

**The
Kids Unlimited**

25th



Celebrating a quarter century of youth development



The Kids Unlimited 25th Anniversary Story

Celebrating a quarter century of youth development

Written by
YOU!



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Dedication



Raised 60-plus years ago in the very neighborhoods that surround Kids Unlimited, Chuck Martinez understood the importance of an opportunity. Growing up with the surname Martinez in a community that wasn't very diverse expanded his lens for the equity — or inequities — of life.

Chuck's life ended July 28, 2022, after a grueling 10-month battle with cancer. He was a fighter and champion to the end.

Born into poverty, often with only a single parent as provider, Chuck also knew how difficult it was to participate because of factors he couldn't control as a kid. He recognized at an early age how important an opportunity could be, and through his relentless work ethic, Chuck seized his opportunities and offered them to others.

As a volunteer board member of Kids Unlimited for nearly 15 years, Chuck's influence was transformational. He was our board chairman during a tenure that witnessed some of our most impactful accomplishments, including the beginning of KU Academies in Medford and White City, as well as the oversight of our campus expansions.

Chuck's professional credibility matched his kindness. His expertise in commercial real estate combined with his passion for serving our kids were incredible gifts to our organization. While professionally his contributions were invaluable, his personal dedication to our kids was extraordinary.

For more than 15 years, Chuck built personal relationships with our kids. Whether it was through mentoring young people, supporting their education and career goals, coaching girls basketball teams every summer or logging thousands of miles across the country on enrichment trips for KU participants, Chuck's dedication was undeniable.

As board president, Chuck knew the differences we make today are imperative to what we can expect tomorrow. His generosity with time and money, coupled with reverence for Kids Unlimited's responsibility, was humbling.

While there have been many who have helped, Chuck's personal friendship and unwavering commitment to our kids were inspiring. His love for what we do echoes daily in our promise to him — and others we've lost like him — that what he stood for and believed in would never be forgotten.

Chuck's legacy is a testament to how one person's belief and passion can effect change. His love and conviction for our children is a standard embedded into the character of who we have been and who we will become.



Humbled, grateful and proud. Commemorating our 25th anniversary is monumental, and it is a true blessing to have the opportunity to step back and reflect on the journey that has made Kids Unlimited what it is over the past quarter century.

The question I'm constantly asked is: "Did you ever think ... (insert one of KU's countless achievements) would happen?" The answer is always: "Never."

Since the beginning, I've embraced our mission to be a shared journey with those we call our Kids Unlimited family. Over the years, that work has involved thousands of kids and families and the celebration of many "firsts." Today, it's incredible to see the generational impact our work has made on transforming our kids, their families and our entire community.

Our story is an unbelievable tale of growth since Kids Unlimited's inception in 1998 as a grassroots afterschool program with 50 participants. It's a tale of perseverance and validation of the hope possible when our heroes — volunteers, staff, parents and donors — come together to ensure the Unlimited is possible.

I can't begin to describe all that the past 25 years of work have meant to me without smiling, laughing

and shedding some tears. It's been inspiring to see what our work could mean to changing the lives of our kids and forever changing the norms of our Southern Oregon community.

There was time early in the evolution of Kids Unlimited that I would ask: "Why here? Why Medford?" The answer was in recognizing our achievements. Watching our kids work hard and effect change inspired the belief that anything was possible, and today those efforts have become institutions.

There has never been a prescribed path for the future, but our foundation has been a commitment to a relationship. That relationship is with a stronger, more resilient, more inclusive community than the one we first encountered 25 years ago. We will continue to listen, learn and evolve to build on our accomplishments, taking the Unlimited to even greater heights.

Plenty of work lies ahead, and we expect to encounter challenges. Change is never easy, but we now know it's doable and are motivated by our responsibility for empowerment through opportunity.

Thank you to everyone who contributed their stories to our Kids Unlimited Story.

— Tom Cole, founder and CEO



Early years: Causes, concerts, controversy and caring

1998-2001

Kids Unlimited was conceived to provide services that never existed. Whether it was afterschool programs at low-income schools, summer camps dedicated to equity or trying to fund those services with dances aimed at what kids wanted, the early years were about proving we belonged.

We founded Kids Unlimited as a nonprofit and established its brand. With no clue it would be more than a mission, we started a movement.



**KU starts
afterschool
program**

1998



**Afterschool
programs
grow**

2000



KU nationally recognized by MTV and Rolling Stone

2000

2001

1998

**First
summer
camp
offered**



1999

**Vibes Main 1
opens**



**Bo Diddley
performs at
VIBES**



2001

**Carpenter Dance
studio opens**



“I spent my working career as an elementary school teacher, and it wasn’t long after I retired that I went looking for volunteer work with kids. I found my sweet spot at Kids Unlimited’s Oak Grove afterschool program in Medford. Here was a team of compassionate educators offering many things these underserved children needed: healthy food, supervised outdoor play, academic assistance, choice of enrichment activities, adherence to group rules, self-esteem and respect for others.

“I volunteered once a week and came away with so much more than I gave. My favorite times were spent outdoors. There, I brought balls, jump ropes, hula hoops, small and large bubbles and flying things.

“The balsa wood airplanes I knew as a child became a KU mainstay. The kids colored, assembled, modified and flew them. I became known as the Airplane Lady, which really tickled me. I came for the kids and stayed for 12 years.

“The afterschool programs were rapidly expanding to include more schools, field trips and summer day camps, which alone had an enrollment of 98 kids. Kids were having a problem just getting to KU. The combination of small, old buses and vans — or renting school district buses at a substantial cost — couldn’t fulfill KU’s transportation needs.

“It was at this time that my mother, Mary Howard, funded our family’s modest Howard Foundation. We sponsored KU for two years to generate enough money to buy KU a new bus. It was painted bright yellow with KU’s big logo on all sides.

“The kids, drivers and teachers were elated and even made their own video of using the bus. It was a game changer.”

— Martha Howard-Bullen



“What’s it like to be inspired, motivated, engaged and then meet someone who says something like: ‘Yeah, that’s interesting, and how about we do it this way?’ That’s Tom Cole!

“I met Tom 25 years ago when he knew he could change the world. He was this cool guy in shorts, T-shirt and had a ponytail. He was the pied piper of Phoenix/Talent kids, and he had a bigger vision. And I can say that vision has grown and changed and keeps forward-focused still 25 years later.

“Tom wanted to do cool things with kids that were positive, that fought against all the images they were seeing and wanted to create a nightclub called VIBES, Vitality in Becoming Educated Socially. He wanted to create Kids Unlimited with truly unlimited opportunities. He wanted kids to see their futures in hopes and dreams that they maybe weren’t seeing at home or at school, and he did it! And so much more ...

“Tom, Hank Collins and I went to see the then city manager of Medford and asked about the city supporting this location downtown. Some people were afraid to see 500 kids in one place, and Tom said: ‘At least you’d know where they were!’

“I was all in, and United Way gave \$500 to help it get going. And I volunteered. I was on the founding board of directors. I remember Tom telling me I could chaperone at the dances. I only did it a couple of times because I wasn’t good at saying: ‘You can’t dance that close together.’ I learned so much, though. Heck, I even learned about krumping.

“Kids Unlimited happened. VIBES happened. The vision kept growing. Eventually came sports teams, a school, career paths and the UNLIMITED became real. I look now at some of the staff and board and realize I knew them when they were in fourth grade. I watched them grow up, play sports, get in trouble, get out of trouble — and I watched them hold the promise of community. I’m the lucky one!

“And the vision keeps growing. Here’s to the next 25!”

— Dee Anne Everson, Executive Director United Way of Jackson County

“It was early in my first term as Jackson County Commissioner (approximately 1999) that Hank Collins took me to meet Tom Cole at Kids Unlimited in the old bank building. Hank was director of Jackson County Health and Human Services, and he had seen what Tom was attempting.

“Hank caught the fire and passion that Tom showed for serving underserved kids in the school system. It was easy for me to see what Hank saw and what Tom was achieving. To this end, I made sure Kids Unlimited got the county’s \$15,000 grant to help with the afterschool programs, and I saw an opportunity to support Tom on the business side of the nonprofit by becoming one of his mentors.

“Tom had many dreams about what the KU program could include but the risk of rapidly escalating rent presented a risk to the planning. That was when I convinced Tom he had to find a building and purchase it. I took him to meet Sid DeBoer, Mike Burrill and Sherm Olsrud to see what property might be available and suitable for this ambitious young man’s programs.

“During this research, I ran into Kellie Hill, who owned the McDonald’s franchise in White City. Her dad owned the Rider Bowling alley on Riverside in Medford. After his passing, he’d wanted Kellie to ensure that his beloved alley would be a lasting and proud legacy in honor of his wife. Becoming home to KU was the perfect opportunity for Kellie to fulfill her dad’s wish.

“Within two years, funds were raised, an agreement was struck and the new location was secured. During the renovation, Tom took me on a tour of the building. The kids were helping Tom and other volunteers clear the building. Amid all the dust and debris, an ever ambitious Tom



shared his next challenge with me: He needed to add a gym for the basketball program. I agreed we could do it.

“After my 16 years as Jackson County Commissioner, in 2004 I was ready to start a consulting business, and KU was to become my first client. My job was to help with fundraising. KU had not done much active fundraising as it relied on grants, but we needed to get into serious fundraising mode.

“First we needed clear financial statements, so we worked with staff to include information we needed to assure investors of KU’s financial responsibility. Outstanding new board members with strong fundraising experience were appointed, and community leaders Bill Thorndike and Patsy Smullin courageously agreed to put their endorsement on this early fundraising effort.

