

SEGUE: SIUE Hall of Famer Chad Opel shares journey to nonprofit founder

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On this week's episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio show that discusses the lives and work of the people on campus and beyond, Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, interviews Chad Opel, certified financial planner and senior wealth management advisor at Visionary Wealth Advisors, and co-founder of Edwardsville Neighbors.

A talented baseball player, Opel was member of Edwardsville High School's undefeated 40-0 team that won the Class AA State Championship in 1998. He was also the tournament co-MVP.

"I'm sure you have fond memories of that season and your team. Do you still keep in contact with any of your past teammates and coaches?" Pembroke inquires.

"I do!" Opel says. "It was an awesome time, and I remember it just like it was yesterday, even though it was over 20 years ago. My fellow co-MVP in the tournament was Matt Evers, and he is now a police officer in town. We were best men in each other's weddings and still see each other frequently."

Opel arrived at SIUE after high school and joined the Cougar baseball team. Before graduating in 2003, he contributed greatly to the team's success and was inducted into the SIUE Athletics Hall of Fame in 2014. He went on to play minor league ball for the Baltimore Orioles organization.

"I was so fortunate and had such a wonderful experience playing at SIUE with coach Bo Collins," Opel says. "He was part of the reason I got to play, be around some great players and even break some records along the way."

In 2002, Opel became the sixth player in NCAA Division II history to record more than 300 hits and was also sixth in NCAA D-II history with 229 runs scored. He finished his career with a .355 batting average and a .501 slugging percentage. He also posted the best wood bat batting average in school history at .420.

"Do you remember what it was like to get that call that you were being inducted to the SIUE Athletics Hall of Fame?" Pembroke asks.

"Absolutely, these memories will be forever embedded in my brain," Opel says. "When Brad Hewitt gave me the news, I just got the biggest smile on my face, and immediately called my wife, then my coach and my dad."

After two years in the minors, Opel came back to Edwardsville, and became a teacher and coach before joining the financial planning and wealth management industry.

"At that point in my life, baseball was everything I'd ever known, so it was natural for me to gravitate toward coaching," Opel says. "I taught community health and exercise science classes at Rend Lake College, and gave lessons to youngsters in the area."

In his position at Visionary Wealth Advisors, he educates and coaches his clients on investments, insurance and many financial planning topics.

“Our focus is helping folks protect their goals and dreams,” Opel says.

Opel and his wife, Kathy, are tireless contributors to the Edwardsville community and founded Edwardsville Neighbors, a nonprofit organization that seeks to help families facing medical or emergency crises.

“How did you and Kathy create Edwardsville Neighbors?” Pembroke asks.

“Nearly 11 years ago, my stepfather Greg Seibert, was sitting in a tree stand while deer hunting,” Opel explains. “He had an extremely rare medical emergency that behaved sort of like a spinal stroke and caused instant paralysis from his waist down.

“Our family joined together and evaluated how we could come together to help him. His job required manual labor, and now he was out of work and confined to a wheelchair. His home needed retrofitting and all those things require a lot of money.”

In 2009, the Opels decided to throw a fundraiser to help take some of the financial strain off Seibert’s family. The event, called the Taste of Edwardsville, showcased dishes from local restaurants and raised money through ticket sales.

“After that first event, we had no real intention of beginning a charity,” Opel says. “People kept coming to us and asking who we were going to help next, when the next event would be, and we decided to formally organize and fundraise throughout the year as Edwardsville Neighbors.

“That way, when disaster strikes, we would not have to rush to throw an event, and people didn’t have to start a GoFundMe. We could have the money available and step in right away to provide financial assistance to those in times of crisis.”

The Taste of Edwardsville, as well as the Turkey Trot 5K, are Edwardsville Neighbors’ main fundraisers. To find information about the organization’s events, as well as ways to contribute, how to nominate a family, and information for local businesses to participate in the event, please visit edwardsvilleneighbors.org.

Tune in at 9 a.m. on Sunday, June 9, to WSIE 88.7 The Sound to hear Opel and Pembroke’s entire conversation.