

## **Gravely Foundation Supports Area Students and North Carolina Wesleyan College.**

In 1945 as World War II was ending, the children of pioneering Rocky Mount businessman J.O.W. Gravely and Lula Keen Gravely decided to honor their parents in a special way. They created the Gravely Foundation to put financial resources behind their parents' philosophy that all boys and girls should have the opportunity to advance themselves through education. In the ensuing years, the Gravely Foundation helped hundreds of young people with financial need achieve their dreams of higher education, and over the last four decades it provided approximately \$803,000 in non-inflation adjusted dollars to support student aid programs at North Carolina Wesleyan College. The Foundation also supported student aid programs at Nash and Edgecombe County Community Colleges and East Carolina University.

The link between the Gravely Foundation and N.C. Wesleyan was rooted in the role that P.K. Gravely played in bringing Wesleyan to Rocky Mount. As Mayor of Rocky Mount in the late 1950's he led the effort by a number of the city's civic and business leaders to generate the financial and political backing to persuade the Methodist Church in North Carolina to locate their new college here.

J.O.W. and Lula K. Gravely's great grandson Winston Lea, who currently serves as an officer, noted, "Simply stated, in the 1940's relatively few girls and boys could afford higher education. My great grandparents believed that our community would be a better place if as many young men and women as possible could advance their lives through education. And that's still true today. North Carolina Wesleyan has long been a great partner as the Gravely Foundation has sought to fulfill its mission." He went on to say, "It's humbling to think that my grandfather and his brothers and sister started a fund that has ultimately provided either loans to individuals or grants to area colleges totaling nearly \$2 million, not adjusting for inflation over all those years. It would be difficult to calculate for the current purchasing power of the loans and grants for every year from its inception to now, but it would be many times that sum. They had extraordinary vision."

P.K. Gravely, L. Lee Gravely, J.O. Winston Gravely, Jr. and Lula Gravely McGee initially began on a small scale by making loans to fund college, technical/vocational school or post college graduate educations for worthy graduates of the public schools in Rocky Mount based on their need. The loans were interest free until after the student completed his or her education, when a low-interest repayment plan would be established.

By 1953, the effort was formalized by incorporation of the Gravely Foundation. P.K. Gravely, J.O. Winston Gravely, Jr., and W.S. Wilkinson, a Rocky Mount attorney who assisted in the incorporation, were elected as the first officers of the Foundation. Records indicate assets of the Foundation of \$49,000, which in today's dollars would be about \$460,000.

During the fifties and sixties, candidates for loans would be interviewed by one or more of the officers. Officers would also review the candidates' references who often were the principals or faculty of Rocky Mount High School or Booker T. Washington High School in those days before complete integration and consolidation of the Rocky Mount School System. Applications were also considered in several cases from students from Nash and Edgecombe County Schools. In this manner, loans were made to students pursuing a wide variety of fields of study such as teaching, business administration, engineering, medicine and law. They primarily attended schools in North Carolina including UNC, NC State, Duke, Davidson, Atlantic Christian College (now Barton College,) Fayetteville State, NC A&T, East Carolina, Shaw, North Carolina Wesleyan, and what are now Edgecombe and Nash Community Colleges. By 1969, 18 to 20 students were pursuing higher education with Gravely Foundation loans each year.

During the 1960's and 1970's, the Gravely Foundation made direct grants to colleges as well as loans to students. Recipients included North Carolina Wesleyan, and later Edgecombe and Nash Community Colleges. Also during this period, in years when individual loan applications were less than expected, the Foundation provided funds supporting various community programs for youth education such as the

Rocky Mount Children's Museum, the Rocky Mount Arts Center for free children's programs, and the Boys Club and the YMCA for memberships for underprivileged children.

By 1982 as the funds in the Foundation grew, the officers determined that the Foundation could more effectively fulfill its mission by phasing out the individual loan program and replacing it with annual grants made directly to institutions, who in turn would provide loans or scholarships to deserving students, based on need as always had been the practice. Initially, the grants were provided to North Carolina Wesleyan College and East Carolina University. By the early 1990's, additional annual grants were also made to Nash and Edgecombe Community Colleges. To keep the focus on the Foundations origins and home base, in 2014 the officers added the stipulation that colleges receiving the grants should give priority to students from Nash, Edgecombe, Wilson, Halifax, Franklin and Martin Counties.

Also in keeping with the founders' wishes, direct descendants of J.O.W. and Lula K. Gravely continue to serve as officers of the Gravely Foundation.