“I brought Sherm and Wanda Olsrud into the Rider bowling alley during construction, and we showed them the Tom Cole dream: the addition of a gym for the kid’s basketball program. The Olsruds, who supported kids’ programs all over the valley, believed in this passionate young man and his programs. They wrote their first check to KU for \$350,000 for what is now known as the Olsrud Gym. Tom and I approached Sid DeBoer, and he generously promised \$50,000. The



rest is history. We now had the means to start construction, and Andy Batzer made it possible to build the gym for well under \$1 million.

“So many wonderful people were involved with Kids Unlimited on so many levels. One of my last conversations with Sherm, he said: ‘We have done so many great projects together’ ... and of course, I gave Sherm and Wanda full credit for their investments in kids. I had given them a county community service award for their involvement in the county fairs and support for rural families. Now this was support for kids in an urban setting. What a great couple! I liked it that Tom always invited them for special occasions, and they always showed up. Great memories.

“As you read this and other commemorations, I’m



sure you understand how many of us caught the fire, passion and drive of Tom Cole. His passion for serving underserved kids and empowering families in our community is infectious.

“When I met Tom, in the 1990s, he was always in crisis mode, surviving the latest blows to the programs and the kids. Today the dreams are still evolving, but they do so on a stable and successful foundation. In addition to the exceptional service they provide to families and the community, KU has developed fundraising expertise, a strong network of community leaders and, most importantly, a record of incredible success for the kids in the programs.

“Tom dared to dream big for these kids and to work tirelessly to realize those dreams, and in turn we believed in Tom’s dream. Today KU provides unlimited opportunity for Tom’s kids as it has grown from an afterschool program to a full charter school.

“Tom will always be my hero. His selfless and inspired leadership has brought an invaluable asset to our community. It’s an honor to have been a part of KU’s 25 years and to watch the programs develop and grow successfully. I will continue to support, as I can’t wait to see what the next 25 years will bring.”

— Sue Kupillas



“The building on the corner of Front and Main was the ghost of a bank. Posters at the entrance to the first-floor cavern announced alcohol-free dance nights for teens. The second floor, devoted to afterschool activities and tutoring, also held the cluttered office of Tom Cole, whom I was meeting for the first time.

“It was off-season for Oregon Shakespeare Festival, so I was on the lookout for material for my Jefferson Monthly column, ‘Theatre and the Arts.’ I’d heard Kids Unlimited, Tom’s initiative to provide resources for at-risk youth, was staging a fundraiser featuring the iconic blues artist Bo Diddley, and I liked the opportunity to mix social issues with the arts.

“Our conversation began with Bo Diddley, stretched on for a couple of hours — and hasn’t ended yet. Tom’s vision for reaching out to Medford youth, meeting needs and motivating success made sense. As a former teacher, I couldn’t resist signing on to work with the KU kids after school, even though it wasn’t clear to me at first what I should and/or could be doing. Once I realized the answer was anything useful and wholesome, I saw progress and its potential everywhere.

“One project took shape when I discovered the kids’ math workbooks offered a matrix mapping the multiplication tables from 1 to 12. Apparently, students had been encouraged to refer to it while doing homework. In other words, skip the memory development and exercise of the brain. After that, I brought in flashcards, and we ran multiplication drills. Each Unlimited kid who managed to answer the full, shuffled set without a hitch received \$5. I wonder if they can run through them today.

“The KU journey went on to transform a Riverside Avenue bowling alley into the colorful, well-equipped Kids Unlimited Academy now serving preschool through eighth grade. My favorite memory there comes from teaming with the wondrously creative, Spanish-fluent Gee Gee Walker, in an afterschool program for girls featuring Mexican culture and history. The final classes presented a costumed enactment in both Spanish and English of the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

“As I’ve grown older, my hands-on work with Tom’s kids has necessarily ended. I’m still an avid fan, though, of the South Medford Lady Panthers basketball team, which he took over soon after I met him. Today, the annual trip to the State Finals in Portland has become a favorite ritual, and thanks to his emphasis on scholastics, countless young women he has coached have attended college on athletic scholarships.

“At least once during basketball season, the elementary students from KUA are bussed to a home game at the high school. It is a truly heartwarming sight to see them trundle into the gym in their KUA polo shirts and climb the bleachers to cheer for their future selves.”

— Molly Tinsley

When filmmaker and set designer John Foote started building a nightclub and performing arts center in downtown Medford, there were “a lot of doubters.”

“They were afraid of it,” he said of VIBES Main 1, the nightclub and performing arts center operated by Kids Unlimited.

Disputes with city government, overzealous policing and general misconceptions around KU and founder Tom Cole embattled the fledgling nonprofit. So much “b—s—” and “negativity” were aimed at Cole and KU that everyone, Foote included, wondered if the youth development organization would ever reach its goals.

“Tom figured out a formula that took it away from the standard, boilerplate, corporate template,” said Foote. “He’s never compromised his vision.”

Instead, Cole gradually mobilized the community around KU and efforts to install its youth center in a remodeled Medford bowling alley. Five years after VIBES, Foote was tasked with designing the new KU facility’s layout. He also put on a filmmaking program for KU participants every summer with grants from the Jackson County Housing Authority.

Overseeing architectural additions and putting in years of physical labor, Foote helped KU staff and volunteers transform the organization’s headquarters. Foote, who now works locally in event production, also served on KU’s board of directors, including as board president, before stepping aside about a decade ago to reclaim some of his personal life.

“It’s kind of something you’re indebted to for a long time,” he said. “The Rogue Valley is absolutely a better place because of this organization.”

Looking back on more than two decades of KU’s growth, Foote said he’s “completely and constantly blown away.” From its first summer camp that consisted of Cole spraying kids with a hose to becoming a “banner and benchmark” for enrichment, said Foote, “Kids Unlimited is the actual organization that has proven, trackable, tangible results.”

“The kids were magnetized toward Tom,” said Foote, recalling how the KU founder would turn teens away at the door of VIBES when they hadn’t come to his afterschool program and done their homework.

“He went to the streets,” said Foote. “It was through tough love, consequences and accountability.”



“I first met Tom Cole at a meeting with Rogue Community College staff about outreach programs for Latin American students. Tom and I felt a special calling to serve this population, most of whom were the sons and daughters of farm workers. Tom’s passion, dedication, conviction and vision became apparent to me. It was then I realized that I no longer needed to continue with the Ayala Foundation for Education Equality. I decided to get out of his way and lend my support as Kids Unlimited collaborator and friend.

“Fast-forward 25 years later: Tom’s vision has not only changed thousands of lives but has also given us a model that can be replicated in other parts of Oregon.

“Thank you, Tom, for your great contribution and gift to the Rogue Valley.”

— Laz Ayala



A Medford native who “grew up on the wrong side of the tracks,” Reginald Breeze had a lot of empathy for Tom Cole’s drive to serve the city’s disadvantaged kids.

“He was operating on a shoestring,” said Breeze. “He could only pay a small amount of rent to start with.”

But the real estate developer signed an agreement to lease the former Wells Fargo building on Medford’s Main Street to Cole, who wanted to open an under-21 nightclub there. Before the paperwork was even finalized, however, Breeze’s phone “blew up” with calls from downtown business owners and city councilors voicing their opposition.

The “firestorm” didn’t deter Breeze, who said he has “marveled” not only at Cole’s ability to win over naysayers but build Kids Unlimited over the next two decades into the region’s largest youth development organization.

“You really can’t imagine how this could have happened,” said Breeze of KU’s trajectory. “There’s something about (Cole); he has these superpowers.”

“No normal person would agree to it, but the next thing you know, you’re out there marching right along.”





Changing the game: Bowling lanes become basketball gym

2002-2006

Five years into our journey, it was clear that finding a permanent facility was critical to our success. Trying to open a place where teens could socialize couldn't have been more challenging. We didn't know one of Medford's historical outlets for play, Medford Bowling Lanes, would become our forever home.

The Rider family cooperated to draft our organization's loan on their former bowling alley. Accelerated by our "Raise the Roof" campaign, construction of the gym was key to KU's basketball program, a magnet for our efforts that ultimately changed the landscape of youth sports locally and leveled the playing field for our participants. Finally, after years of proving our work was worthwhile, we found the permanence to expand some of our most important programming.



First basketball program begins



Kids Unlimited gets a new home on North Riverside

2002

KU middle school program begins



2003

2004

2005

CEO Tom Cole appointed to Governor's Juvenile Justice Committee



2006

“Tom Cole and Kids Unlimited have been a very important part of my life going way back to Day 1 — 25 years ago. Seeing what Tom has accomplished — converting what was an old bowling alley into the educational complex it is today — is truly amazing. I feel privileged to just be a small part of that journey important to the many folks who have benefited from all Tom has accomplished.

“I’m just one of the many folks who have been inspired by Tom Cole’s vision and commitment to accomplishing the improbable: imparting critical life skills and creating opportunities for the many underserved/economically disadvantaged youngsters in our community. I feel privileged to have participated in all 25 years of this journey, from laying the basketball floor in what was once a bowling alley, to helping assemble the furniture in the first classrooms in what would become KU Academy, to helping organize and operate 15 years of the Rotary/KU instructional basketball program for fourth- through sixth-grade youngsters from the district’s Title I elementary schools.

“It has been quite the journey and, at least in my



opinion, the kids are not the only people who have benefited from the experience. Tom, congratulations on the 25 years of unwavering commitment to the youth of our community. And thanks for inviting me along for the ride.”

