

The Spirit of Generosity: Don and Shirley Litwiller

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Although Don and Shirley Litwiller are not graduates of Eureka College, they have been faithful, generous supporters of this small school 'Neath the elms since they moved to Eureka in the late 1950s. Don was named as an Honorary Alum in 2013. Over the years, the Litwillers could be seen at various college events, and they were people I always enjoyed meeting and visiting with; however, their attendance in recent years has been somewhat limited. As Shirley explained, "Since we have gotten up in years, we are not as able to attend college events as we did in the past." Don agreed, adding, "I am not able to stand at long periods of time, and I have to find a place to sit." Thus, they limit themselves to attending football and basketball games and other events where they can sit and enjoy the event.

The impact that Don and Shirley have had on the college is best expressed in the following words of Vice President Mike Murtagh, "Perhaps no couple has made a bigger difference, not just at Eureka College but also in the Eureka Community than Don and Shirley Litwiller. Their generosity has been significant and has made a difference in the lives of many, many people, especially in the lives of Eureka College students. They are examples of people whom one can never thank enough for their good deeds."

In 2013, for the book *Stories from 'Neath the Elms: Eureka College 1970-2014*, I interviewed Don about his involvement as a trustee of the college. What follows are Don's own words:

"Well, I remember when we moved to Eureka in 1959, I was interested in the college. Although I had a low income, I remember making a \$250 donation, and from that time on I have seen a lot of changes and improvements. Then in the 1990s I was a trustee of the college for six years and served a few years after that. Don Magee made a special motion to extend my term.

"I remember that at my first trustee meeting they gave a financial report, and I said to myself, 'What am I doing here?' It didn't look good, and so at the next meeting, I said the same thing to myself. And then I said to myself, 'We've got to roll up our sleeves and do something.'

"The college began to change in the mid-1990s because all of the trustees knew we had financial problems. We had some good trustees and we rolled up our sleeves and addressed the problems. Maintenance was a terrible problem at the college. Everything had been postponed. Being in the construction business that's where I spent a lot of my time fixing things, trying to 'stomp our brush fires,' so to speak. But when you didn't have any money it was tough to do certain things. One example I could just not figure out was that the two main buildings—one was Burgess Hall and the other the main building which contains the president's office—didn't have any insulation. And I, as a builder, was thinking, 'Oh, my gosh, over a hundred years old, think of how much heat we have wasted.' So, we put insulation in those buildings and cut our utility bills. And that's kind of where I came in—at the maintenance level. Much of my work was a donation. The college didn't have the money, and so I paid for it myself. I knew that in one or two years it would pay for itself. So, I have done a lot of little things that just needed to be done.

"I was a trustee when Burgess Hall and Burrus Dickinson Hall were remodeled and bathrooms were installed in Burrus Dickinson Hall. Then one summer we discovered that the underground plumbing was in terrible shape, and we realized we had to fix it. We started when school was out in the spring, and we didn't have long to get it done. I said to President Arnold, 'I know someone who can get it

fixed.’ It was Core Construction Company and Wayne Baum. President Arnold said, ‘I have his number right here,’ and he gave Wayne a call. And Core did a wonderful job and got that all fixed up before school started. So that’s the typical thing I got involved in. I was able to advise the college about the right price to get things fixed up.

“I remember the students complaining about the washers and dryers. They were coin-operated. The dryers wouldn’t dry their clothes, and the machines would gyp them out of money, so I told the trustees what I would do. I will buy 31 washers and 31 dryers that are not coin-operated so the students could use them free of charge. And that’s what we did. The students gave me the nickname ‘The Laundry Fairy.’ I still laugh about it.

“Another project that I helped with was the development of land where the soccer field is located. With Chuck Staley’s help and planning, we had 30 acres of land that we were getting \$4,000 a year in rent on, and I thought, ‘We need a soccer field. And I’m in the subdivision business, I will just deed that into lots and make money.’ We’re doing it now, and we hope we’ll clear a profit for the college from \$700,000 to 900,000, and the college has already got payments enough to cover the \$4,000 a year that we would have lost on the land. So, it’s moving along; we as soon as we started, we had a recession. That really changed things, but the college has not had to put up any money other than just to deed the land, and all the profits go to the college. I have donated a lot of time, and I’m still mowing all the empty lots and not charging for it. That’s the closest I can come to being a farmer. I always wanted to be a farmer. We named the streets in the subdivision for college professors we liked.

