

## **“THE CHANGING FACE OF THE BONNER FOUNDATION”**

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Mr. Bonner's Vision:

*I want to displace despair with opportunity.  
I want to help the person who is hurting.*

These were the phrases, slogans really, that Mr. Bonner shared with me one winter night when I visited him at their home in 1989. We were sitting in Mr. Bonner's library. It was after midnight and we had been talking non-stop since lunch. He had just asked me if I would work for the Foundation.

For those who don't know, I grew up under the shadow of Mr. and Mrs. Bonner. Because my father was the senior minister at the church they attended, I had a unique access, insight and invitation to be a part of their lives.

Inspired by these simple, broad and biblical visions that Mr. Bonner shared with me, I enthusiastically began my work at the Bonner Foundation.

John Stephenson's Courage

Other than the Bonners, no one had more impact on the Bonner Scholars program than Dr. John Stevenson, the late president of Berea College. Dr. Stevenson came to Princeton in 1990 to meet with Mr. Bonner, an avid supporter of Berea College. That visit marks the beginning of what we are celebrating today.

The Bonner Scholars program began with a simple notion: “make college accessible to students who might not otherwise be able to attend and create ways for those students to direct their talents and interests in service to others.”

### **The First year of the Bonner Program at Berea College**

“*Changing the world through service,*” was the original theme for the first class of 80 Bonner scholars at Berea. Midway through that first year, Dr. Kela Thomas, the director of the Bonner Program and 16 of the original Bonner Scholars surprised Mr. Bonner by walking into his office unannounced. They had driven 14 hours through the night to

thank Mr. Bonner for his vision and support. Never have I seen a man so happy, excited and ultimately fulfilled. Looking back on that morning, I know it was at that moment that the Bonner Scholar Program went from being an experiment at one school to what it is today; an initiative involving more than 2,500 students at 65 colleges across the country and boasting more than 4,000 alumni.

### **Expanding the Bonner Scholar Program: Not Merely a Duty**

That spring, Mr. Bonner asked John Stevenson to recommend other colleges he felt would benefit from a Bonner Scholar Program. Several months later twelve college presidents gathered in a room at the Boone Tavern Inn in Kentucky to hear Berea students, faculty and administrators speak about the program. When asked by one young college president, who isn't so young anymore, what it meant to be in the Bonner Program, Stormy Gillespie, responded to Jerry Beasley and others that being a Bonner Scholar was 'not merely a duty' but a fulfillment.

Within four months, the Bonner Program was launched at eleven additional schools in the Appalachian region. The following year, another twelve schools were added.

### **Mrs. Bonner's Grace**

Three years later in 1992, Mr. Bonner passed away. Mrs. Bonner stepped in to assume the leadership role of the Bonner Program. She was committed to continuing the legacy that she and her husband started. Mrs. Bonner brought different strengths and interests in her role as chairman (not chair woman, she didn't like being called chairwoman). Her humble background, much like the background of the early Bonner Scholars, gave her a connection, an awareness and an ability to relate and respond in authentic and moving ways.

Mrs. Bonner brought energy, passion and commitment to the Bonner Scholar Program, and her simple grace and charming determination brought enthusiasm and excitement. She traveled with her daughter Carol and Bobby or me to visit numerous Bonner campuses. One week we visited eight campuses! Regardless of how travel-weary she may have been, as soon as she stepped on campus she came to life, greeting everyone with a firm handshake and providing constant encouragement. "You can do it she would say," or, "Stay in school," or "I am so proud of you," or "I love each and every one of you."

While she delighted in the quality and the impact of the program, she never felt that she or we could rest. She reminded anyone involved with the program that there were always things to learn, or ways to improve. Even as she celebrated the successes of the program, she challenged us to do better.

## **Tutoring and Slogans**

For the first four years at the Bonner Foundation I was “tutored” nearly every day by Mr. Bonner for several hours, always beginning at 10:00 in his office. It should be no surprise therefore that we developed words and phrases as slogans to define and communicate our goals and map out direction of the first fifteen years of our journey: a journey that could be described by the following phrases...