— Roger Stokes

“Medford Rotary Club members, including president Roger Stokes, discussed in 1999 how we could involve more members directly with projects to improve our community. We wanted physical participation to quell frequent suggestions that we participated more with our pocketbooks. With that in mind, we divided the club into 14 group members and assigned each group to a Medford school to make a difference in student needs. Our new plan, Connecting With Kids, met with mixed success. Some groups made a big impact, and others resorted to contributing money rather than physical action.

“We became aware of a growing organization named Kids Unlimited, headed by Tom Cole, that had afterschool programs in several west side grade schools targeting needy children. Roger, Rick Hutchins and I met with Tom, who was excited to get backing for a KU program to provide basketball instruction to third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students, based on ‘pass to play,’ meaning completing schoolwork before participating in weekly two-hour basketball clinics. This required full buy-in by teachers, staff and parents to operate the program that ended with live games on two or three weekends.

“Rotarians provided coaches, referees, monitors and financial support that allowed all students to be RECOGNIZED and rewarded with jerseys, sweatshirts and basketballs with the motto ‘wear me out’ printed on each ball, bestowed at an end-of-the-season banquet where all family members were invited. This program expanded over 16-plus years to include several grade schools, where many young children benefited from a structured program, involving a sport never previously available to them, run by role models that encouraged their progress and future successes.

“Early on, we had a committee to administer the basketball program, but within this group was the trio of Roger Stokes, Tom Cole and myself who began meeting every month or so over breakfast. Tom took over the South Medford Lady Panthers basketball program,

which was in disarray. This allowed us to do some ‘breakfast’ coaching, as well as fine-tuning the KU basketball program. Along the way, we convinced Pat Berry to join the breakfast group, who added so much to our conversations. Occasionally, I had the chance to attend some Panther practices, even participating in some free throw coaching of players. Over the years, this ‘breakfast club’ has formed a friendship that is irreplaceable. This year, our four ‘breakfast brothers’ were able to attend the state girls 6A basketball championship playoffs, along with wives and family members, a fitting climax to 25 years of KU.

“KU and Tom Cole have created an organization that has given back to many adults something special, in addition to those benefits for thousands of students. His presence has led to many friendships both within and outside KU that we all cherish. My wish is to see KU renamed ‘The Tom Cole Center for Kids Unlimited,’ based on 25 years of dedication, expertise and love — not based on a financial contribution.”

— Tom Tangeman



“Growing up as a Kids Unlimited kid, I felt empowered to break barriers and to change the narrative of what a first-generation Latina student can accomplish if given the opportunity. Being part of KU has allowed me to accomplish things I never even dreamed about.

“For undergraduate I attended Bates College. After graduating, I received the Fulbright Grant to teach English in Colombia for two years. When I returned to the states, I attended Arizona State University and received my master’s in secondary education. I am truly grateful for KU and to the people who support the organization.

“I was part of KU’s first afterschool program. I started kindergarten without speaking a single word of English. I still remember my first day walking into the cafeteria and hearing Edgar, a KU staff member, greet me in Spanish and another staff member, Tanny, greet students with a big, welcoming smile.

“During homework time, I greatly appreciated the one-on-one and small-group support I received because there was no way I could have done my homework on my own. I know this support played a key part in my English acquisition. The staff went out of their way to make students feel seen, heard and valued.

“My parents — seeing the positive impact the afterschool program was having on me and my siblings — signed us up for the summer camps, too. I have many fond memories of the summer camps, including playing wall ball against staff and the ever-popular staff-versus-campers dodgeball games.

“As a third grader, I remember participating in the first KU Rotary Basketball Program. This was the first time I touched a basketball or played on a team. The Rotary coaches — Dr. Tom, Pat and Roger, along with Tom Cole — taught me and my peers the importance of hard work, commitment and teamwork. As a kid I remember thinking: ‘Wow, the coaches are taking their evenings to teach kids like me the fundamentals of a layup.’



“KU and programs like Rotary Basketball gave me a sense of belonging as a little kid. This program meant so much to me that I decided to do my high school senior project on the Rotary Basketball Program, and I got to see a lot of familiar faces.

“Fast-forward to 2021. I was teaching science in Phoenix, Arizona, and after a few years I felt homesick. I reached out to Tom to see if there was a position for me at KU or KUA. Without hesitation, he set up an interview with the principal, and shortly after I was hired to be the 8th grade science teacher and the STEM coordinator.

“I then had a short hiatus when I returned to Colombia for a year and half. While I was abroad, I served as a remote instructional coach. I returned to Medford in January 2022 and currently serve in KUA’s administrative team. I support Spanish-speaking parents, co-create and organize school events, lead the PAC/ Migrant Ed meetings and support our interim principal, Jani, and assistant principal, Lindsay.

“I feel blessed to be back in the valley and working in a place that feels like my second home and second family.”

—Lupita Vargas, KUA Director of Academics

“I first became involved with Kids Unlimited as part of the initial fundraising campaign to remodel the old bowling alley on Riverside into KU’s headquarters facility. During that process, I became a board member. As a board member, I have been involved in organizational and operational issues (finance committee) and have helped out during difficult times.

“During my tenure, I have seen and participated in KU’s growth and development into a well-organized and -operated charitable organization that is well-respected throughout the state. We went from an organization that had difficulty with recordkeeping and accounting to one that operates effectively and efficiently.

“I am impressed with the commitment of KU staff and volunteers, the respect KU has within the community and state and its impact on youth and families, many of whom are at risk.”

— Pat Huycke, KU board member



“Karen and I have been there from the beginning, giving as much as we could possibly with as many other choices as there are. We are delighted with the progress in Kids Unlimited, the school and helping young people grow and become adults.”

— Sid DeBoer





“From 1998, with the arrival of Tom Cole we have experienced a creative change agent that explored and created an organization that has evolved into Kids Unlimited.”

“Over the years, I have witnessed KU growth driven by the commitment of Rogue Valley residents and foundations to make it happen. I cannot think of a prominent local family that has not supported KU. The Thorndike Family and Medford Fabrication are proud to be among those who have supported in-kind contributions to building KU.”

“I described it early on as ‘guerrilla warfare’ — tactics Tom employed to establish connections with providers at the ground level. Important relationships with the likes of Hank Collins, Jackson County Health; Dee Anne Everson, United Way of Jackson County; and educator Stephanie Johnson-Klug gave credibility to Tom’s commitment for supporting families and children that had not been served.”

— Bill Thorndike Jr.

The first basketball players for Kids Unlimited learned skills specific to the sport — and so much more.

personally attending basketball practices. Seven of Medford’s Title I schools participated.

“We hoped that these kids would have a sense of being on a team ... learning a sense of cooperation,” said Pat Barry, member of the Kids Unlimited Academy board.

“If you do your work in the classroom, it pays off with a reward outside.”

It’s obvious to employers, said Barry, when their workers have been members of a team — and when they haven’t. He and other members of Medford Rogue Rotary Club recognized their volunteer coaching efforts would go far behind players’ school years.

The payoff for Rotary members was hands-on involvement that made a difference in their community, rather than being involved in a strictly monetary sense, said Barry. The basketball program connected Rotarians to a younger generation and demographic in Medford that was different from their own. He said he still recognizes many of the KU players, including some who have gone on to lead local sports teams. The program ended amid coronavirus restrictions, and organizers are trying to work through logistics, including bussing, to resurrect it.

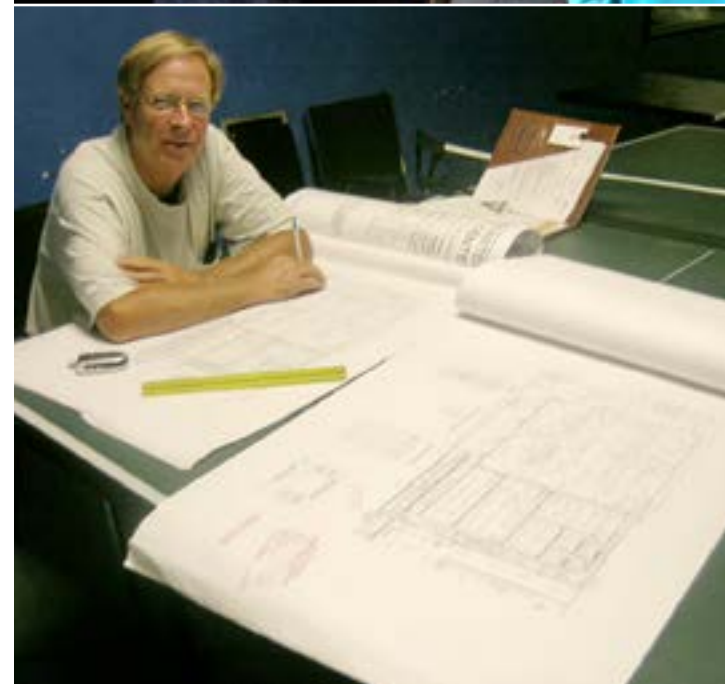
“A lot of them didn’t have an opportunity to participate in any organized activities,” said Barry, explaining that Medford school district had eliminated sports programs in elementary schools when KU founded its basketball program. Barry, himself, had the opportunity to play basketball as a student in Medford schools, including high school.

In addition to coaching and funding, Rotarians donated basketballs and shirts. In some cases, they purchased court shoes for kids who showed up to play in the single pair of shoes they owned. All players were recognized at a parent night following three weekends of games at KU to conclude the season.

“I just thought: ‘These kids need this.’”

“There was such an outpouring of support for these kids.”

