



November 12, 2010

A Good Life, A Simple Plan

Learn, earn, return. Earl Settlemyer's philosophy was that simple.

National Philanthropy Day is November 18. It is a celebration of one of the most fundamental ties that binds us together: a love of humankind, foibles and all. It is a time when we reflect on the generosity of our community in supporting an impressive breadth of activities that directly or indirectly benefit all of us. For Earl Settlemyer, every day was Philanthropy Day. He passed away in May.

Earl was a direct albeit soft spoken man. He was a Rotarian, a dedicated donor and volunteer, a brother, a retired banker and, to the surprise of many, a former child actor. Earl believed in a life lived deliberately: a thoughtful life of planning, preparation and execution. He followed sound business practices like 'pay yourself first'. It is the financial equivalent of putting on your own oxygen mask before helping your child or another fellow airline passenger with theirs. It is simply good practice. Planning.

Earl had a successful career in banking in California. Like many, he discovered Bellingham while searching for a desirable place to retire. Our region's natural beauty, higher education offerings, vibrant cultural and arts scene and other amenities were the perfect lure. Earl joined the Rotary Club of Bellingham and served on several not-for-profit boards, including the Bellingham Technical College Foundation and Whatcom Community Foundation.

Perhaps most interesting is that Earl only lived in Whatcom County for eight years. His memorial service felt more like that of a third generation Whatcom County resident than a relative newcomer. True to form, Earl connected himself to Whatcom County even before he moved here. He reached out to the Western Washington University Foundation to explore giving opportunities more than a year before relocating. Preparation.

Earl's giving focused on education and music. He believed that education was the key to many things: individual growth and advancement, understanding and community building. He established scholarships at Bellingham Technical College, Western Washington University, Whatcom Community College and a scholarship through the Whatcom Community Foundation's Bellingham Dollars for Scholars program. Music also held a special place in Earl's heart. He contributed to the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra and many other arts organizations. Execution.

Since Earl passed away, we've often reflected on the impact of 'learn, earn, return'. It comes up in meetings and casual conversation. It sticks with us. It is such a simple phrase, one that many marketing professionals would admire for its simplicity and its punch. While many at Earl's memorial heard his philosophy articulated for the first time on that day, everyone agreed it captured his life.

Earl's legacy far exceeds his exceptional generosity. He left a powerful example. That is philanthropy at its best: lighting the way for others to follow. Earl lived quietly but his philosophy is a clarion call to action. Learn, earn, return. We hope it calls to you. Happy Philanthropy Day.

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