

Ron Rolett

Welcome Home!

By Eunice J. Hart
Staff Writer

It was a particularly gloomy Christmas Eve in 1964 when Ron Rolett, age 11, discovered the depth of his family roots in the North Little Rock Boys & Girls Club.

By then his father, a mechanic, had abandoned his mother and four children and, living at the Silver City Courts public housing complex, they had agreed that even though it would mean a lean Christmas that year, mom should go to practical nursing school and get herself a career to support them.

But as the holiday drew near, the outlook grew dim for Santa's even coming at all, and young Rolett was worried about his two believing baby sisters, 5 and 3.

Worried, that is, until after the annual party and turkey dinner

thrown every Christmas Eve by the club, Coach Jim Dickerson and firefighter Paul Holderfield, where Toys for Tots would donate gifts, the children would take turns on Santa's lap and Rolett

would stay late to help clean up.

"I never said anything, he just knew," Rolett said of the intuition of Club Director Jim Wetherington that Christmas.

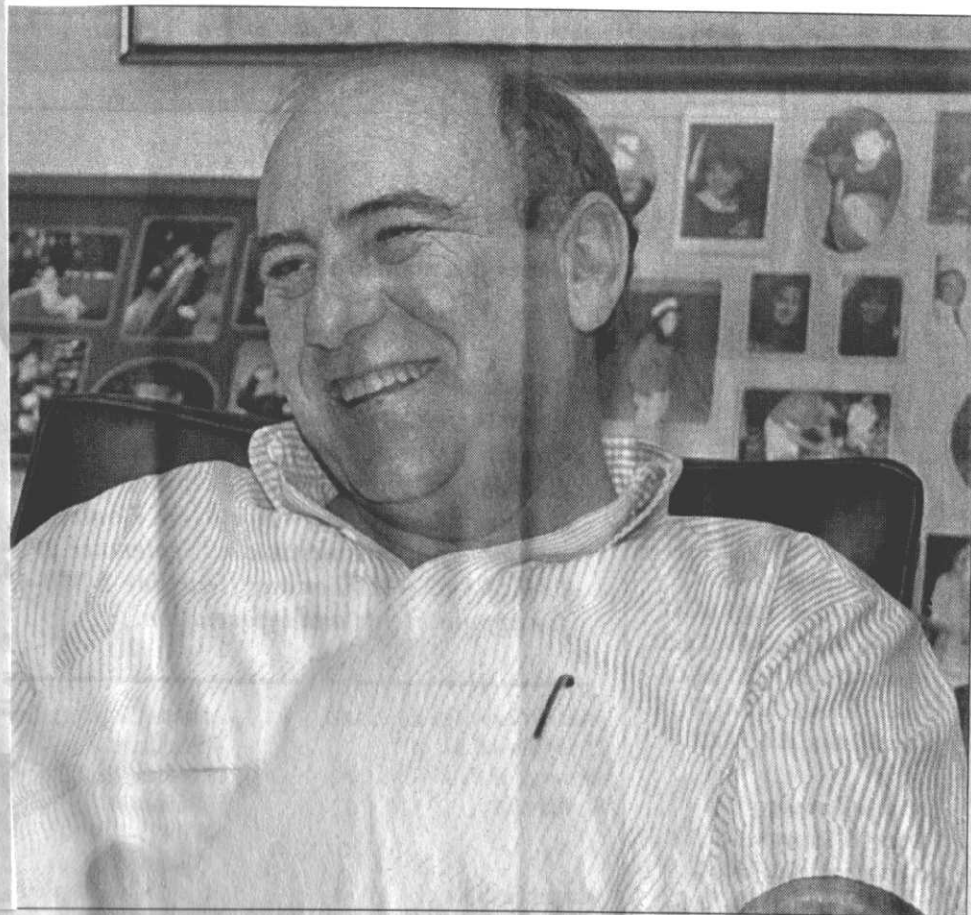
Because, before he knew it, Wetherington and Dickerson were filling the back of Dickerson's sta-

tion wagon with all the leftover toys from the party to take to Rolett's apartment.

"We had presents under the tree, in the tree, on the couch, in the window sill," he said. "My mother and my little sisters and brother woke up to the best Christmas morning they ever had."

"We are the kitchen table. Our priorities have to be to continue to provide and expand upon the educational opportunities."

— Ron Rolett



DAVID SCOLLI

Ron Rolett reflects on the good ol' days at the North Little Rock Boys & Girls Club.

It has been 33 years since that Christmas, but club blood still runs deep. Wooded back home to succeed his lifelong mentor at the North Little Rock Boys & Girls Club, Rolett recently found him-

self pleading for a house from a Lakewood landlord who could not decide whether to rent it to him or another family.

Until Rolett mentioned The Club. "You mean you're the guy who's

taking over for Jim Wetherington? I used to live down there at The Club," the landlord said. "Tell you what. The house is yours."

Rolett

■ From Page 1B

So it is with the camaraderie cultivated in that building on 13th Street, where after 38 years an ailing Wetherington, the towering giant and soft spoken father figure to three generations of North Little Rock youngsters, has stepped aside to assume a fundraising role and turned his office over — to Rolett.

"I really felt good about him coming back," Wetherington said. "He's always been a really outstanding person — who did not hesitate to take on a job."

Indeed, less than a year after that memorable Christmas Eve party, Rolett recalls, Wetherington took him aside and asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up.

"Well, I'd like to do what you do," Rolett says he told him. "I want your job."

To which Wetherington replied: "Well, I'm not quite through with it yet!"

The first time Rolett stepped inside The Club was at age 5 when his mother, pregnant with his sister, dropped him off to play while she went to the doctor.

"I was a pain as a 5-year-old sitting in Dr. Ritchie's office with all of them sick people," he said.

