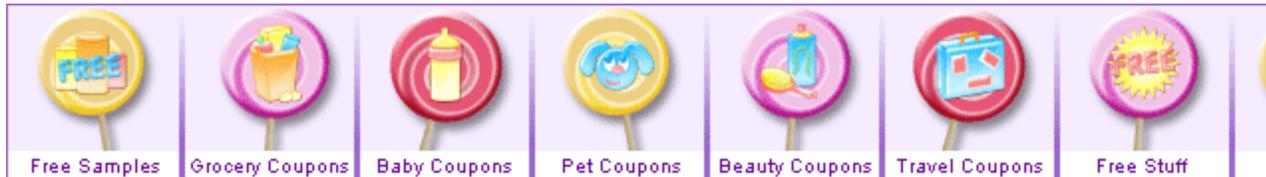




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METRO

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Citadel chief's parents recall his Jacksonville days

There were signs the Forrest High football standout would become a leader.

By MICHAEL LAFORGIA, The Times-Union

When one of your kids grows up to be an Air Force general, then goes on to lead two top military colleges, sometimes you look back and try to pinpoint exactly when he started to stand out.

For one thing, says John Rosa Sr., his son John Jr. was good at football.

John Sr. remembers watching him play quarterback for Forrest High School -- and, later, for The Citadel in Charleston, S.C.



Forrest High grad John Rosa Jr. examines a Citadel cadet's rifle in February, shortly after taking over as president of his alma mater. He's being formally installed at the Charleston, S.C., school today. RUSSELL K. PACE/Citadel Photography

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"He was a skinny kid, went out for football, played four years, got the living hell beat out of him," says Rosa's dad, 84. But, he adds, "The kid would never quit."

His parents think of other examples.

"Fishing," says his mom, Liz Rosa.

"Fishing!" his dad says. "The son of a gun had patience. I didn't. I didn't catch a fish, I'd throw rocks in the water."

Looking back, they agree, they could tell the kid would amount to something. He had the right qualities: He was president of his class at Forrest High. After college he joined the Air Force, where he flew fighter

jets. Eventually he was promoted to general. Then the Air Force appointed him superintendent of its service academy in Colorado.

Today, he's being inaugurated as the 19th president of The Citadel, his alma mater.

"We were obviously looking for top-quality leadership," said Billy Jenkinson, chairman of The Citadel's Board of Visitors. Jenkinson and the board chose Rosa from a pool of more than 50 applicants.

He stood out to the board for the same reasons he stood out as a kid. As Jenkinson put it, John Rosa Jr., 54, "was, in effect, a race horse in training, and had been prepared for us."

But before the screaming jet engines and the promotions and the appointments, there was ice cream.

"I shouldn't even tell you this," says his older sister, Linda Thompson. Remembering, she stifles a giggle. "We would play tricks on him."

She remembers buying ice cream cones and sitting in the backseat of her mom's car with a 6-year-old John Jr. and their oldest sister, Mary.

"Let's have a race!" Linda would yell out.

John Jr. would gobble up his ice cream as they watched, waiting for his head to ache.

"And then we'd sit and laugh at him. He'd cry."

About The Citadel

What it is: A public, co-ed military college

Where it is: Charleston, S.C.

How many are enrolled? 1,964 cadets, 1,174 grad students

How many graduates join the military? About 30 percent

What it costs: In-state, \$17,750 for freshmen, \$14,000 for upperclassmen; Out-of-state, \$27,000 for freshmen, \$24,000 for upperclassmen

Source: www.citadel.edu

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Growing up with three sisters was like that. But with his dad away on a Navy ship all the time, it wasn't long before his sisters began respecting John Jr.

"When dad would leave, he would tell John he was the man of the house," Linda recalls. "And, even at a very early age, he became the man of the house."

While it was tough leaving the kids, John Sr. says -- "Three o'clock in the morning, and there's the four kids. You know, you go in and kiss all of them, they're still asleep." -- he tried to impart good values when he was home.

"You've got your God, Navy," John Sr. would say at the dinner table, "and when you do a job, do it right or don't do it at all."

"He always instilled that in us," Linda says, "and John just got a double case of it."

Meanwhile, John Jr.'s mom took care to put him on a playing field while his dad was away.

"I said, 'I've got to do something for this kid. He's not going to grow up a sissy,'" she recalls.

It worked. Rosa eventually led the 1968 Forrest High football team to an 8-2 season his senior year, attracting The Citadel's attention in the process.

"Learning discipline and character on the football field is where I really think I started growing up," Rosa said. "We had a great group of leaders at our school back then, and I have nothing but fond memories."

He attended The Citadel on a football scholarship and met his wife, Donna Kangeter, as an undergraduate in Charleston.

He accepted an Air Force commission after graduation in 1973. He flew American and British fighter planes and racked up promotions, steadily developing a reputation for leadership. In July 2003, the Air Force Academy -- which was reeling from rape and, later, religious intolerance scandals -- tapped him to become superintendent.

"That was a great institution, and its train had gotten kind of off the tracks," Rosa said.

A three-star general, Rosa straightened things out in Colorado the way his high school football coach, Jerry Disch, taught him. He took responsibility, introducing broad changes to the cadet training program and beefing up penalties for breaking the rules, among other measures. Then, after a 32-year career, he retired in November. By now he and his wife had two sons and a grandson.

The Citadel board has charged Rosa with completing a \$100 million capital campaign to pay for construction and academic programs and to fund academic and athletic scholarships.

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The board is looking forward to seeing what he can do.

Back in Jacksonville, in the house Rosa grew up in, his parents are looking forward, too -- to their son's next visit home.

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