They also needed to become strong academically. So KU instituted its “pass to play” policy to motivate kids in the classroom. Feedback from teachers was overwhelmingly positive, Barry said, adding that some principals lent their support by



“I was enjoying my first year of retirement in 2004. My wife and Tom coerced me into tutoring math in the kids’ afterschool program. Six months in, Tom proposed building a gym, and I was coerced once again into managing the project.”

“Over a year later, with the help of contractors, merchants, community members and a solid crew of misfit kids, Tom’s ‘Raise The Roof’ dream became a reality. I am proud to have helped place that stone in the foundation of today’s Kids Unlimited.”

— Rick Sawyer

“Tom moved to Southern Oregon in 1995 to develop Medford’s first Boys & Girls Club. However, Tom realized the efforts to reach Latino schoolchildren needed to acknowledge the challenges of the community, rather than replicating a national model.

“With a seed grant of \$500, Tom launched Kids Unlimited, a grassroots afterschool pilot program designed to meet the needs of at-risk youth with the purposeful integration of Latino students and their families. KU’s mission statement is to empower schoolchildren through opportunities.

“I am a KU alumnus and one of the first cohorts of Latino schoolchildren to participate in KU’s afterschool pilot program at Oak Grove Elementary. My siblings — Lupita, Javier, Daniela — and I are beneficiaries of this program and credit KU for playing an integral role in our childhood development.

“Now as a Ph.D student in Education Leadership at the University of San Diego, I’m aware of the herculean effort and intentionality that Tom and everyone at KU played in creating a better future for Latino students in Southern Oregon. KU became a beacon of hope and a safe haven for my peers growing up.

“What I love about Tom is his vision for developing and cultivating the potential of all children. For example, in the early 1990s, some adults in Southern Oregon saw a group of Latino kids with heads shaved and wearing baggy clothes as a rising gang problem. In contrast, Tom saw a group of kids longing for identity, belonging and opportunity. With those same kids on whom adults projected their insecurities and biases Tom built long-lasting relationships.

“I am proud to call Tom my mentor. As a first-generation Latino student, I struggled a lot. Juggling two languages and navigating a foreign education system was difficult. However, KU became the bridge that connected everything. At KU, I gained the social capital and confidence to take on the world.

“As one of Tom’s earliest basketball players, I still remember the endless wall jumps and sprints we had to endure at Sacred Heart gym to become a formidable basketball team. Tom’s motto was ‘We might not be the most skilled, but we will be the most in-shape team.’ Through his coaching, I realized how to improve my skill set and win.

“Dedication, hard work and a growth mindset are the virtues I walked away with from KU. When I graduated from South Medford High School in 2010 and was awarded a full academic scholarship to Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, I did not hesitate to take the opportunity. KU and Tom’s mentorship prepared me to venture out and seek new opportunities.

“When you come from nothing, and someone sees value in you and develops it, you begin to feel like somebody. I still sing the Kids Unlimited song that we would chant to start every day of summer camp: *When a Kids Unlimited kid walks down the street, he looks a hundred percent perfect from head to feet, and if you look at them it’s quite a treat; hard to beat a Kids Unlimited kid.*”

— **Beto Vargas, doctoral student in leadership studies, University of San Diego**



“My first memory of Kids Unlimited is when Tom came before the Commission on Children and Families and asked for a \$500 grant to buy some hoses and other playthings to help keep kids entertained at the park. A very tiny provision request for a startup.

“Through the years, Tom continued to apply for grants from CCF and always presented his requests well. I believe his comments at one presentation brought about the decision by CCF to require collaboration between different entities that were helping the children in our community, if they wanted to be awarded grants.

“When I coerced Chuck into participating for a short time on the finance committee, I did not anticipate the longtime, deep relationship that would develop between him and Tom or the catalyst relationship to follow. Together, they challenged each other to bring about the amazing trajectory of KU to become today’s stellar organization.

“May KU continue to orbit to even greater heights.”

— **Julie Martinez, widow of longtime KU board member Chuck Martinez**

“Congratulations to Kids Unlimited and Tom Cole as you celebrate 25 years of service to our community!

“The Leightman Maxey Foundation began its relationship with Kids Unlimited in spring 2006, when the Foundation awarded its first grant to KU in support of a nutrition education program. Over the years, the relationship has continued, with grants totaling over \$240,000, all aimed at introducing and improving children’s exposure to and experiences with healthy foods.

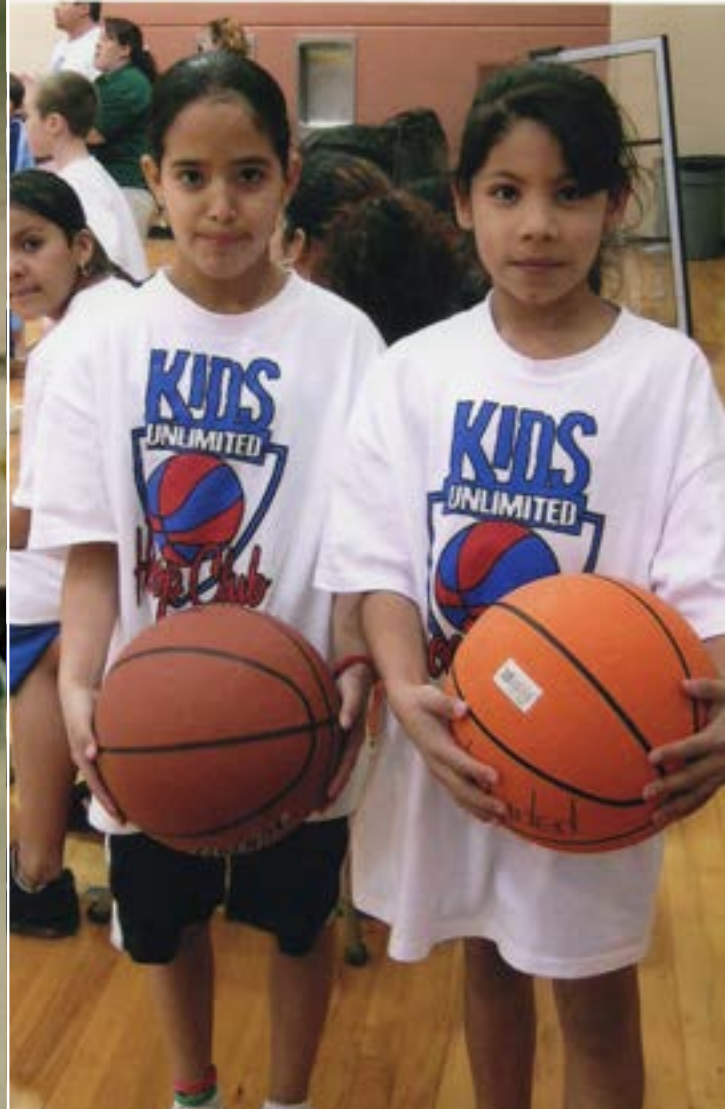


“KU has offered nutrition education in a variety of ways: using an evidence-based health curriculum; collaborating with Rogue Valley Farm to School, including student-prepared ‘harvest meals’; partnering with a local farm, where students learned about the cycle of healthy food production and ate from the garden; and by offering a hands-on culinary arts program.

“It has been a privilege for all of us at the Leightman Maxey Foundation to support the nutrition education endeavors KU has provided, and we look forward to their future success.”

— **Dee Ann Harris, Executive Director Leightman Maxey Foundation**







Belonging: Local, regional and national recognition

2007-2011

After establishing a permanent residence at Kids Unlimited, we finally felt our work had become recognizable in our own community. The identity of Kids Unlimited grew from our kids and our community campaign to one that began to stretch our identity in a much wider capacity than we could have envisioned.

Following nearly a decade of work, we watched the accomplishments of our kids start to make an imprint as leaders in their schools, changing cultural norms and creating many firsts. The recognition of Kids Unlimited began to transcend its importance from being meaningful to our kids to being meaningful to our community ... and little did we know, being meaningful nationally.



KU youth center gains commercial kitchen



President Obama visits



KU expands role into Medford Schools

2007

2008

2008

2009-2010

2007

2008

2009

Southern Oregon Open basketball tournament begins



Toby Linwood sculpture commissioned for Beijing Olympics



Afterschool programs increase



KU opens first suspension/expulsion program and begins SES tutoring services for turnaround schools in the Medford School District.



“The memories we have with Kids Unlimited are many, but the first thing that comes to mind is: Our entire family has been impacted and inspired by KU and what Tom has done in building his vision.”

“All three of our children did their high school senior projects at KU, starting with Katie in 2005, Kyle in 2007 and EJ in 2009. With Tom serving as their mentor and KU being the backdrop for their projects, a real genuine relationship began to take shape.”

“It was 2007 when Kyle elected to work with Tom to put on a basketball tournament for his senior project when our family’s friendship with Tom was forged. One of the unique features about that first tournament was Kyle’s desire to create the tournament logo for the T-shirt that would be given to each player. The design of the logo would become a main focal point for each tournament and truly became a living and breathing symbol of the event.”

“That first year of the tournament about 19 teams attended, mostly from the local area. No money was raised, as that was not the focus of his project. Year one was sort of ‘run off the back of a paper napkin,’ but the lesson learned from his experience was about Tom giving a young person freedom and empowerment so they could learn and grow in the quest of personal development.”

“With year one in the books and Kyle off to college, it was clear that help was needed if the vision of doing an annual tournament would become reality. Team Singler committed to step in while Kyle was gone and brother EJ stepped in to help carry the torch as co-ambassador of the event. I am pretty sure at that time, no one really had any idea what was to come.”

