

What Chicago and Boston may not know about Chick-fil-A By Tim Echols

The Chicago and Boston mayors have said they'll do all they can to keep Chick-fil-A franchises from opening in their cities. Besides making a bad culinary decision, this knee-jerk political reaction will have the unintended consequence of hurting local charities, teens and orphans. Let me explain.

First, let's talk about what working at Chick-fil-A does for teenagers. Of their 60,000 employee workforce, 80 percent are less than 21 years old. This is a company that gets these young people to say "It's my pleasure" on cue whenever a customer says any version of thank you. This is no small feat—I know because I have seven kids and four of them have worked for the company. This respect, an accompanying work ethic, and career opportunities are desperately needed in every city, but especially cities like Chicago—with one of the largest gang populations in the country. Plus, the company will award \$1.65 million in scholarships to its restaurant team members in 2012—one of which is my son, John.

Second, Chick-fil-A operators work from coast to coast and often serve as model corporate citizens giving away food, organizing community events like 3-on-3 basketball tournaments, and getting involved in civic groups like Rotary and Kiwanis. That is where I met Mr. Truett Cathy in 1978—the Atlanta Airport Rotary Club in Hapeville. I was one of a dozen seniors being honored by the civic club. Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A, cornered me after the meeting and invited me to his office. There, he gave me a set of Zig Ziglar motivational tapes, a tape recorder, and \$50 to buy batteries for the contraption. Listening to those tapes and setting life goals had a direct bearing on my life, eventually running for office, and now serving as Chair of the Georgia Public Service Commission.

But Truett Cathy's commitment to children and youth extends far beyond Rotary Club honorees. Cathy, with profit made from selling chicken sandwiches, has rescued hundreds of orphans and under-privileged kids from a certain life of poverty and all that can go with that. Cathy's WinShape Foundation establishes foster homes—paying a fulltime salary to foster parents to care for the kids, even buying the house, van, and groceries. He often funds vacations, college educations, and weddings. Add to that the WinShape camps serving 15,000 kids of all socio-economic stripes per summer and Chick-fil-A is taking a huge burden off of our government social services. I wonder if the Boston and Chicago mayors thought that through.

Space doesn't allow me to wax on about the Cathy impact on young and old. But suffice it to say, I don't expect Mayor Reed or other prominent Atlanta leaders to jump on the bandwagon in criticizing this outstanding company or any of its executives. After all, this is a corporation doing something right. They have a 97 percent retention rate among their store operators. And last year, Chick-fil-A had 22,000 applications for only 87 operator selections.

Everyone in Atlanta knows the void we would have without the Cathy family and Chick-fil-A. According to Dan Cathy, Chick-fil-A's Chicago openings have broken all previous company sales records. Wow, people in the "Windy City" are voting with their wallets, and their voice along with ours will drown out any political non-sense from people who really don't have all the facts.

Tim Echols is Chairman of the Georgia Public Service Commission. He considers Truett Cathy a mentor in his life since age 17.