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*The
Auen's:*

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Portraits of philanthropy

In California's Coachella Valley, the Berger Foundation is making a difference



Sherrie and Ron Auen

"To know Ronald and Sherrie Auen is to know that their passion extends well beyond the gift of land, funds and resources," California State University Chancellor Timothy P. White says. "They give of themselves and their time, which is the truest principle of philanthropy." The new CSU chancellor first met the Auens thousands of miles away, when he was the president at the University of Idaho, Moscow, from 2004-2008. White and the Auens came together on the 1,200-acre ranch they donated to UI that became the Nancy M. Cummings Research, Extension and Education Center, a hands-on agricultural training facility in Salmon, Idaho. Located in farm country, the center is aimed at giving students in that area skills that will help maintain and grow their own communities.

Ideals like this and the Auens' midwestern, middle-class roots synched well with the philanthropic visions that had guided the H.N. and Frances C. Berger Foundation, which Ron Auen has headed since 1988 as its president and CEO. The private family founda-

tion was established by its namesakes in 1961. Sherrie was born in Illinois, raised in Idaho and headed for California to go to school. Ron was also born in Illinois, but his residence was in Iowa. He moved to Pasadena, Calif., with his family when he was 7 years old. His family of six lived in a two-bedroom home. Ron's bedroom was a tent in their backyard. Ron worked, as did his sisters and brothers, from a very young age in an effort to assist the family.

Like the Bergers, the Auens look not to give people a handout through their philanthropy, but rather give them a hand up, "to help people to help themselves," the foundation's mantra that has stood the test of time.

In 1992, Ron and Sherrie established the Auen Foundation, which is dedicated to enhancing the overall quality of life of the aging population by supporting charitable programs and services aimed at meeting the social needs of mature adults and their families. Growing up with live-in grandparents, aging issues and the value of intergenerational con-

nections were things Sherrie developed a passion for at a very early age. Today, Sherrie is a trustee and the program director for the Auen Foundation, where she works daily, just a few doors down from Ron and the Berger Foundation offices.

One of the Auens' favorite success stories of giving is the Berger Foundation's support of the "I Have a Dream" program founded by Eugene Lang. On a television show in the early 1990s, Ron heard Lang tell his story, how he had returned to his school in Harlem to give a talk, but just before he delivered his speech he heard from the school principal that most of the children would never graduate from high school. In that moment, Lang abandoned his speech and instead told the kids that he'd fund the

it wasn't always easy to convince a parent that perfect strangers were going to give their kid funds for college. One grandmother and guardian made her skepticism crystal clear, looking the foundation committee in the eyes and saying they were lying. After experiencing the one-on-one mentoring, tutoring and special experiences the program offered her granddaughter, she discovered they were not, and the one child of hers who had become a recipient of the Berger Foundation's goodwill also became the embodiment of hope for her siblings, all of whom would graduate from high school and attend college.

The next year, believing that third-grade was slightly too late to pull children into the program, they started with first-graders. For the next 15 years, the Berger Foundation sponsored some 150-plus children, with more than 90 percent of them graduating from high school. Ron knew what many of these children were up against. They could wake up mornings wondering if there was any escape from the drugs, wrong crowds or palpable apathy that ate at their neighborhoods and schools. As a teenager, Ron was out on the streets and "known," he remembers. When he was 15, he somehow managed to join the military. There, he ran into a few problems, too, but served for nearly five years in the Army, earning a GED, and positioned as a field artillery gunner in Europe for a period, scored high on a military IQ test, and found himself in a newly formed counter mortar radar unit, which expanded his base of education.

Ron says he feels the time in the service saved his life because of the strict discipline and structure, which carried consequences for a person's actions. These were concepts he had never paid attention to but it was, as he puts it, the beginning of a positive life path. Although he did not receive a traditional high school diploma or a college degree, Ron worked for free to learn skills, and dabbled in higher education throughout his life, including taking some classes at Cal State Long Beach in the 1950s and '60s. He studied drafting, radio announcing, took flying lessons for a pilot's license and learned more about construction, which gave him the expertise for his building and developing career.

As the CEO for the Berger Foundation, Ron car-



ries with him a belief in programs imbued with a measure of discipline, because it sets the table for forays into philanthropic work. The Berger Foundation is run differently than most philanthropic foundations in the country. Rather than meeting once every few months to review applications and select grant recipients, an executive committee, made up of working board members meets "day-to-day," reading proposals together and going on-site to meet the people and see the programs under consideration.

