legacy.

This spring, we had 287 students graduate with their associate's degree, and another 87 earned certificates. LTCC students work throughout various industries in this community and are an integral part of South Lake Tahoe. So they are serving you food, bussing tables, checking you into your hotel, cleaning guest rooms, providing child care, and even working in our forests like Kettja doing field reduction work to make our forests safer and more fire resistant.

So our students are out there and you're meeting them when you're here in Lake Tahoe. Our students come from diverse backgrounds. Many, like Kettja, are the first in their family to attend college. For some, English is not their first language. They often are working multiple jobs or one big full-time job while they are attending classes.

Some of them have families of their own, children that they are raising while they're going to school, and then we even have students who are overcoming the challenges of incarceration to earn their degree.

So these are our students at Lake Tahoe Community

College, and they are the heart of our efforts for the foundation that we are all working together to support to continue Gene's legacy.

So we're so grateful to NBC for this \$10,000 scholarship. It will almost pay for Kettja's first year. This next year she's continuing on at the University of Nevada, Reno to earn her degree in mechanical engineering. She has already started.

She is taking calculus three right now. She graduated from LTCC with her associate's degree, focusing in math and science, 3.59 GPA, and she is working full time supervising fuels reduction crews, multiple crews, across the Northern California region.

She's a great example of our students who have overcome challenges, and with this support it's so great that she's going to continue on and do fabulous things with her engineering degree.

I'll hand it off to Kettja to tell us a little more about her background and her journey.

KETTJA BENNETT: It's really a blessing to be here and to receive this scholarship. So actually a little bit, when I was with my birth mom, I lived a couple blocks down from right here. I would have never thought I would be here today doing this. So it's pretty crazy to think about.

Growing up wasn't the easiest for me. My birth mom, she had mental illnesses and also was an addict. She really struggled to take care of her own self.

My birth father, I wish I could tell you where or who he was, but I have yet to figure that out. I would really like to figure that out.

My younger sister and I, we lived with my birth mom until I was about six years old. We were put into the foster care system, and I think it was right before I turned 12, we were adopted. It was the last home we were in, the home we were in the longest adopted me and my younger sister.

Since I was adopted, I don't qualify for any of the financial aid for foster youth because I wasn't in foster care at the age of 13. So receiving this scholarship is definitely a great help for paying for school.

The one blood-related family I know is my younger sister and my older brother. So one thing I definitely want out of life is I want to create my own family, have kids one day.

One thing that sticks in the back of my head is I don't want to end up like how my birth mom was and have my kids go



through what I went through.

There's a couple things I want to do before I have kids. One is having my home. I don't want to have to worry about renewing my lease or increase of the rent -- and that actually just happened to me a little bit ago. Just a stable home. When I was with my home, we kind of bounced all over the place. I just want a secure home for my family and myself.

The other thing is a good-paying job and to be financially stable. And the reason why college is so important to me and this scholarship is I think my degree in mechanical engineering is definitely going to let me get to that point of life.

Growing up was definitely hard. I didn't really have like a mom or a dad to call on, like, hey, what do I wear to the golf tournament? Things like that. Just like what normal kids would call their parents. I never really had that connection with anybody, and it's honestly kind of weird to say "my mom or dad." The last time I said that was when I was six years old with my mom, never with my dad.

I definitely went through hard times. When this scholarship actually came about, when I was able to apply for it, I wouldn't say I was going through a hard time, not too much, but maybe like a lack of motivation.

So before this scholarship, I had no idea who Gene Upshaw was. Reading about him, researching him, the things that he had done, it's just like it was an instant motivation for me. It was a light switch of motivation for me to keep going and to finish out the last quarter. I think I was about halfway through spring quarter at Lake Tahoe Community College, a bunch of stuff was piling up with work, finding a new place to move into, and things like that, so it was kind of like perfect timing. Not only has this scholarship helped me financially, but it's also really helped me just get that motivation back and continue forward.

One thing that really stood out to me about learning about Gene was just like how much he cared for his players. And the reason why that stood out is I played softball all growing up. I was a softball pitcher, and there were times that I got hurt. Gene, he just cared about his players so much. And I do have some amazing coaches. There are some coaches out there that would rather care about winning instead of the player's future and things like that. So just to hear how important the players and everybody was to Gene was amazing.

Just his leadership and him being willing to help and all those things, it's just amazing. I can't remember if I read it or watched a video, but I'm not sure what the player

needed help with, but he walked up to Gene, and Gene ended up just writing out him a personal check right there to help him get through whatever struggle it was. That was super awesome.

He was pretty humble, and I was reading about like he was kind of like a loud person.

(Laughter)

I think that's pretty cool to be around. I'm just going to take the leadership, and I think in the future, if I ever have any problems with my motivation again, I can always look back on this day and also when I was writing the scholarship, learning about Gene, it could always just help me move forward with that. I'm really thankful to be here today and to receive this scholarship, and most importantly, learn about Gene and actually meet Terri. That's awesome.

GARY QUINN: Kettja, your character is off the charts. I don't want to speak for Terri, but you're a part of our family from now. You're a part of the NBC Sports American Century and Gene Upshaw family.

And you're joining an alumni. Linda is down in the front row, her son, Garth, was a recipient in 2012, has now just graduated from physician assistant school and passed his boards. You're joining an alumni of special kids too.

The sky's the limit, mechanical engineering, go for it, but we're always here for you.