“Over the course of the next 13 years, the Singler Open not only grew in numbers and money raised, it exploded to the point that the City of Medford recognized the tournament for bringing significant tourism dollars into the Rogue Valley — a proud moment for all of us. At the height of the tournament’s success, there were over 200 teams attending from all over the West Coast. With the help of so many sponsors supporting the tournament, many years raised well over \$100,000 dollars, with all funds going to KU. The tournament became the largest sporting event in Southern Oregon, but it was so much more. It was creating opportunity for young kids while making a difference for many.”

“In the mix of the tournament years, Kyle and later EJ were asked by Chad Cota to join and partner with him to headline the Cota/Singler Auction, an auction that Chad had started years before. At the time, Kyle was playing basketball for Duke University and EJ playing at Oregon. Duke had just won the 2010 NCAA national championship, and the local community was so excited about Duke and Kyle’s success that the timing was right for good things to happen.”

“The partnership between local kids, Tom and KU fueled the auction’s success for many years, raising literally millions of dollars. The memories of those auction nights will forever be with us, as we witnessed our generous community coming together supporting young people, giving back to their community and a local organization doing such important work.”

— The Singler Family: Ed, Kyle and EJ



More than a “second home,” more than a “family” of peers and mentors, Kids Unlimited, said Yaremi Mejia, “literally gave me an identity.”

“If it never existed, I would never be where I am today,” said Mejia.

The first Latina in Oregon to win an NCAA Division I basketball scholarship, Mejia got her start as a fifth grader who filled out a KU flier to play basketball and convinced her parents to sign it because the program was free. Still learning English, Mejia’s Spanish-speaking parents asked if she was telling the truth. Little did they suspect that sports — administration and coaching — would become Mejia’s chosen career path after their daughter earned a master’s degree in physical education.

“It doesn’t matter what background you are,” said Mejia. “It opens so many doors.”

As a KU participant, Mejia traveled, including to Washington D.C. and the White House where she didn’t see the president but did meet the commander in chief’s dog. With her KU basketball team, she visited Sherm and Wanda Olsrud, who donated funds to build the gym at KU’s Medford campus. Mejia and her teammates contributed months of sweat equity alongside KU volunteers toward the facility’s construction.

“You build these relationships with people that last a long time,” said Mejia. “It also brings the community together.”

Beyond KU’s sports teams, the organization’s staff, programs and volunteers teach values and “how to be a good citizen,” said Mejia. Her parents, who moved from California to Medford for the small-town lifestyle and work in construction, consider KU a “blessing” to their daughter.

Giving back as a KU basketball coach and athletic director, as well as assistant coach for South Medford High School, Mejia still recalls feeling “like a star” wearing KU’s jersey. Just a few years after middle school basketball, she led South’s Lady Panthers to an undefeated season and state championship — the first team outside the Portland metro area to claim the title. On scholarship, Mejia was a freshman starter and shooting guard at Portland State University.

“You can literally turn your dreams into reality if you participate in Kids Unlimited.”





“It’s been a privilege and honor to be a part of the Kids Unlimited journey to bring so much through educating and helping our underprivileged youth in the local Southern Oregon community. To watch how much KU has grown and contributed has been an amazing thing to behold. Thank you KU!!”

— Chad and Christina Cota

The impacts of Kids Unlimited have been “huge,” not least on her career trajectory, said Jessica Corona.

A home equity processor supervisor at Rogue Credit Union, Corona got her start in banking through a Kids Unlimited board member. Jan Griffin managed Northwest Community Credit Union and needed an employee bilingual in Spanish and English. Corona took the part-time position after working at KU afterschool programs and summer camps.

“It was supposed to be just a summer job.”

When the credit union needed a teller, she applied, was hired full time and gained experience in loans before moving to Rogue Credit Union almost nine years ago. Looking back on her life since she joined KU’s girls basketball team in seventh grade, Corona acknowledges that her connection to KU runs deep.

“I lost my mom when I was 18, and I felt like Kids Unlimited was there for me.”



“KU started its groundbreaking afterschool program for children of poverty in 1998. This program was filled with students facing significant challenges due to crime, drugs, language difficulties and lack of parental support — all barriers to success in the classroom and life. KU moved in 2004 into Medford Lanes on Riverside Avenue and over the next 12 years renovated the old bowling alley into a vibrant community center for families. In 2013, we opened Kids Unlimited Academy, a charter school that serves preschool through eighth grade.

“From the beginning, the mission of KU has been to break down barriers for students — regardless of economic status, race, ethnicity or gender — by providing a pathway to success. Our students at KUA receive a well-rounded education with enhanced teacher support, longer school days, enrichment programs, sport programs and many opportunities to challenge themselves academically. We set high expectations at KUA to ensure high school graduation, college success and career readiness are reasonable and achievable goals for all our students.

“Many of the wonderful kids I have encountered at KUA face enormous daily obstacles in their lives. But each day, they arrive at school and are met by our outstanding teachers, a dedicated principal and a cooking staff that feeds them three nutritious meals a day. As a result, we are seeing test scores rise, behavior problems decrease and a sense of pride and achievement that extends beyond the classroom.

“None of the tremendous results we are accomplishing at KU would be possible without the vision and drive of founder and Chief Executive Officer Tom Cole, our board of directors and the entire Rogue Valley Community. Collectively, we are doing our best to find and encourage the ‘Unlimited’ potential in each of these kids. I have been blessed to see firsthand the phenomenal results when we successfully unlock the potential in the resilient children at KUA.

“It has been a privilege for me to serve on the Board of Directors of Kids Unlimited for the past 12 years. I have lived and worked in the Rogue Valley for over 45 years. My husband and I raised our two children here, and they attended Medford public schools before heading off to college. It has always been my goal as a volunteer at KU to improve our community and positively impact the lives of those around us.

“It is hard for me to quantify the impact KU has had on my life. By volunteering, I am betting on our students’ success, their future and, in turn, their commitment to our community.”

— Jeri Olson, KU board member

“I was with the organization before the school existed, when it was just afterschool and sports programs for kids. During the early years prior to school, when I’d walk in the building in the morning, all the lights would be off and the only light shining would be coming from underneath Tom’s office door.

“Seemed like cash flow was always an issue in the early years, especially when you would rely on grants and other funding because fees for service were almost nonexistent. I believe there were several instances when Tom wouldn’t even take a paycheck. Once Michelle came on board and developed other forms of payment with DHS for families, the cash flow increased in regards to fees. Jane played a huge role in the grant process; if she spent quality time on a grant, nine times out of 10 she got the award.

“The building would come alive in the afternoons when afterschool and summer programs would come, as well as other types of enrichments: dance, basketball, indoor tennis, art, etc. Once the school opened, that’s when things really started to take off and grow. The seeds of the afterschool and summer programs to me were the catalyst that boosted the growth into becoming a school.

“When I first started, it was really more about needing a job versus wanting to belong to an organization that helped kids. The longer I stayed, the more vested I became. I made great friends along the way and saw many wonderful things. I know there are more, but here are two stories that touched my heart.

“There was a young girl, maybe 13 at the time, living with her parents in a tent somewhere. Tom was able to give her a job at that young age, so she was able to find a place for her and her brother to live after a few years. Both she and her brother were able to finish high school, she received a scholarship to U of O and graduated college.

“Another story that stays with me is a woman I met who was a college advisor for my daughters and a single mom. She told me that Kids Unlimited’s afterschool program saved her life for her and her son. He was in the afterschool program, and because they were able to do homework, she could spend more quality time in the evenings with him.”

— Cass Weiland, KU chief financial officer



“I first met Tom Cole in the late 1990s when I was the director of Medford Parks and Recreation. He was working with youth at Washington Elementary School and explained his vision to create a program for youth that allowed all youngsters opportunities and access to sports and enrichment classes to reach their full potential. Our department offered a facility for his program as it continued to grow, and we saw the positive impact upon the youth attending his programs.

“Strong mentorship, as well as setting expectations for each child, laid a solid platform for youngsters to begin believing in themselves. The program continued to grow, and they are now in their own facility and continue to use the vision that started the program.

“Kids Unlimited’s ‘trusted counselors and guides’ work with the youth and allow them to find their areas of excellence. Be it in arts, dance, sport or academic areas, there are those to offer support for them to succeed. The vision is still as strong as it was in the ‘90s and perhaps stronger now that the community is seeing the results and believing in the vision for our youth.

“After retiring from City of Medford, I was asked to join the board of Kids Unlimited, and during my tenure we have added the school and expanded the program even further. I am a member of Medford Rogue Rotary and asked Tom to join the club so he could tell his story to a group of folks that ‘do good in the world’ by volunteering for and supporting projects with dollars. Many club members are still involved and are board members for Kids Unlimited and Kids Unlimited Academy.

“What has amazed me over the years is that Tom’s passion for what he is doing has not diminished and perhaps is stronger than when he started.”

— Greg Jones, KU board member







Intuition to institution: KU expands

2012-2017

When we started Kids Unlimited, we believed it could be successful. More than a hunch, we knew how vital what we were attempting to do could be for our kids and their families. While work like ours had never previously existed in Medford, the importance of what was needed fueled our determination.

Our programs grew to bring out kids' best, and the evidence of those endeavors became our core identity. The Unlimited was expanding, and some of our most important accomplishments were through the evolution of programs and services we saw as critical to our children's needs.

Perseverance fostered success, and with longevity, our work became institutional.



Programs extend reach into White City

2012



Public charter school opens

2013



Kids Unlimited Academy is born

2014



KUA adds 5th grade to student body

2015

2017

2012

KU high school girls contribute to first state championship team originating outside Portland metro area.



