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Late businessman, Baker arboretum founder commits \$10 million for scholarships

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com May 25, 2018

Jerry E. Baker

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A new \$10 million endowment created by late businessman and local arboretum founder Jerry E. Baker will support scholarships for students at Western Kentucky University.

Baker died last June at age 86. His friends remember Baker as a shrewd entrepreneur, a good friend and someone who could never say no to a charitable cause.

“Anyone who knew of him knew of his heart and his desire to make things better,” said John Paul Blair, WKU’s interim vice president of philanthropy and alumni engagement. “He demonstrated it most successfully through his philanthropy.”

Annual investment earnings from the endowment will be used to enhance the Jerry E. Baker Student Scholarship Fund created through Baker’s direct bequest, according to a WKU news release. The fund supports students pursuing a major or minor in music, dance, theater, art or horticulture, with funding divided among the five programs.

Blair said support for those programs reflects Baker’s passions in life.

Baker was known as a local patron of the arts, including support for the Phoenix Theatre, the Symphony at WKU and Orchestra Kentucky.

In 2006, when he was planning to open the Downing Museum, Baker estimated in a Daily News article that he owned nearly 1,000 pieces of artwork from Joe Downing, an artist and the brother of former WKU President Dero Downing.

Baker also founded a nearly 115-acre arboretum that bears his name. He donated both his arboretum and the Downing Museum to WKU in 2006, a gift that totaled roughly \$17 million, according to his Daily News obituary.



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His philanthropy record to WKU also includes support for professorships in horticulture and music as well as scholarships in horticulture, music, dance, art and athletics.

WKU expects to receive \$450,000 from the scholarship endowment in its first year, according to the release. Combined with Baker's previous support of scholarships, the Jerry E. Baker Student Scholarship Fund will annually award around \$500,000 to students.

"WKU plans to make the first awards in the fall of 2019," Blair told the Daily News. "It's safe to say it will impact more than 100 students each year and as many as 200."

WKU President Timothy Caboni praised Baker's generosity and support for students in a news release.

"Mr. Baker's clear and powerful vision paves the way for future scholars. WKU commits to continuing his legacy of supporting student scholarships," he said. "This enhancement of the Jerry E. Baker Scholarship Fund is part of the original gift announced in 2006. Upon the realization of his estate, the scholarship funds will soon be available to generously support our students. His philanthropic spirit endures at WKU and stands as an example to others."

Aaron Mudd

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