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OUR OPINION

Gatton leaves legacy of giving

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In his younger days, Carol Martin “Bill” Gatton was driven to succeed in business. After amassing a fortune through his many ventures, he was driven to help others.

“Now that I’m past 80, I’ve thought about retiring,” he told Kentucky Monthly years ago. “But I think I’ll just keep on making more money so I can keep on giving it away.”

After donating millions upon millions of dollars to higher education and other important causes in Kentucky and elsewhere, Gatton died April 18 at age 89.

Reinforced by the news of his passing, Bowling Green – home of the Carol Martin Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science at Western Kentucky University – our state and others owe a huge debt of gratitude to his philanthropy.

“Mr. Gatton’s gift has left a living legacy through opportunities he made possible for our students. Not only has he directly impacted the lives of Gatton Academy students, but his investment in Gatton inspired the establishment of other specialized STEM programs in

schools across the commonwealth,” said Lynette Breedlove, director of the Gatton Academy. “Mr. Gatton’s life and philanthropy serves as a positive model for our students, illustrating the ripple effects of investing in young people.”

Established in 2007 with a financial gift from its namesake, the Gatton Academy was Kentucky’s first residential two-year program for gifted and talented juniors and seniors. The academy’s students enroll as juniors and are full-time WKU students pursuing their interests in advanced science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Although the academy bears his name, Gatton told Kentucky Monthly that he doesn’t deserve credit for its creation or its amazing accomplishments.

“I just wrote them a check,” he said. “They did all the work.”

But in 2015, another gift from Gatton allowed the academy to expand.

“The Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science is a great asset for the commonwealth of Kentucky,” Gatton said in 2015. “Its students have come from almost every county. It has brought honor to the commonwealth by its recognition as the nation’s No. 1 public high school three years in a row. That’s a remarkable achievement. It has great leadership, great faculty and great students. I am proud to have my name associated with it.”



While the academy that carries his name is the most well-known of Gatton’s gifts in southcentral Kentucky, another notable moment was the \$5 million donation from Gatton in 2021 that created the Julie and Gary Ransdell Living and Learning Community at Lifeworks, a WKU program for adults with autism.

Gary Ransdell, a former WKU president, said that it was Gatton who wanted the couple’s names to be on the facility rather than his own.

Gatton, a Muhlenberg County native, fell in love early with business, selling watermelons he grew on his family's farm as a young child to local grocers. At age 8, he bought his first piece of real estate and then sold it at age 12, doubling his original investment.

He attended the University of Kentucky, where he received a bachelor's degree, and then The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania before starting a successful career first in automobile sales and later in banking and property development in Kentucky and Tennessee.

He donated more than \$70 million to UK for many construction projects and scholarship initiatives beginning in the 1990s, according to The Lane Report. In his honor, UK's trustees named the business college the Carol Martin Gatton College of Business and Economics.

He also made the lead gift to the Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy at East Tennessee State University, and he made substantial gifts to other educational institutions as well as numerous gifts to other worthy causes.

After Gatton's death, the family said no formal viewing would be held. A private family funeral was planned at Bethlehem Cemetery in Bremen.

But in memory of the man who gave so much to others, the family requested that no flowers be sent but that expressions of sympathy take the form of donations to your favorite charity or do an act of kindness.

The Lane Report noted that Gatton often quoted a statement he heard from longtime U.S. Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee: “There is a time for learning, a time for earning and a time for returning or giving back.”

Gatton gave back plenty. And he left a legacy of philanthropy that will be long remembered.

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