

## **ROCKET BOYS AND HANDY DADS**

*By David A. Watson, Ph.D.*

I've been reading an excellent book to my boys lately, one I highly recommend. My guys love it too. So I read to them...and read to them some more (at least its something I believe I can do fairly well). Rocket Boys, by Homer Hickam, Jr., is the autobiographical tale of a young man coming of age in the late 1950's in the tiny town of Coalwood, West Virginia (population 900). I won't review the book in detail here (its been out now for a couple of years); I would, however, like to tell you about Homer's dad, and why he reminds me so much of my own.

Homer "Sonny" Hickam, Jr. was the younger son of the supervisor of an underground (deep underground) coal mine. His older brother Jim was a high school football star with an undistinguished academic record. Since Sonny's dad was an avid fan of high school football, and particularly Coalwood football, Jim was the apple of his dad's eye. Sonny, who was more adept in the classroom, but less so on the gridiron, was convinced that his father favored Jim. Turns out that while Homer Sr. was not as outwardly demonstrative in his love for his second son as he was in cheering the athletic exploits of Jim, the old man really did care about Sonny. The manner in which he proved it was a poignant reminder for me of how my own father supported the early development of my own scientific career. I'll explain. While Homer's father would have preferred for Sonny to follow in his footsteps as a miner, actually by taking the next step up and become a mining engineer, Sonny had other plans. Junior was convinced that the future was in space. The Russians had just successfully orbited Sputnik, and Sonny wanted very much to go to work for Dr. Wernher von Braun down at Cape Canaveral and help the United States catch up in the race for space. Sonny therefore endeavored, with

the help of several friends, to build his own rockets. Over time these creations became highly sophisticated, particularly the propulsion nozzles, which had to be precision-machined from heavy steel. Homer Sr. directly and indirectly made it possible for machinists at the Coalwood mine to produce these essential parts for Sonny's rockets. I guess I'm spoiling the ending of the book, but here goes. Sonny's rockets flew high and true, and he won the national science fair in 1960. Homer Hickam, Jr. did indeed go on to a career as a NASA engineer, just as he had hoped to do. He's retired from NASA now, working on his second career as a writer of excellent books.

I, too, am a second son, and while my older brother was never a sports star, he and my dad are nevertheless much alike. So much so that even in high school it was clear to me I could never compete for dad's attention (they are both very mechanically inclined, hunters, hot rod fanciers, etc.). I did make one attempt to follow in their footsteps, however. I came home from school one day and announced to my father that I wanted to take Shop class, or maybe Ag. My thinking was that dad would be overjoyed that I wanted to learn to be a mechanic or a farmer. I was wrong. Dad told me in no uncertain terms that I would be taking only college prep courses, that he could teach me the rudiments of being a mechanic, and that he would personally build whatever I might need for the science experiments that I had darn well better do. I followed his "advice", doing my experiments with gadgets beautifully crafted by my dad based on my drawings. I won scholarships, went to college, and became a scientist.

Back to my assigned task of reading to my own boys. I read to them because I can't make rocket nozzles or other gizmos. My role is therefore a bit different for them than it was for my father in helping me, or Homer's father in helping him. Just as surely,

however, as the support given by Homer Sr. for rocket building, or the late night hours of fine craftsmanship contributed by my own dad, my boys also know that their dad loves them, since I'm always coming up with books to read to them. We fathers do what we can.