*Access to Education Opportunity to Serve*

*Service as Transformation.*

*Best Practice to Common Practice*

*Common Commitment*

*Everybody, Everyday*

*Service Based Scholarships*

With each of these stages it has been individuals, some of whom are in this room, all of whom come from these institutions, who have helped change the face of the Bonner Scholar Program

## **Access To Education, Opportunity to Serve**

The first five years were not easy. Wonderful ideas and bold visions require innovation, commitment, patience and endurance. Community partnerships had to be built, revisited and restructured as the number of students and the volunteer hours multiplied. In every case the huge influx of volunteer hours caused extreme stress on existing volunteer infrastructures. It seemed that when we had our initial meetings, regardless of what was on the agenda, we ended up talking about transportation.

The success of those first five years depended on John Heniesen of Berry for his knowledge of and passion for financial aid, Ruth Pittard of Davidson for her experience in counseling and supporting students, Carson Newman’s Doug Reynolds for his humor and ability to lead students, Shanda Wilson of Ferrum College for her passion to social justice, Billy Newton of Rhodes for his pastoral sense and programming skills. It was the founding college presidents, educators like Jerry Davis of College of the Ozarks and Bob Bottoms of DePauw who cut through the red tape and inertia to enable Bonner to thrive on their campuses.

## **Service as Transformation**

When each campus was able to set establish the fundamentals of their Bonners Scholar Program, we began to see the need to establish a student development model that could

map out and communicate the high expectations that came with a multi year, intense and integrated scholarship program. We created a student development model known as Service As Transformation where students would journey through the Five E's beginning with "Expectation" and moving to stages of Exploration, Experience, Example and Expertise.

Through this process Stan Dotson of Mars Hill developed the "LifeWorks" curriculum and Jackie Miles of Morehouse created the "Emerge Project" and Jennifer West of Maryville imagined the "passport system", programs which established a student journey that articulated rising expectations and a series of challenges and provided a network of support to empower students along the way.

### **Best Practice to Common Practice**

One of the strongest aspects of the Bonner Scholar Program is the diverse and vast number of institutions that are part of the program and the way we interact, depend on, and enjoy each other. In light of this diversity, the second five years became a time of exciting innovation, creativity and implementation.

Judy Harvey of Guilford built a team of trained student project coordinators and Lee Ann Brown offered new ways to identify, select and enroll incoming Bonner Scholars. Teresa Ankney of Hood established the Social Visionary Speakers Series, Beth Blissman of Oberlin the developed the leadership curriculum ALLIES, Activist Leadership and Learning Institute for Engaged Service, and Earlham's designed a First Year Mentoring Program. Richard Morrill of the University of Richmond started the Bonner Book discussion. Franklin Tate of Warren Wilson developed a "presentation of service" and moved it from an end of the year speech to a yearlong internship for the senior year. All provide replicable models for other campuses.

All of these programs and dozens of others makeup the collection of Best Practices that have been captured in the publication "Recipes for Change: A guide to strengthen Your Bonner Program."

### **Common Commitments**

At the tenth anniversary, we began to talk less about programming and more about purpose. We asked ourselves questions like "What do we want students to learn? What type of experiences do we want them to have? What type of student do we want to graduate?"

Later that year Directors and coordinators met at their annual fall gathering, as did members of the Bonner Student Congress. At those gatherings the Bonner community answered these questions by identifying six "Common Commitments" which would

guide our actions and evaluate our effectiveness. These commitments included: social justice, community building, civic engagement, spiritual exploration, international perspective and diversity.

Lisa Jordon Payne and Lee Ann Luxenbuger of Union College and Debbie Dees and Lynn Pace of Wofford College have worked with Ari Hoy from the Bonner Foundation to make the Common Commitments a daily part of the Bonner Experience.

### **Everybody, Everyday**

With the successes of the Bonner Scholar Program, it became clear that the Bonner Foundation was having an effect not just on the individual students who participated, but also on the entire campuses. Cultures of service were developing and expanding, and Mrs. Bonner wanted to make sure that the Bonner Program was designed in such a way that it encouraged and supported everyone to be a part of that service. “Everybody, Everyday” became the slogan of the Bonner programs as we worked to build initiatives that reached out to the entire student body and created ways for everyone to get involved.