Q. Very impressed about your story. What do you plan to do with the mechanical engineering degree?

KETTJA BENNETT: So right now I'm a field operations manager to field reduction crews, and I don't even know if I have an actual job description, I just do a bunch of stuff, payroll, bidding jobs and things like that.

So I would like to take all of those skills and eventually move up to something in the mechanical engineering field.

Q. As a mechanical engineer, could you help me with my golf swing?

KETTJA BENNETT: I don't know about that. I have to practice my own. I can swing a softball bat.

Q. Terri, I don't remember this from 15, 16 years ago, but I was reading up on Gene. He withdrew in 2008. Was that because he was sick?

TERRI UPSHAW: Yes.

Q. And he went home and he died like 10 days later?

TERRI UPSHAW: Yes.

Q. With pancreatic cancer?

TERRI UPSHAW: Yes.

Q. Does that say something about how tough he was?

TERRI UPSHAW: I guess, yes. He actually passed away and was not diagnosed until after his passing of pancreatic cancer. And it being one of the deadliest cancers and extremely painful, I guess he hid it from his wife, too, and maybe even himself.

He wasn't under the care of any doctors for a particular symptom. And it came quick. I say that the good Lord knew how to take him, when to take him and where to take him because Tahoe was his favorite.

Q. Tell us a little bit, Gene's legacy continues with the Gene Upshaw Cancer Foundation Center up in Truckee.

TERRI UPSHAW: The cancer center, part of the Tahoe Forest Hospital system, we have a beautiful cancer center in Truckee, California. And it's remarkable. It's beautiful.

There was nothing there when Gene was going through his -- he really actually didn't go through treatment. He was admitted into the hospital on a Sunday and passed away three days later. So I didn't do the cancer journey with Gene.

The docs are great up there, but the facility, they didn't have a facility. Now they have a cancer center where it treats this region here. It treats patients -- I learned a lot more, but patients would have to go down to Reno, Sacramento.

When you receive radiation -- I didn't know this at the time -- but it's an ongoing daily process and it doesn't take that long for actual radiation, but the whole process of getting into the facility, being treated, the whole process. So there were people that, without having radiation in Truckee, were driving down to Reno or Sacramento daily.

There are so many programs within the hospital that they support families, and just there's wellness, all kinds of things in the cancer center there. So it's just a beautiful facility. It really is spectacular.

Q. Terri, we heard briefly about Garth, one of the alumni. I'm curious, is there an alumni? Have we been

following up with them and their careers? Because that was really interesting about Garth.

GARY QUINN: Actually, Richard Salazar from last year, has reached out and just kept me posted on his progress.

He's going down in a field where I'm not of much use to him, but he is staying in touch with me. Janine White, her daughter, Anna, is now a nurse in Hawaii.

So there are a few. Not everyone over the 12 years or however long it's been -- 14 years. But we try to stay connected. Like, I'm going to give Kettja my contact information and if I could be a reference for her or help her in any way moving forward, that offer always stands.

Q. Kettja, I recently found my sister who was adopted. She found me when she was 56. I get emotional when I talk about it. But you are killing it in life, if you don't know that. You've got the right goals. You're smart. You have this scholarship. You already know what's important. It took me til I was 40. You're doing a great job. But I hope it's okay if I ask this, but you're doing really good. What would you say to your birth mother or your birth parents right now on the eve of this day when you can start to feel success coming your way?

KETTJA BENNETT: When I first got taken away, I was kind of upset with her. She wasn't going to do her drug rehabilitation and things like that. But now that I look back, I'm definitely not mad at her at all. She fought mental illnesses. I think she's somewhere in Ventura to this day. That's where my little sister was born.

So I think it would honestly just be good to kind of see her, and I haven't seen her since I was nine years old. That was the last time.

For my birth father, I don't think I'm mad at him at all. I don't even if he knows that I exist. I know nothing about him, not his name, anything.

Q. Terri, you spoke about what you're looking for in scholarship recipients. So what was your reaction hearing Kettja's story and hearing her qualifications, if you will?

TERRI UPSHAW: Well, it's interesting -- and I think Gary will agree with me -- every year we say, "How can this be?" The bar, the bar, the bar keeps going up.

It's just remarkable the caliber of individuals that are selected that take the time to research about Gene, understand his qualities, who he was as an individual.

NBC, American Century, Gary, everybody in this part of this event have also shown what it is to lead by example and do the right thing.

So selecting these individuals -- I'm glad I don't have to do the selection process, quite honest, but it's remarkable. And to hear all the stories of the past recipients. I occasionally get a letter or an update, and I love to hear how the individuals are doing.

GARY QUINN: I always say to Phil, "Who do you think I should pick?" There's so many candidates. But you were the clear-cut this year. It was unbelievable.

KETTJA BENNETT: Thank you.

Q. Kettja, you talked about what you're going to do moving forward. But can you talk about your experience with LTCC and how it's helped you get to where you are now?

KETTJA BENNETT: I remember when I first started, I just did it all online. I had no idea how to even start. I actually paid for my first class. I didn't know I had the Promise Grant to waive my tuition.

And walking in, the first day I was going to the Promise program, and they all just helped me out. They really helped out me a lot. And all the teachers, faculty, I've learned, once I started UNR July 1st, I'm in this Calculus 3 class and all of it is review for me. I was really thankful for that.

That's saying something about the teachers at Lake Tahoe Community College. They were all so supportive. It was pretty awesome going there. I'm glad that's the path I chose to go.

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