

Reaching Out to People and Enriching Lives

When Sylvia and Bill Solari settled in the Lake Gaston region, the nearby counties along the Virginia/North Carolina border obtained an asset that continues to offer significant dividends. Through their volunteer commitments and financial investments in the wellbeing of others, the Solaris have given of themselves and their resources to make the community a better place. Their efforts have enhanced regional healthcare, promoted a better educated workforce, and boosted local pride.

Their story began when Sylvia, a native of Hickory, NC, decided to pursue an interior design degree at Richmond Professional Institute (now VCU). Bill was a student at the University of Richmond. They met on a blind date arranged by a friend in 1963 and were married in 1965.

Bill's first job after college took them to Louisville, Kentucky. A few years later, he was transferred to Raleigh, NC. That location, halfway between their families proved to be an ideal spot for raising their two sons. In order to stay in the region, Bill switched careers and entered the financial investment field. They purchased a vacation cottage on Lake Gaston in 1975. After Bill retired in 2008, they moved full-time to a new home at Lake Gaston.

Family and professional commitments prevented Bill from getting involved in civic activities while working. Retirement brought the opportunity to explore other interests. He says, "God has been very good to us, and we wanted to do something to give back to the community."

Community theater provided the first draw, and for years the Solaris volunteered and invested in the Lakeland Theatre in Littleton, NC. Their next venture was working with the Colonial Theatre in South Hill, VA where they helped start the Colonial Actors Theatre Society (CATS), built sets, and performed in shows. That participation led to selling ads to help fund the theater. In that capacity, they were introduced to advertisers, including Community Memorial Health Center, which is now VCU Health Community Memorial Hospital. Bill was also involved with the South Hill and Lake Gaston Chambers of Commerce and served for five years on the Board of Directors at CCB (now Touchstone Bank).

The couple's community involvement began to snowball. "One thing led to another," Bill laughs. Soon, they recognized a need to focus and decided to dedicate their efforts to volunteer work with the hospital and theatre. Sylvia served two years on the hospital's Auxiliary Board of Directors and has volunteered weekly for twelve years in the Emergency Department. For seven years, she built sets for the community theatre and acted in a number of productions. Bill has served on the hospital Foundation Board and is currently Chairman of the Board. For many years, he has been the stage manager for the theatre and acted in a number of productions.

They also began to channel their financial resources in numerous directions, establishing scholarships for students with a variety of needs, helping CMH better serve area patients, and

supporting other charitable organizations. CMH wanted to offer radiation services so cancer patients wouldn't have to travel long distances for care. In order to bring the high-tech treatments to South Hill, the hospital needed to construct a building and provide the basic staffing that would permit specialists to come in with necessary equipment and expertise. Bill remembers, "I offered to contribute \$500,000 to the project." Sylvia had other ideas and increased the couple's donation to \$1 million. The Solaris also funded the purchase of a software program to increase the speed and efficiency of the center's linear accelerator. Today, the Solari Radiation Therapy Center proudly operates as the only radiation therapy center in the region.

Patient feedback underscores the benefit. One young woman with breast cancer told Sylvia and Bill that the availability of local treatment meant she was able to get the care she needed and return to work the same day. Another cancer patient said he probably would have declined treatment if it had been necessary to travel to Richmond to receive it. "You like to think you've made a difference," Bill notes, "and this type of feedback helps you know that you've done something that reached others."

The Solaris also enjoy reaching out to people who need help pursuing higher education. Their interest has its roots in family experience. Bill's father had only a high school education. He disliked his job, but felt trapped in it. "Work is a four-letter word if you don't enjoy what you're doing," Bill comments. He summarizes his father's story: "He raised a family of six children on a bookkeeper's pay. He didn't have the educational credentials to rise higher to make more money."

Sylvia and Bill's younger son disliked traditional education and opted to attend community college where he studied electronics and electricity. After entering the workforce, he realized the need for further education and took classes to qualify for Microsoft certifications. After that, he needed only a few more courses to obtain an Associate degree in computer networking.

Bill says, "Community college provided our son with a life-changing experience." He notes that a community college education is "the bargain of the century." Students attending community college come out with marketable skills and a career that can last for the rest of their lives. Another bonus is that the financial burden is far less than a traditional college.

Sylvia and Bill understand that the cost of education can be a barrier for many of the people who stand to benefit the most. When Sylvia's father, a World War II veteran, turned 90, they made a donation to establish the William C. and Evelyn L. Setzer Family Scholarship at Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory, NC.

Bill comments, "Scholarships provide a chance to change lives, to reach people that we could never reach individually." In subsequent years they added to the scholarship fund. They started another in Bill's parents' names at Belmont Abbey College where Bill's younger brother serves as Abbot. They also established an endowed scholarship at Vance-Granville Community College in northern NC to assist low-income students.

At Southside Virginia Community College, they joined resources with an anonymous donor who wanted to set up a scholarship for nursing students from Virginia's Mecklenburg County. The resulting Kitty Solari Nursing Scholarship honors Bill's sister, her generous spirit, and her dedication to the nursing profession. One scholarship recipient told the Solaris that she had wanted to be a nurse since the age of four. Without scholarship assistance, her dream would have been out of reach, but with support, she was well on her way to becoming a nurse.

More recently, the couple decided to endow the Sylvia and William Solari Scholarship at SVCC. "If you create an endowed scholarship, you leave a permanent legacy to help people," Bill notes. The award provides aid to students from the ten Virginia counties within SVCC's service area and four neighboring low-income counties in North Carolina.

Sylvia and Bill encourage everyone to get an education. "Nobody can take your education away from you. It will make a difference for the rest of your life." Bill emphasizes.

The Solaris acknowledge that their philanthropy also serves their own interests. "Seniors like us need people to fix their cars, operate medical equipment, or be linemen who keep the electricity flowing. We need people with skills, and community college is where things like this are taught."

For Sylvia and Bill, the future looks bright. Bill hopes to help increase the hospital's endowment, which will permit CMH to provide services that the regular hospital budget doesn't cover, such as a therapy dog program. Sylvia plans to keep volunteering in the Emergency Department, where her efforts help alleviate stress among nursing staff members. The Solaris want to provide music programs in the hospital lobby to cheer people with physical challenges, and they want to help students with health concerns such as obesity and diabetes.

Regarding the breadth of their outreach, Bill says, "It's easy to get involved. Be a good example for others to follow. Individuals can do this. Businesses can do this. Volunteer where you can and give what you can. Even small donations, such as to the Cancer Care Fund at CMH, go a long way toward helping people, and an endowed scholarship, which leaves a legacy after you're gone, is not as expensive as you might think at a community college like SVCC."

Sylvia and Bill are grateful that they've found fulfilling ways to participate in the community. The journey continues to bring them satisfaction, and they both look forward to joining with their neighbors to usher in a healthier and enriched prospects for all.