"The Berger Foundation is a team," says Fred Jandt, dean of the Palm Desert Campus. "It is not Ron and Sherrie alone by any means. Ron carefully handpicked the original board of people he had worked with for many years whom he trusted."

While the members of the board, and how they have worked, have been consistent, the recipients of Berger Foundation grants began to shift about 18 years ago. In the beginning of the couple's philanthropic endeavors, about 25 percent of Berger Foundation gifts were awarded near the home headquarters in the San Gabriel Valley, with the

other 75 percent going throughout the U.S. This meant Ron, Sherrie and members of the executive committee were doing a lot of traveling. In 1996, beyond traditional retirement age for most board members, they were drawn to a simpler life, where the Auens made their second home in Palm Desert. Exposing the pros and cons of relocating, a board decision was made to move the foundation's headquarters to Palm Desert.

"Little did we know," says Sherrie, "the needs that were here, because we saw the surface of everything. How wonderful it is to live here." The Coachella Valley is that. It is a strange mix of those who worked hard to make it – and have – and those who are working hard: farm laborers, dry cleaners, and restaurant and hotel workers. Today, almost 90 percent of the funds from the Berger and Auen Foundations go to causes in the Coachella Valley. "We came here for the quality of life for ourselves, we thought. We didn't realize we came here for the community. Once we were here we realized the needs and the impacts the foundations could have."

The Berger Foundation has, in the words of one

Nursing students (from left to right) Corynn Busch, David Welch, Tiffany Caranci and Daniele Knickerbocker give the Auens a tour of PDC's hi-tech nursing lab.



Student orientation event at PDC

college education of any student there if they finished high school. That was the beginning of the national "I Have a Dream" Foundation. The concept of sponsoring large groups of at-risk youth so moved Ron that he wanted to meet Lang, and did. He came back motivated. In 1991, board members from the Berger Foundation visited a school in Pasadena, from Ron's old school district, where, as part of the national program, the foundation adopted a class of third-graders. The students and families in that class were informed that, if the third-graders finished high school, the Berger Foundation would fund their college or trade school educations. But

friend, become an “industry” in California’s Coachella Valley.

“The Auens are consummate philanthropists and community partners,” says CSUSB President Tomás D. Morales. “This is why they are so good at what they do. Their giving in the United States, and especially in the desert, has helped transform lives and advance education.”

The Auens have certainly done that for CSUSB. When approached in 2002 by former Indian Wells Mayor Dick Oliphant, who was co-chairing a vigorous campaign to raise funds for the first permanent building at Cal State San Bernardino’s Palm Desert Campus, a quick decision was made by the H.N. and Frances C. Berger Foundation Executive Committee to underwrite \$4 million and finish the first building. Dick says he was driving when he received the call from Ron, and said he nearly ran off the road. Surprisingly, that wasn’t the last time a call from Ron distracted Dick from driving. After the completion of the building, which sported a 123-seat auditorium and smart technology, Ron called while Dick was on his way home from San Francisco. “I told him we were going to name the auditorium after him and his wife Jan. We heard a screeching and turning, and he said, ‘I damn near broke my car!’”

When you’re doing good deeds, almost causing a man to crash twice are forgivable trespasses. Through years of giving, the Berger Foundation has fixed a lot of things. Since Ron took the helm, the foundation has awarded grants totaling nearly \$400 million dollars nationwide. Since the incep-

tion of the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, the foundation has extended in excess of \$6 million toward the CSU facilities in Palm Desert, now a campus of four permanent buildings thanks also to the area towns, foundations and citizen donors that have rained upon the campus more than \$35 million in a model public-private partnership that was once featured on the front page of the Sunday New York Times. Today, the PDC is a blend of squared and rounded architecture and vintage desert landscaping all at the corner of Cook Street and Frank Sinatra Drive.

The reward for the Auens has been to see a four-year college grow in the low desert and make life simpler for new crops of students. It was true for their daughter, Catharine Reed, a single mom with two children living in Palm Desert who never would have been able to make the drive from there to CSUSB. For years, she took one or two classes at a time at the Palm Desert Campus, working on her degree in psychology and graduating just five years ago. In June, the Auens will go to commencement ceremonies for the Palm Desert Campus and be awarded honorary doctorates of humane letters from CSUSB, something they both say they are proud to receive. Ron says he is particularly emotional about it. He works every day to ensure more kids that are growing up like he did are given opportunities to see their potentials and reach their dreams, because the school of hard knocks is not necessarily the path he would direct young people down. “Education,” says Ron, “is an immeasurable gift.” ●

The Indian Wells Theater and Indian Wells Center for Educational Excellence

