Honoring a Lifetime of Loyalty

With seventy years of consecutive giving, Eugenia Curtis has never wavered in her devotion to the Big Orange.

In 1942, just a few months after the United States entered World War II, Eugenia Hamlett Curtis left her family’s home on Main Street in rural Ardmore, Tennessee, for the University of Tennessee.

“I lived in Henson Hall,” she remembers. “Shortly after we moved in, we were transferred to Mattie Cane dormitory to make way for platoons of engineers and Air Force recruits that were training at UT. I still think about all those boys who went off to war.

“We had events on campus that made college enjoyable, of course, but we were all very aware of doing our part. I worked as an aide on the UT Library staff. I made $100 a month, which helped with my room and board.”

Curtis earned her BA in English in 1944, intending to become a librarian. Instead, she returned to Main Street and took a job as a bookkeeper at the Bank of Ardmore.

That year she also made her first donation to UT.

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Student Spotlight: A Man of Many Talents

Cullen Johnson, a recipient of the Elizabeth Z. Smith Scholarship, excels in his academic coursework and keeps his love for music alive at UT.

When Cullen Johnson began looking at colleges, he had several paths from which to choose. He received scholarship offers from various schools for athletics, academics, and music, but when he visited UT, something clicked.

“The friends that I have today are the ones I made my first day on campus. It was like we were a family right then and there.”

Like many other incoming students, Johnson depended on financial aid and scholarships to fund his education. He came to UT with the Hope and Promise scholarships, and last year he was awarded the Elizabeth Z. Smith endowed scholarship.

“The University of Tennessee offered the best academic scholarship opportunities, and I love it here,” says Johnson, who just completed his sophomore year.

Johnson is a positive force on campus as a Student Alumni Associate, an advisor in the College of Engineering Office of Diversity Programs, and a saxophone player in UT’s Love United Gospel Choir.

Her Love for Animals and Their Caregivers Lives On

Shortly before her death, Barbara Witzig and her husband, Eric, decided to channel their love of animals into the funding of an endowed clinical professorship.

On a visit to UT two years ago, Barbara and Eric Witzig saw Veterinary Social Work Professor Elizabeth Strand’s work and its profound effect on the community and students, and they decided to support it. In 2014, their gift created the All Creatures Great and Small endowed clinical professorship in the Veterinary Social Work program.

Barbara Witzig passed away on April 23, 2015, at the age of sixty-eight, after battling cancer. She was an IT specialist and CEO of Instructional Consulting Services in Annandale, Virginia.

The story on the following page highlights the work of All Creatures Great and Small Professor Elizabeth Strand, whose work is supported by the Witzigs’ endowment.
A child frightened at the prospect of testifying in court is calmed by the presence of a court dog specially trained for this purpose.

A pet owner grieving the loss of a faithful companion joins the Pet Loss Support Group conducted by faculty and graduate students from University of Tennessee Veterinary Social Work program and, over time, works through the sadness.

A veterinarian burdened by the occupational reality of having to euthanize so many patients gets relief by sharing her feelings with a veterinary social worker.

A family, distressed by their grandmother’s house full of dozens of cats and dogs, works to arrive at a solution with the help of a Veterinary Social Work pet-hoarding counselor.

In these and other ways, Veterinary Social Work touches lives and addresses needs that until just a few years ago had existed largely under the radar.

Elizabeth Strand, associate clinical professor at the UT College of Veterinary Medicine, developed the Veterinary Social Work program in 2002 with the guidance and support of College of Social Work Dean Karen Sowers and Michael Blackwell, then the dean of the Veterinary College. Operating as a partnership between the two colleges, the program works to enhance and support both professions. It offers graduate and undergraduate training that focuses on grief and bereavement, compassion fatigue, the link between animal and human abuse, and animal-assisted therapies.

In clinical practices, veterinary social workers help clients face tough decisions about their pets and relieve some of the stress that veterinarians experience dealing with pet owners’ emotional distress. Veterinary social workers may also counsel the practitioners. “Veterinarians deal with death at a rate that is five times higher than doctors who care for humans. My motto is, ‘Be kind to yourself or else.’ If a veterinarian has had three euthanasias in one day, we seek them out and ask them what they’re going to do for themselves,” says Strand.

Strand regularly hears from former students whose training in veterinary social work is having an impact on their communities. One in Nashville plans to incorporate dogs in the juvenile justice system to help children experiencing courtroom anxiety. Another is using animals in private psychotherapy practice. Yet another is executive director of an animal-assisted therapy program for people with serious and persistent mental illnesses.

“This unique partnership between veterinary medicine and social work depends on the generosity of individual donors to continue its vitally important work,” says Sowers. “The training, research, and compassionate outreach of the program have already had a profound impact in both colleges and the community. Our donors help to ensure that Veterinary Social Work continues to flourish.”
“I’m sure I wasn’t too generous,” she says. “There were some lean years way back when!”

Curtis married Robert Wade Curtis, a farmer, whom she had dated in high school. They had four children, and over the next eighteen years she worked on and off at the bank. In 1962 when the Curtises bought a grocery store, she helped run it. And each year, she gave to UT.

Curtis’s husband passed away in 1967, when she was only forty-three. In 1973, when her youngest child was a senior at Ardmore High School, Curtis went back to banking—this time as a teller at the Ardmore branch of the First National Bank of Pulaski. Still she never missed a year of giving to UT.

“I probably just got a letter and I responded,” she laughs.

To date, Curtis has accrued seventy consecutive years of giving. It’s the longest current streak among UT alumni and probably the longest in UT history.

What has inspired her loyalty? “My blood runs orange,” she explains. “I’m a big sports fan. I follow UT in football and basketball, and I have UT memorabilia everywhere in my house. There’s even a UT flag in the front yard!” She also attributes her long streak of giving to a lifetime pattern of steadfastness. “I’ve lived on the same street for ninety-one years,” she says.

Curtis’s eleven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren are now also sharing her love for UT. Seven of her grandchildren were enrolled in the UT system—one at UTC, one at UT Martin, and the other five at UT Knoxville. She says, “This legacy has kept us connected to UT.”

“It’s my duty to contribute to UT. I never thought twice about giving to the university that shaped so much of my life and made me who I am.”

We are grateful to Eugenia Curtis, Class of ’44, for her seventy years of consecutive giving to the University of Tennessee.