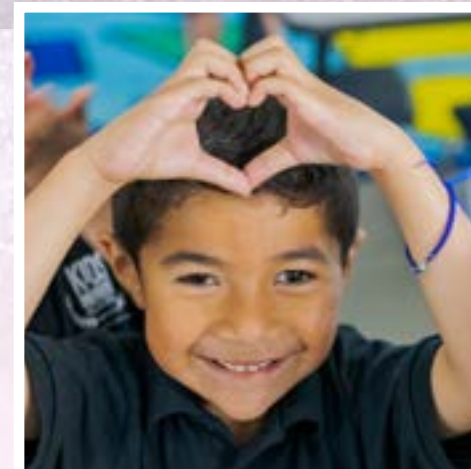
2013

Mahar administrative building opens; Yuremi Mejia is the first Latina in Oregon to receive a Division I basketball scholarship.



2014

KUA opens first all-day kindergarten in the region



“Building the Block” campaign accomplished





Helping to steer the course of Kids Unlimited has been “a wonderful, wonderful ride” for founding board member Steph Johnson.

“It’s just been my life, too,” she said.

Johnson’s belief in KU was so complete that she, along with KU founder Tom Cole, mortgaged her house to make their dream a reality.

She and Cole met when she was principal of Medford’s Washington Elementary School in the late 1990s. They both saw a need to serve children living in poverty that Johnson said hasn’t waned in importance over 25 years. Johnson cites KU’s waiting list of 300 for afterschool programs that are so vital for working parents.

Founding Medford school district’s first charter school was “tough,” given the community’s limited exposure to public school alternatives, said Johnson. But the students’ success, said its first principal, has validated their work, and Kids Unlimited Academy

only looks to “grow and get even stronger.”

“So many of our kids who have gone through are doctors and lawyers,” said Johnson.

Now an entire school board at KUA’s White City campus is composed entirely of alumni, added Johnson. The boards’ next tasks will be to refine pre-K to lay early foundations for the next generation of students.

“And that’s a whole cycle.”

Teaching was Lisa Hutchins’ “passion,” but her love faltered at the thought of instructing grade-school students at Kids Unlimited.

Gravitating instead to teens, Hutchins had been offered a job as a physical education instructor and coach at a local high school. Then the first principal of Kids Unlimited Academy asked if she would take one of the first teaching positions at the newly formed charter school.

Although Hutchins’ husband, Rick, served on the KU board, she agonized over joining the staff. Her mom convinced her to work where she would have the most impact, a decision that would forge a lifelong connection between Hutchins and the youth development organization.



“I will always be a part of Kids Unlimited.”

Now serving on the KUA board, Hutchins’ paid work with the organization shifted from the classroom to afterschool programs to donor relations and fundraising events. Her son attended KUA for several years, which exposed him and his siblings to some of the harsh realities that other kids navigate daily, said Hutchins. Her kids have volunteered and mentored peers participating in KU, which is a vital link to services beyond education.

Without KU, said Hutchins, “I don’t know what these kids would do. This is a place of safety.” Her husband agrees.

“There was a huge need for kids ... having a way to connect,” said Rick Hutchins. “Instead of kids doing what kids do.”

Lisa Hutchins’ family already had made inroads toward youth development with their organization, Bulldog Boxing, where Lisa offered tutoring. The program appealed particularly to Latino kids who weren’t connecting through mainstream sports or other avenues.

Then KU founder Tom Cole came to Southern Oregon, making the rounds of service clubs, including the Rotary chapter where Rick Hutchins was a member. The first time he heard Cole speak, Hutchins thought it was unlikely the KU dream would align with reality. The second time he met Cole, Hutchins thought KU’s small successes could be just a fluke.

“The third time I heard him speak, I believed he was for real and his vision was growing,” said Hutchins.

Cole was soliciting support for his “Raise the Roof” campaign to remodel the old Medford bowling alley that would become KU’s youth center. Hutchins went on a tour and, at the end, Cole asked him to serve on KU’s board.

“I just felt like Tom was the guy really doing something.”

Over the next 18 years, Hutchins, a financial advisor, steered KU to fiscal stability, including passing an outside audit with a local certified public accounting firm. He also was instrumental in KU’s “Our Kids Our Community” fundraising campaign.

“We knew that we had to do more than just raise the roof,” said Hutchins. “We made a lot of connections through that campaign ... that are partners to this day.

“They didn’t want to just give advice; they wanted to get involved.”

Citing some very involved, engaged adults who made a difference in his own childhood, Hutchins said he wants the same for KU participants, regardless of their background. It’s one reason why he and Lisa choose to help, instead of staying in the “bubble” of their East Medford neighborhood.

“It doesn’t matter where you live in Medford — or outside of Medford,” said Hutchins. “It’s all our community.”

She spent years reading to students at Kids Unlimited, but Dorothy Schoder knows that true knowledge isn't bound up in books.

"It's learning for yourself — that is truly learning," said the 96-year-old Medford resident

That's why "Grandma Dorothy," as she is affectionately known, did more than contribute to KU's library and fund construction of its science lab. She has been a longtime, enthusiastic supporter of the organization's girls basketball teams.

Missing a shot at the basket, said Schoder, is an immediate indicator of a player's focus, effort, preparation and commitment to the sport. And unlike many classroom-based activities, the pace of a basketball game allows for second attempts at success — in mere seconds.

"The lesson is learned, and you can improve on it right then and there."

Athletics, she said, also offer "well-rounded" lessons that can't always be learned in a classroom. She recalls KU basketball alumna Yaremi Mejia as a fifth grader "full of mischief" who "absorbed" everything she could from coach and mentor Tom Cole. Winning a college basketball scholarship and earning a master's degree, Mejia "turned a light on" in the community.

"She learned more than just basketball, more than the classroom," said Schoder. "She learned all she needed to develop herself. It's just priceless."

Still a prominent KU donor, Schoder is recognized in the Kimmel Family Resource Center with "Grandma Dorothy's reading corner," the place where she connected with hundreds of kids that invites staff and other volunteers to do the same. Sometimes the students, said Cole, needed a break from the classroom; sometimes they wanted to read; and sometimes they just wanted to talk with a sympathetic adult.

"Kids would always be excited," he said, "who got to meet with Grandma Dorothy that day."

"I first met Tom Cole not long after he arrived in Medford with his dream of a future Kids Unlimited. I was working with a social service compact. Tom briefed us on his plan. After the meeting, I told Tom good luck ... and if all failed, he had a great voice and could be a radio DJ.

"Years later, Tom gave me a guided tour of the Kids Unlimited school. I used to bowl in the former bowling alley that was/is the Kids Unlimited Medford charter school. Tom took me into a second grade classroom. When the teacher told the class they had a visitor, the class lined up and, one by one, looked me in the eye and welcomed me. Great teaching of social skills and part of becoming a future adult!

"KU is, and always has been, about the kids."

— Larry Slessler



"I remember when I spoke to my first student at Kids Unlimited Academy. It was Nov. 16, 2016. The idea of being principal had not crossed my mind, as I had dedicated 20 years to South Medford High School as a teacher, coach and assistant principal and 13 years to Phoenix High School as principal. I was done — or so I thought.

"Tom Cole had requested a meeting. I assured him I would listen and do my best to give advice that could help offset the news of KUA's first state test scores. Tom was worried about the impact these low scores would have on KUA's charter agreement with Medford School District. I agreed to come to the school and just talk.

"The last time I was in the KUA building, it had been a bowling alley, so I was a bit lost in the maze of hallways. I ran into a little girl on her tiptoes, trying to remove a pushpin from a bulletin board. She explained she needed a pushpin so she could go home and put a picture on her wall. In that short conversation, I was hooked. Thirty-five years spent working in high schools had not prepared me for the instant love I felt for that little girl or the hundreds of children I would soon be meeting.

"Meeting Tom Cole sealed my fate. My alter ego has always been a double-edged sword. On one side I'm carrying a torch trying to save the world while on the other, I'm saying to myself: 'Oh my God, what the hell am I doing here?'

"In Tom I met a kindred soul. I'm not sure if it was a coincidence, or ...? But the same day I fell in love with the little girl in the hallway, the KUA principal quit. After Jeri Olsen, Stephanie Johnson and Linda Evans wrapped their arms around me, I knew my fate was sealed. The rest is history.

— Jani Hale, KUA Principal

My best memory is the first day of Kids Unlimited Academy in 2013. That day, Tom Cole and the KUA board had our very first assembly, and I felt this truly was a school that was going to change the lives of every kid, including my own. Every day, I walk into KUA with the feeling of love for what I am so blessed to be able to do.

— Michelle Hull, KUA office manager



"The students with whom I worked at South Medford High School and Phoenix High School are now my KUA parents. These parents grew up with Tom Cole. They grew up with me. They trusted Tom, and they trusted me.

"Many of our Southern Oregon families from challenging circumstances did not grow up being invited onto basketball teams or into honors classes or orchestras or dramatic productions. For many of these families, KUA became a trusted friend.

"In our corner of the big world, it was the work of Tom Cole that showed Southern Oregon that the work of building a community we all want to live in is about building bridges between a child's circumstances and a bright future. I've struggled, and I've soared, made mistakes and made magic happen. Yet the work and mission of KUA has kept pulling me back.

"That little girl went home with a pushpin. The last memory I have of her at KUA was at our final assembly of my first year. She marched off the bleachers, asked for my microphone, which I gladly gave, and started singing in a loud and proud voice 'She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain.' I let that girl sing her heart out. We gave her a standing ovation."