Seven years later after his father left, his mom would find out that a practical nurse didn't make much money, and she could do better working on the assembly line in the Westinghouse plant.

"All that struggling she went through and ended up doubling her money at Westinghouse," he shook his head recalling those hardship years.

But it was The Club that helped them through.

"If my mother had a problem with me, she'd call Jim and he'd deal with it when I came to the club after school," he said.

It was where he did his homework every day; where he learned to swim; where he learned responsibility; where he learned teamwork; where he learned respect for others and where he learned about service to the community.

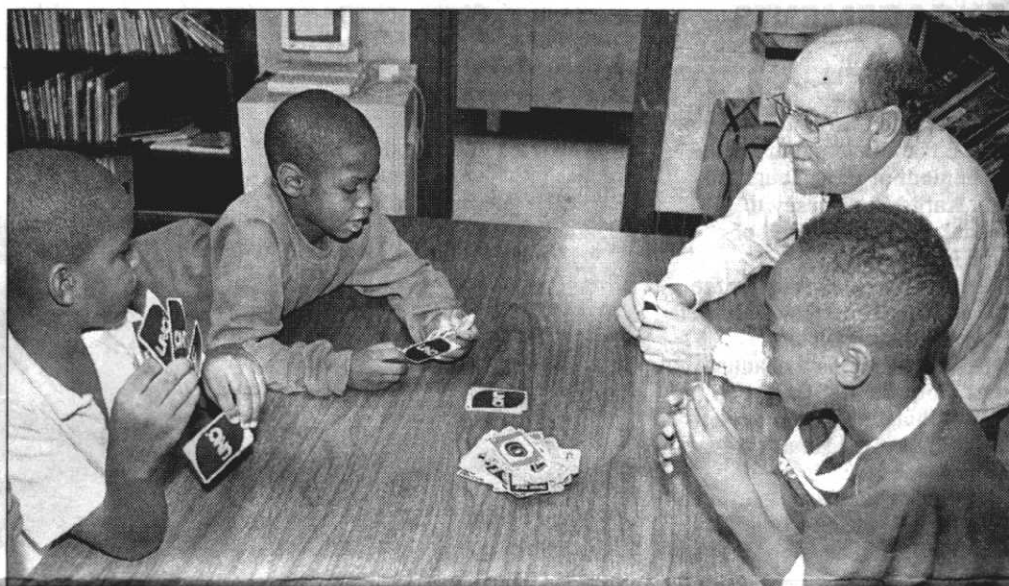
Wetherington said Rolett demonstrated leadership at an early age, so they put him to work as, among other things, the score keeper and front desk clerk.

Additional scholarship help from The Club got him through the University of Central Arkansas, and afterwards Rolett put in a few years running the Jacksonville unit of The Club before working a few years on Wetherington's staff.

Then in 1985 he got the chance to run a club in Carlsbad, N.M., and five years later to do the same thing in a bigger club in more urban Bryan/College Station, Texas.

As soft-spoken as his longtime mentor, Rolett is hard pressed to describe his style or impact in any of these places.

But colleagues like Angela Ware, the Bryan Club's education director, say his strength is that "he has the ability to see the future in the



said Dale Ivey, director of the Bryant Street unit in Texas.

Still others tell of his ability to make good hires, to draw excellence from his staff. And still others tell of his natural comfort level with young people, who find him an accessible pillar of strength who is easy to talk to.

"You can tell he has been in the trenches," Ivey said.

Rolett admits he's not exactly sure why thousands of boys and girls flock to the clubs he has run, but he does know that good programs help draw them in.

Wetherington taught him that much when he called him from Carlsbad one day in a panic: "I don't know what I'm going to do," he told him. "There's hardly any kids here."

"Start some good programs," he says Wetherington told him. "You'll see. They'll come."

And in just a few months they came by the hundreds.

And after they got there, Rolett says, he knows from experience that The Club can fill many roles, including that of an absent parent or role model.

"I tell our volunteers that these kids will cling to you, they will walk up and hug you, they will walk up and kiss you," he said. "They are that hungry for adults in their lives."

In a world of two income families and more struggling single mothers than ever, The Club's mandate today must be broader than it ever was, whether it's in Bryan, Texas, or North Little Rock, Ark., Rolett says.

"We are the kitchen table," he says, referring to the centerpiece of family life in generations past where youngsters sat and did their homework while mom made dinner.

Time was, when family discipline also insisted that you didn't go out and play until your homework was done. So the normally unflappable Rolett says he admonished a student volunteer from Texas A & M when she let a student play basketball before he did his studying one day. Rolett told her she would-

out of that gym and into the library to do his homework first."

So asked his emphasis in the direction of this smooth running local club that is routinely judged one of the best in the nation, Rolett answers without hesitation:

"Our priorities have to be to continue to provide and expand upon the educational

"I tell our volunteers that these kids will cling to you, they will walk up and hug you, they will walk up and kiss you. They are that hungry for adults in their lives."

— Ron Rolett

opportunities," he said. "We have to continue to teach kids what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman."

And how do you do that?

"A quality staff and a staff with the resources to conduct these programs," he said.

So, yes, it was he who went to Mayor Pat Hays soon after he accepted the position here to talk to him about taking over the city's dying community center in Rose City, the neighborhood of his youth.

"I want to get in there quick and start some programs," he said. "I know we could build membership, draw kids in from that neighborhood. I'm a Rose City kid, I understand."

This father of two active members of The Club also wants to do more for the city's teenagers, like maybe holding a teens-only night every once in a while, a concept that has worked well in other clubs around the country.

"I'm just giving back what was given to me," he said of his home coming. And no, there was simply no choice nor a moment's hesitation when the board called and asked him to take this job he has wanted since the age of 12.