



Pillars of America speaker: Kevin Sweeney

Vet, athlete and chief executive teaches excellence under extreme pressure

Posted: April 29, 2012 - 3:00am

By RUSSELL STIGALL

JUNEAU EMPIRE

Kevin Sweeney didn't start life a big guy. The six-foot three-inch, all conference collegiate basketball player, Fortune 500 executive and veteran of two wars graduated high school weighing 85 pounds.

"I never played athletics in high school," Sweeney said in a telephone interview.

His inexperience didn't dissuade him from his desire to play college basketball. Though Sweeney made the team his freshman year, he was cut the year after.

"As a sophomore in college I lost my life's dream," Sweeney said.

Sweeney said his father told him not to blame his coach for cutting him from the team. Instead he asked if Sweeney had prepared properly, did he do what was necessary to be a college basketball player? Sweeney decided the answer was no and set about training hard to get back on the team.

"It's not the competitor who is beating you," Sweeney said. "If people prepare properly and they are honest with themselves they can accomplish anything they want in life."

Sweeney said he started every game his junior and senior year.

"All Conference, All District and captain of the team," Sweeney said.

Sweeney played college ball, flew military jets in two wars and held executive positions at Fortune 500 companies before he came to his current life as a speaker.

"This is something I've always wanted to do," Sweeney said, "talk to people and help them become successful."

Sweeney said he studied what successful people do to be successful.

"They practice and they follow their passion," Sweeney said. "They get a coach and truly believe in themselves and the outcome of their endeavors."

"So now I just go around and talk with groups about how to really excel when you are under pressure," Sweeney said.

A leader's role is not based on rank or position, Sweeney said. Just because a person possesses a high rank doesn't mean people will follow them, he said.

"It is a gift. They are given a leadership post by their friends and by their co-workers," Sweeney said. "I talk about how people earn this, the value of decisive leadership and what that means to your team."

Sweeney said his lectures can help youths become the teammate all of their peers covet.

"How do they become the go-to person for their fellow adolescents," Sweeney said. "It's a matter of trust and integrity," Sweeney said. "If there is someone you trust, who has high ethics and high integrity, you will follow them."

Great leaders make sure highest and lowest ranked people on their team are ready to lead, Sweeney said.

"In the snap of a finger, the lowest member of the team becomes the most important," Sweeney said. "Do you have them ready?" he asked.

All members of the team have tasks that may prove to be the most important at any given time, Sweeney said. The proof is in his experience landing a crippled airplane in a war zone with his crew.

Sweeney was a military pilot in the Vietnam and first Iraq wars. He was aircraft commander of a KC 135 - military equivalent of a Boeing 707 - in Iraq during Desert Storm.

One night he and his crew were flying just south of Iraq, over Saudi Arabia, when two engines came off the airplane's left wing.

"It is the final exam," Sweeney said. "Every experience in life prepares you for the final exam. And you'd better be ready because you never know when the final exam will come."

Sweeney said he and his crew kept their heads and spent an hour and 15 minutes returning the jet to base.

"The last thing you have to do is put down the landing gear," Sweeney said. The plane had no power, he said, so the gear had to be dropped manually. It takes seven minutes to lower landing gear. He told his bomb-bay operator he would only have three or four.

"My hero goes, 'no I'll get them down,'" Sweeney said.

We all face pressures personally and professional daily, Sweeney said. "How do you excel under pressure? How do you get your team to excel under pressure?"

Whether it be an adolescent taking a final exam, a lead actor or actress in a school play or trying to win a big athletic event, a professional trying to meet a quota, or finish a project that's over budget and behind, the pressure will be on.

Who does he speak for? "Anybody who every feels like they are under pressure and want to excel under pressure," Sweeney said. Who wants to know they will "excel when the heat is on."

For more information visit www.sweeneyspeaks.com.

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