The source for some of Kids Unlimited's most significant contributions is not a "traditional philanthropist."

The Kimmel name adorns myriad KU facilities and projects, but the man himself avoids recognition, said KU Executive Director Tom Cole. Formed by Howard and Sandy Kimmel, the Kimmel Family Foundation board has funded major KU projects and initiatives, said Cole.

"Their work has contributed to some of the most important transformations of our organization," said Cole. "They have literally helped in every phase of our operations."

Between the KU performing arts center and family resource center, its sports field and gardens, the nonprofit's learning and recreation opportunities are diverse and span multiple generations because of the Kimmel Family Foundation.

Based in Southern Oregon but also serving California, Kimmel's foundation has a 15-year history with KU, beginning with transportation, said Cole. Foundation grants built KU's state-of-the-art center for performing arts and synthetic turf athletics park in 2018, culminating in 2020's debut of the Kimmel Family Resource Center, which houses the region's first preschool aimed at vulnerable kids.

The needs of underserved kids continue to motivate the Kimmel Family Foundation board, said Cole. And board members responded by supporting KU's 2020 expansion into White City, including Kids Unlimited Academy and Pre-K.

"They are recognized by our kids as heroes, and their impact is immeasurable," said Cole. "Our kids have got to know who Uncle Howard is."

On KU's main Medford campus, the Kimmel Performance Arts Center has hosted Grammy Award winners and is home to our KUA Royal Kids Theatre. The Kimmel Soccer Park serves KU's summer camps when it isn't in service to the organization's "pass-to-play" soccer league.

"Preschool, food, sports, the arts," said Cole. "The Kimmel foundation's generosity has been a game-changer for our work."





Unlimited future: Campus extensions and celebrations

2018-2023

After decades of services, our home on Riverside became a holistic campus dedicated to all the elements we call “the Unlimited.” Providing an outlet for food, clothing, literacy, early learning, recreation, education and social entrepreneurship for 3-year-olds to adults, our headquarters is a physical testament to the evolution of our work. The addition of White City’s satellite campus reflects our history and strengthens our delivery of resources while honoring our relationships to kids and families.

We supported entire households with meal assistance during the coronavirus pandemic, simultaneously providing one of the state’s first online curricula. We celebrated our successes by hosting The Temptations, Ziggy Marley and The Four Tops in concert.



Temptations visit KU, Ziggy Marley plays benefit concert for KU, Four Tops visit KU, Latina civil rights activist Dolores Huerta visits



KUA receives grant to build screenprinting studio in old Lithia garage



KUA pre-K in Medford and KUA White City campus open



White City pre-K campus opens

2018

Kimmel Family Resource Center opens



2019

2019

KUA is one of the first schools in Oregon to be online during pandemic



2019

2020

EmpowerPrint Unlimited formed for student entrepreneurial classes and high school work program



2021

2022

Sound studio built for one of Oregon's only middle school advanced digital media classrooms



2022

“The first time I saw Tom Cole was about 15 years ago at the South Medford High School gym. He was there with hundreds of students from Kids Unlimited. I watched countless numbers of young children come up to hug him and give him high-fives. I watched from a distance how engaged he was with the kids and how much they adored him. A few years later, my daughter played on Tom’s basketball team, and it was through this that I got to know him and had the opportunity to support KU activities through sponsorship from my business.

“I have been a member of the KU board for the past four years. It was an absolute honor to be asked to serve as a member. Growing up in the Rogue Valley gives me a great heart for our community. The impact that Tom Cole and KU has had on our valley has been profound. The passion, energy, and resources that KU has dedicated to the most vulnerable population of children in our community is something I feel so much pride in being a small part of.

“Tom Cole is a champion of kids, always doing what is best and what is right. He has tirelessly dedicated his life to making impossible situations possible for children that overcome more obstacles than imaginable. I have so much gratitude, respect and admiration for the opportunities that Kids Unlimited has created for our youth.”

— Rachael Martin, KU board member



“KU was fundamental in my life because it provided a safe place and a group of people who believed in me and wanted to see me succeed. Tom Cole especially would push me to my greatest potential and provide the tools for my successes. Tom would reward us with a trip to see the Portland Trail Blazers if we succeeded in class.

“KU also was involved in my upbringing because not only did they help me though elementary school, but they developed the middle school program for us to continue to grow as productive people in society. KU created recreational basketball teams for us to join because my parents weren’t aware of extracurricular activities. In the summertime during middle school, KU was my first job, working the summer program and being a junior counselor. Being part of KU was the leading influence for me to stay in school, play sports and graduate from high school.

“Through school and the opportunities from KU, I was the first in my family to graduate from high school and receive my associate’s degree in fire science. I am thankful because I was able to pursue my dream career of becoming a firefighter and currently work as a firefighter/EMT for the City of Roseburg. I am gratified that now I have a family, my daughters can be part of KU and continue to succeed in life.”

— Daniel Banuelos



“I’ve known Tom Cole since I was 16. He ran Boys & Girls Club in Talent for many years before starting his own program in Medford. Very humble origins — just like our water sports every Friday during summer camp consisted of a hose and faucet. If you didn’t behave that day, you weren’t going to last long against the counselors; the games were rigged!

“The larger story is the services offered by Kids Unlimited. Instead of just leaving kids to their own devices for those three hours between the end of school and when parents get home, instead of kids going home and watching cartoons or just loitering with their friends and looking for trouble, KU provides a structured, focused and positive influence in kids’ lives that they may not otherwise receive.

“KU’s unique service to my group of classmates was showing us and giving us experiences that we otherwise would never have had. Simple things like going to a Trail Blazers game, buying us cleats or basketball shoes, meeting with successful community members that would come out and spend a day with us. Even the president came to visit once. It stretched our minds and made our world a little bigger in a positive way. I don’t believe there is a better program in the state to support our community youth.

“I’ve been involved in every aspect of KU, starting as a student enrolled, to junior counselor (teenage helper), to counselor, to now being a parent with kids in the program.”

— Franco Caballero

“A family friend approached my mom and explained they were going to offer an afterschool program at Oak Grove Elementary, where they would help with homework and provide activities for students at very little cost. It would run from 2 to 5:30 p.m. — the perfect option for me because both my parents worked and my older brothers — in middle school and high school — never wanted to watch me.

“At first my mom couldn’t believe it — too good to be true! She didn’t have to pick me up from school until 5:30, and they would help me with homework and provide a snack.

“For me, Kids Unlimited was an option that helped me stay involved with school. English was my second language, and both my parents only attended grade school in Mexico, never receiving a higher education.

“As I was growing up, KU became part of my life in and out of school. I would have somewhere to go after school and finish my homework and work with site counselors who dedicated time for me to not only finish my schoolwork but understand the academic subjects. Outside of school, KU took me to my first NBA game in Portland and, over four years, a basketball tournament in the Bay Area.



Attending Kids Unlimited Academy will set Galiano Duran on the path to being a leader, said his father, Gonzalo.

His own path, recalls this father of a preschool-age son, had veered into troubled territory before he found Kids Unlimited. When Gonzalo Duran was in eighth grade attending Medford public schools, the community was concerned about the rise of gang activity. His mom attended a parent meeting, heard about KU and encouraged her son to go after school.

“It’s been a long journey for me and Kids Unlimited,” said Duran, who came from Mexico to the United States as an infant with his parents.

Now a member of the KUA board for White City’s satellite campus, Duran gained a sense of belonging at KU, where he could pursue a love of basketball, eventually leading to two years on the Lane Community College team.

“I expressed my love of basketball to Tom, but almost that basketball, for me, wasn’t necessarily an option.”

The KU basketball program welcomed Duran and his Latino peers, who felt excluded from teams at their elementary and middle schools.

“I would play basketball in jeans,” he said, adding

that his mom scolded him for ripping through his single pair of shoes on the court.

Duran recalls helping to build the gym at KU with many of his teammates. But the youth organization, Duran said, had the greatest impact for its mentorships and illustrating “where I wanted to be in life.”

“It gave me the opportunity to see what success on many different levels looks like.”

Past KU board president Chuck Martinez offered Duran a job to save money for college that ultimately sparked the teen’s interest in finance. Duran went on to work for Lithia Motors and a certified public accounting firm before becoming an accountant for Grange Co-op. He stayed in contact with Martinez, even telling him when he bought his first house, until the board member’s death in 2022.

“And he became a real close mentor of mine.”

Duran said he wants to do the kinds of things that Martinez and other mentors did for KU kids: purchasing sports gear for the ones who don’t have it and providing experiences, such as travel, that “could just light a light in you.”

“I want to create enough wealth that I can give back — opportunities that money CAN buy.”

“I started volunteering at Kids Unlimited in 2004 as a freshman at Rogue Community College. Volunteering as a mentor at Washington Elementary School afterschool program opened my eyes to the harsh realities that many of our youth face on a daily basis.

“I had been fortunate enough to be raised by both my parents: my dad worked, and my mom chose to stay home to raise her children. I had a stable upbringing with supportive parents who attended my school and athletic activities. I always had home-cooked meals, a warm bed and stable housing. Naively, before volunteering at the afterschool program, I thought every child had that.

“I realized some of the kids were in foster care, had a parent or both in jail or lost to drugs, unstable housing and abuse. Kids Unlimited was the only place for the kids to feel safe and protected. The KU afterschool program offered meals, caring staff and a safe place to be. That is why I quickly became an employee — to be a support to the kids and help make their lives a little easier.

“I worked at Kids Unlimited as an afterschool staff member at Washington and Oak Grove Elementary, as well as summer camps, then at Vibes Main One concerts and events, for basketball seasons manning the door, in many capacities for 10 years until I completed school and earned my nursing degree.