In terms of renovating the college facilities, I see things being done as they need it. We had a lot of old houses that had been donated to the college, and they just gradually went downhill. I was able to get about eight or ten of them torn down at little expense. Some we even burned down to give the fire department practice. It just makes the campus look so much better. I usually drive through the campus twice a day, and I am always looking for projects to improve the place. That brings me to the matter of the parking lot right across from the Cerf Center and Jones Hall. That was land donated to us by Roy Jakle. The lot was nothing but a briar patch full of barbed wire, old buildings, and a house that was run down. One day I said to myself, ‘We need a parking lot.’ And I said, ‘If you turn me loose on this, I will get it done. I’ll raise the money and get it done.’ And that’s how the parking lot got put in. We got it all done without a cost to the college.

“I was a trustee when David Arnold was named as president. I had sat in on the hiring process. I will give Dave the biggest credit for turning this college around. He’s done a great job. When you’re the boss you can’t satisfy everybody. I know there’s been a little friction here and there, maybe with the faculty, but it’s the boss’ job and he’s done a good job, especially when the trustees were considering closing the college down at the time of his taking office. We didn’t even know if the college could be reaccredited. Most people don’t know that it was on the table to close the college, and David asked for the chance to see what he could do. That’s when the trustees decided to roll up our sleeves and see what we could do to help him. There is another person who deserves a lot of credit: Mark Pasteris. Mark and I worked together on a lot of projects and several problems. Mark is a great credit to Eureka College.”

Update: On January 30, 2020, I drove to Don and Shirley’s home on the shores of Eureka Lake to interview them about recent developments. I was also curious to see if I could discover the motives for their generosity toward Eureka College.

I pointed out that they had given so much, and I wondered how they had been involved in the college since Don's interview for the book.

Don began by telling me that after the renovation in the Reagan Field house, he learned that the college still needed funds for seating in the arena. Don saw the need, and so he and Shirley donated money for two section of seating and their son Dennis donated for another section and Carl Hirsch donated for another.

Then Don said one day Coach Kurt Barth took him to the chain-link fence on the north end of the football field and asked: "What can we do about that?" Don answered, "We can build a wall." Thus, Pete Hughes donated the money for the wall to honor Coach Leo Traister, and before the project was finished legendary Coach Ralph McKinzie was honored along with Coach Barth's parents. My construction crew tore down the fence to prepare for the construction of the wall."

Don and Shirley have donated funds for bleachers for the baseball field and for a classroom in Sanders Hall. Don has also hired college students to work on his construction crew during the summer. He recalled that one summer he hired six or seven students to work for him. He said that students frequently stop and say hello to him after they have graduated. He told me that he didn't want to mention specific students for fear of leaving someone out; however, he did mention Brian Barth as one student who impressed him.

I asked Don to comment on the high points of his involvement with the college over the years. He thought a moment and answered, "It's the leaders who have impressed me, especially the financial leadership of Mark Pasteris, Dave Arnold, and Mike Murtagh. And, of course, the outstanding financial gifts of Dr. Richard Sanders."

Don then went on to praise another person: Coach Kurt Barth for his leadership in developing a successful football program. "He's not just a good coach but also a good example of leadership for young men to follow."

Then I asked the question that had sent me out to visit on this cold January afternoon: You have given so much to Eureka College over the years with your money, time, and ideas, you must have a very special reason for doing so. Why have you been so generous?

Don did not hesitate, "Because the college is good for the community."

Shirley nodded and said, Yes, the college deserves our support. We are a better community because we have a college here."

When I asked if there were any other highlights, Shirley said, "Yes, about two years ago Kerrigan Dura wrote us a nice letter thanking us for attending the women's basketball games. That was so nice of her to do that."

I thanked Don and Shirley and said, "I am sure Kerrigan speaks for many students who have benefited from your generosity." Then I thought to myself that the students who called Don "The Laundry Fairy" were using that name as a term of endearment and appreciation as if he embodied the Eureka College version of the Tooth Fairy.