

Dick Tyner's Gift: Supporting Honors Education

by Sophie Katz

As the presidential race enters primary season, donors all over the nation are throwing hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars at their favorite candidates—but Dick Tyner, who recently pledged one million dollars to the University of Iowa Honors Program, believes that there are better uses for his funds.

“I suppose I could give money to a politician, but why?” he joked. “We may as well concentrate on education. It’s about passing the torch to the next generation. If anybody can help solve the problems of the world, it’s the next generation.”

Tyner, an alumnus from the University of Iowa class of 1970, after a long career as an international lawyer in the Middle East, finally returned to campus in 2014 on a visit to the political science and French departments, his old majors.

“I thought it would be important to come meet faculty and see what’s going on,” Tyner said. “And at the last minute I thought, ‘Why don’t we meet someone in the Honors Program?’”

At the time, the Honors Advisory Board did not yet exist, but when it was formed in September 2014, the Honors Program remembered Tyner’s enthusiasm for the program and invited him to be a member.

“It seemed like Dick would be a good fit for the Honors Advisory Board,” Honors Program Director Dr. Art Spisak said. “He was excited about Honors and expressed an interest in it. Not too long after he visited, he had already made a couple of gifts to the Honors Program.”

Those gifts included a five thousand dollar donation for the Presidential Scholars Program, which is comprised of the eighty or so current Presidential Scholars. Tyner’s gift will help the current Presidentials with their out-of-class academic and community-building experiences. But Tyner didn’t want to stop there.

“Presidential Scholars and Old Gold Scholars are incoming freshmen,” he said. “What about people who get to the university and don’t have scholarships at all, but are excellent students? It could be for a variety of reasons that a student isn’t one of those scholars—he or she applied too late, for instance. It occurred to me that we needed a scholarship for students like that.”

Tyner also wants the recipients of the new scholarship to be students from small towns, like himself; he grew up on a farm near Shenandoah, Iowa, and still thinks of himself as a “farm boy.” According to Tyner, people from small towns oftentimes don’t get the same kind of advanced placement opportunities that people from larger towns do, and so they come to college without the advantage of good grades or knowing what they want out of their education.

“People who just haven’t had the opportunity or weren’t motivated before but came to the university and found their passion—those are the students who should be awarded this scholarship,” Tyner said.

So, in October 2015, Tyner pledged one million dollars to the university, half to go to the Honors Enrichment Fund, and the other half to create a new scholarship for small-town students who reach a 3.5 GPA while at the university and are invited to be a part of the Honors Program.

But how does a pledge become a scholarship?

“The money is an endowment,” Dr. Spisak explained. “The University of Iowa Foundation invests the money in a diversified portfolio that is projected to grow over time. About 4.5 percent of the fund is available each year as the spendable part. You keep the principal invested so you have money year after year, so you’ll be able to award the scholarship continually.”

This million dollar pledge will come from Tyner in \$100,000 yearly installments, the first of which the university has already received. The first installment is all for the new scholarship, while later installments will be split between the scholarship and the Honors Enrichment Fund, which supports out-of-class experiences like study abroad and internships. This will undoubtedly be a big help for University of Iowa students who, like Tyner, don’t figure out what they wanted to do with their education until long after their freshman year.

Tyner is eager to help the next generation as soon as he can. Many people choose to leave money to their alma mater in wills, but Tyner sees a benefit in giving money to the Honors Program while he’s alive. “That way,” he said, “I can see the good that comes from the donation, and I can help tailor the gift to the needs of the Program as we go forward.”

“It occurred to me that the initial donations didn’t have to be the end of this,” he continued, referring to his previous gifts to the university. “I realized that there was no reason why I couldn’t do more for the university. I could make a much larger contribution to the Honors Program—the part of the university that was the most meaningful to me. Seeing faculty again, and the new students, has meant a lot to me.”

And his support means a lot to those who receive it, too. As a member of the University of Iowa Honors Program and a Presidential Scholar, I thank Dick Tyner for his generosity and his belief in my generation.