

WILDCAT CREW ON THE PROWL AT GADSDEN

By Ron Barry

It was evident from the outset that this story was going to be quite different than anything else I'd written thus far.

That's because when you agree to interview a group of six fifth graders... well, let's just say there's a reason the television show *Kids Say the Darndest Things* ran for almost 30 years in four different versions.

I went to Gadsden Elementary School on Thursday afternoon, supposedly to prepare a feature on the Wildcat Crew, a group of students who "serve as student ambassadors" for GES. When I sat down in the cafeteria with these six – Madison Cathey, Aslynn Fortenberry, Marlee Jones, Layla Phillips, Keoni Pinto, and Aubrey Smith – hilarity ensued.

What started as a legitimate attempt to find out the kinds of things they do to help out their school, soon deteriorated into exactly who would play which role if they were to pull off a bank robbery together – and it all happened so quickly I can't even recall what prompted it.

Before we get into that, though, let's allow GES Principal Marsha Foust to explain the actual reason the group exists. Pulling a bank heist is not in the actual job description.

"The Wildcat Crew is a group of students (fifth graders) who serve as student ambassadors for GES," she said. "Students chosen are the example for others and must maintain a good discipline record. They're responsible for picking up attendance and lunch count each morning; they help decorate for special events; they greet visitors during special events and take care of the sign-in process. They are the representatives for our student body and help with opinions and choices whenever a student voice is needed. They serve in any capacity necessary."

To get on the Wildcat Crew, there's a nameless (but numbered) application process that consists of a short essay and answers to specific questions such as, "Ways I Help at Home," "Ways I Help at School," "How Am I Getting Myself Prepared for Middle School," and "What Would I Like to Do When I Grow Up," as well as identifying hobbies and a favorite subject in school. Instructions for the essay are: "Describe why you think you would be a good candidate for the Wildcat Crew. What character traits do you have that would make you a good example to other students and a good helper for teachers?"

A group of teachers and administrators then read the applications, not knowing who wrote them, and vote for the ones that impressed them the most. Those are then matched with the numbers that identify the students selected.



So that's what brought this particular group together. Every one of them told me they enjoyed being an example for the younger students (whom they endearingly call "the little ones"). They enjoy helping the teachers and staff with the various tasks they are assigned. Madison, Marlee, and Aubrey all cited math as their favorite subjects, which flies in the face of the stereotypical view that girls don't like math. (I have always suspected they did, and now I have proof.)

Layla, they say, is the most curious one of the bunch – "She's always asking other people questions," volunteered Keoni – and Layla agreed she'd be the one most likely to be a news reporter. She also said she's heard the song "Layla" but doesn't particularly care for it – tough news to take for a fan of classic rock.

Aslynn prefers science as her favorite subject because she likes animals. Later, when we were walking out to the playground to take some pictures, I asked her, "You're the reasonable one in this bunch, aren't you?" Her quietly affirmative reply was noted.

Then there's Keoni. A future talk show host in the making, Keoni can sling opinions in every direction on virtually any subject, I suspect. His favorites are split between P.E. and math, he said, although the others – notably Marlee, whom Keoni identified as the one most likely to pull off the bank robbery and then rat out the others if they were in on it – tabbed him as most likely to be the brains behind the heist.

The bank robbery discussion hijacked most of our time together, largely because each student's personality came shining through in ways which quickly identified why they had ended up on this crew in the first place.

Marlee took all the kidding about being most likely to rob the bank with tremendous graciousness – although there was a twinkle in her eye that said, "Maybe I could get away with it!" Eventually, we all decided that Keoni might actually plan the proceedings, Aslynn and Aubrey would go in as the "nice decoys" that no one would suspect, Layla would be a good lookout because of her observational skills, and Madison would most likely drive the getaway car because nothing seems to rattle her at all. Marlee may then rat out the others, but only to claim the reward money so she could say she didn't actually steal anything.

The funny thing is that when I related this to Principal Foust before I left, she said, "That sounds exactly like each of their personalities coming through! That's why we love them so much."

So while learning that they also help the kindergarten children with their lunches; occasionally clean up the campus and throw stuff in the garbage; and usually rotate for some functions in groups of two, I also found out (from Keoni, of course) that there's a guy on YouTube named Mr. Beast who makes the best cookies (called "Feastables"); that Aubrey wanted to be on this Crew because she wanted to "try something new"; that Aslynn has a lot of riding trails near her house; that Marlee likes "responsibility"; and that Madison and Layla share the conflict of being Tennessee fans while not particularly liking the color orange – although they like the orange-and-black combination the team sometimes wears. If this Crew is indeed representative of GES, then Gadsden has an impressive pack of Wildcats.