“My daughter is 7 years old and a second grader at Kids Unlimited Academy. My step-daughter, Katherine Mejia, was a student at KUA, as well, from fifth to eighth grades and earned a scholarship to St. Mary’s High School. She will be graduating next week and attending Fordham University in New York in the fall.

“I serve on the White City KUA board, and I will always be an advocate for KU and KUA schools because I know we are invested in creating a safe environment for kids in our community and helping to shape and mold

productive citizens.

“I will forever be grateful to KU for opening my eyes and my heart to see the needs of the people in my community and to do my part in helping to create change and opportunities to level the playing field for everyone.”

— Larissa Medina, KUA board member





“I am honored to be able to speak about my experience with Kids Unlimited Academy. I was lucky enough to have been able to witness it from its humble beginnings and its transformation into the empowering and educational safe house this school has become for the underserved youth in our community.

“When I first was introduced to the founder of KUA, Tom Cole, I was in fifth grade. It was 1995. My parents had migrated from Mexico and were working tirelessly to provide for my siblings and me, all while acclimating themselves to this foreign place that they had bravely ventured to.

“They believed this country would offer opportunity and would be a safe place where

their children would have access to education. Due to the multiple jobs they worked to clothe us and put food on the table, they were unable to be home when we were released from school. My parents also initially struggled with the language barrier and were unable to assist us with our nightly homework.

“Tom recognized this and really saw families like mine. Tom began an afterschool program called the Under Ground. It was in the basement of a church. Every day after school, I would go there with my brothers. Not only were we supervised, but we also gained confidence by engaging with staff there who would assist us with our studies. It was here I experienced a feeling of welcome and acceptance as opposed to feeling like the dumb kid in the back of the room because I didn’t always understand English.

“It was my freshman year of high school when I learned of an opportunity to volunteer at the West Medford After School Program, which later merged with Kids Unlimited to become what it is today. Initially, I volunteered as an excuse to hang out with my then-girlfriend, but soon after I began, I realized it awakened gratitude and passion that was rooted deep within me.

“I was interacting with children who also had been struggling to adjust to this place. I continued to volunteer, and I ended up being the first child to graduate from high school and go on to college within my family. Eventually, I became a program manager and later a director. During my time as a director, my duties involved planning and directing sport and dance activities for the youth, engaging with parents and translating language, as well as training and supervising junior counselors.

“While this was a job, performing these tasks provided me with more than just a paycheck. It provided me with a privilege to witness a child’s recognition when they understood, gained abilities and confidence to bridge the gap and promote understanding and, finally, to continue the tradition and shared passion of being a builder of community.

“When I look back on this, I’m reminded of the marigolds we used to honor the death of our ancestors in Mexico during Día de Muertos. In the beginning, the flowers are bright and vibrant. They act as a symbol of the wisdom of the ones who came before us. They then die and their seeds are scattered to the wind, eventually cultivating new life only to resurrect themselves and grow into another flower. This will continue on through generations.

“It’s imperative that we continue to plant the seeds of empowerment, hope and education so that our youth may thrive and contribute back to their community and their children, and so on and so on.

“In 2008 my son was born, and Barack Obama was elected. KU welcomed the senator to speak. He and his wife, Michelle, were the first African-American president and first lady to ever occupy the White House. Change was happening. I was so proud to work at a place where acceptance and transformation was ingrained in the culture and where an optimistic sense of possibility was always tangible within the air.

“I am now a KUA board member. My son is finishing his last year at Kids Unlimited, and my daughter is currently attending.

“When I look at my children and I consider my own personal experience and their childhood, I recognize that I have been fortunate to have been exposed to and witnessed the transformative power of KUA both personally and within its community. I see how it supported and rooted for me and now for my children, how it has shaped me and how that has impacted me as a man, a father, a son, a friend, a brother and as a partner.

“Kids Unlimited Academy plays an invaluable role within our community and our children’s lives. It offers opportunities and programs that, without its open doors, could be inaccessible to our youth, our future. I feel so privileged to share my experience and to celebrate Kids Unlimited Academy and its 25-year commitment to excellence.”

— Ignacio Sanchez

“Innocent” to many societal issues, Rocio Mendoza didn’t know a job with Kids Unlimited would entail police and social worker interactions.

“You really got to deal with unfortunate situations,” said Mendoza. “You realize how much the community needs.”

Mendoza was 16 when she was hired to staff KU’s afterschool programs and summer camps, meeting Executive Director Tom Cole through a friend. Twenty years later, Mendoza is a registered nurse working in intensive care who also serves on KU’s board of directors and the board of KU Academy in White City.

“I came back because I truly believe in this program,” said Mendoza. “They truly believe in their mission statement.”

And more kids believe in themselves because of KU and its “generational impact,” said Mendoza, who has sixth- and third-grade daughters at KUA in Medford. More of Southern Oregon’s Latino youth feel “confident,” she said, to pursue higher education and extracurricular activities through involvement with KU.

“I feel like you build trust with these kids,” said Mendoza. “You just see better choices.”



Girls Got Game

Since the debut of Kids Unlimited's Olsrud Court, the contributions of girls basketball have been historic.

Players representing KU have been awarded three state championships as members of South Medford High School — the only girls team outside of Portland to ever win the state title for a large school classification. In addition to 26 players receiving full scholarships to play basketball, Yaremi Mejia — the first Latina in the history of Oregon girls basketball to receive a Division I scholarship — came out of Kids Unlimited.

Over 29 girls have received full-ride basketball scholarships since Olsrud Court opened in 2007, and the number continues to grow. It is an unprecedented accomplishment.

Alana Stevens: University of California, Santa Cruz

Brittney Newcomb: Weber State

Hannah Curtius: Chaminade University

Tess Picknell: Stanford University

Lupita Vargas: Bates College

Yaremi Mejia: Portland State University

Kylie Towry: Willamette University

Luisa Tago: Metro State University

Leilani Morris: Umpqua Community College

Ashley Bolston: Washington State University/Portland State University

Andee Ritter: University of California, Irvine

Juli Tago: University of Hawaii

Jasmin Falls: Portland State University

Keyari Sleezer: Pepperdine University

Lauren Orndoff: Northern Arizona University

Hannah Washington: Chico State University

Jonnay Foote: College of the Siskiyous

Ula Chamberlin: University of California, San Diego

Bella Pedrojetti: Eastern Washington University

Kaili University: McNeese State University/Austin Peay State University

Bella Stone: Eastern New Mexico University/West Florida University

Emma Schmerbach: Southern Oregon University

Shakia Teague Perry: Southern Oregon University

Toni Coleman: Chico State University

Laini Dahlin: Lane Community College

Sierra Logue: University of California, Riverside

Donovyn Hunter: Oregon State University

Tatum Schmerbach: Oregon Institute of Technology

Kendall Fealey: Oregon Institute of Technology



In Memoriam

Kids Unlimited could have foundered in its first decade if not for the support and advocacy of Hank Collins.

“His leadership at that time was super pivotal,” said KU Executive Director Tom Cole. “He was constantly this champion of our efforts.”

As director of Jackson County Health and Human Services, Collins championed other local initiatives to tackle everything from air pollution to methamphetamine addiction. After a 33-year career in public health, Collins died in 2008.



“He would be extremely proud,” said Cole of KU’s accomplishments in the years since Collins served on its founding board of directors and saw the youth development organization move into its Medford headquarters on Riverside Avenue.

Collins had a reputation among colleagues and the larger community for encouraging and forging partnerships between government agencies and nonprofit organizations. He spoke up for Cole’s fledgling KU as it battled the City of Medford’s red tape, police profiling and opposition by administrators and elected officials.

“Hank stood courageous in a position that was quite honestly political,” said Cole. “His endorsement gave us an opportunity to at least have some credibility.”

Collins wanted more than vital services for the largely “voiceless” population that KU represented, said Cole. He understood the importance of teens’ “social inclusion” that sprang from dances and musical performances at KU’s VIBES Main 1 Center for the Performing Arts.

“He got it,” said Cole, referencing the VIBES acronym Vitality in Becoming Educated Socially. “He was down there with the kids dancing.”

Then Collins was diagnosed in 2007 with myelodysplastic syndrome, a condition in which the bone marrow stops producing red and white blood cells. He received a bone marrow transplant at Portland’s Oregon Health & Science University in November 2007 but suffered complications. He remained at OHSU for nearly three months until his death Feb. 12, 2008, at age 56.

Born in Tennessee, Collins was an Eagle Scout who worked in North Carolina’s public health system before taking the helm of Jackson County Public Health in 1987. He led the charge for a local methamphetamine task force, county provision of birth control services and needle exchanges for drug users, among other controversial policies.

Cole said he’s still surprised Collins used his role to argue on behalf of KU, contrary to the City of Medford’s attempts to constrict Cole and his programs. Wagering his professional reputation on KU’s integrity, Collins lived to see the organization’s success.

Fifteen Grammy winners and some of the most transformative artists in music history — collectively selling 50 million records — have played at Kids Unlimited.

KU pioneered funding its youth programs with proceeds from putting on concerts that appeal to all ages. And the tradition continues.

We have hosted The Temptations, The Four Tops, Ziggy Marley, Damian Marley, Stephen Marley, Tone Loc, Sir Mix-a-Lot, Korn, Marc Cohn, Digital Underground, Pitbull, Juvenile, Quiet Riot, Blue Oyster Cult, Pat Travers, Robert Cray Band, Bo Diddley, Slum Village, E-40, Kelis and many others.



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