Schools were asked to develop comprehensive long-range plans that identified the culture of service as both a challenge and a priority. Because of the creativity and courage of many of these plans, the Foundation allocated more than \$2 million dollars to help schools implement initiatives which integrated the Bonner Scholar Program into broader campus-wide programs that reached out to the campus and local communities.

In his planning document for the Enrichment Proposal, Talmadge Stanley of Emory & Henry College laid out a vision for what is now the Appalachian Center and Dr. Zenobia Hikes of Spelman began a multi-year process that culminated in the creation of the Bonner Office for Community service and Student Development. Some of the most effective and distinguished service centers in the country were built by campuses through this challenge and support.

I must stop here and recognize the leadership and the work of our host institution, Waynesburg College. What has occurred at Waynesburg in the last fifteen years defines transformation in regards to its physical plant, its curriculum, its focus as an institution, and its commitment to service. Not even the President of Harvard ... well that is not a good example; no other president has done more to transform a campus and a local community than Tim Thyreen and his wife Carolyn. He has brought about this transformation with dedicated leadership from Vice President Skip Nofzger, Dean of Students and Bonner Director Dave Calvario, and Bonner Coordinator and Bonner Alum Rachel Volpe. Together they have built a culture of service where indeed everybody everyday is challenged and supported to be actively engaged in the campus and local community.

## **Service Based Scholarships: The Third Merit Scholarship**

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, said that you must *do all you can for the most that you can for as long as you can*. Though Mrs. Bonner was a Presbyterian, her theology of action could describe as Wesleyan. “We must do whatever we can to help,” Mrs. Bonner would say to us at the Foundation.

So when Dr. Richard Cook of Allegheny came to the Bonner Foundation to ask if his campus might join in the Bonner Program, even without funding from the Foundation, Mrs. Bonner instructed us to do anything we could to help this young man. And so began the Bonner Leader program, an initiative that included other colleges and universities in the Bonner Program without Bonner scholarship funding. Faces like Trina McFarland of Centre College, Tracy Espy of Pfeiffer University, Harlan Beckley of Washington and Lee University, Debbie Thompson of Stetson University and, Janet Luce of St Mary’s College of California began the list of an ever increasing number of schools that were joining in on the country’s first community service league of colleges and universities.

Today there are more than fifty colleges and universities here to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Bonner Scholar Program, half of them who joined the Bonner community through the Bonner Leader Program.

## **The New Face of the Bonner Foundation**

At a recent gathering of the Bonner Congress, the students and I spoke at length about ‘the face’ of the Bonner Program. Many generations of Bonner Scholars identified Mrs. Bonner, with her firm grip, her engaging conversation and her indefatigable commitment to every individual and each campus the Foundation supported, as the ‘the face’ of the Bonner Program.

With her passing and the passing of time, a void was developing. Who would serve as the inspiration for Bonner and the leader of the Bonner Program? Certainly I was not prepared for such a question. My answer? I suggested they look around the room, that they close their eyes and consider their peers, their directors and coordinators, and their presidents. These faces, our faces, the faces of anyone interested, involved and committed to the vision that began fifteen years ago were, and are, now the faces of the Bonner Program.

I believe it is important for each of us to know and understand the founding vision of the Bonner Program, of what Mr. and Mrs. Bonner gave so that we might be here today. Their simple, yet innovative and courageous provision of access to education with the expectation that students respond through service was the impetus for a comprehensive program addressing complex issues in our contemporary world.

As we move forward, each of us is summoned to take the Bonner Program and make it our own, to allow it to inspire our best intentions, to reawaken our noblest thoughts and to enable us to act with courage and creativity to do and to be the people, the servants and the leaders who we are called to be. Not for the glory of the Bonner Foundation, or for ourselves, but with the hope and confidence we might build a legacy worthy of our ideas enabling future generations to move even further than we have because of what we have done.