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# GIVING BACK BY PAYING FORWARD



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IMAGES COURTESY SKOKOS PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

**W**hen Shannon Boy Skokos was a student at Alma High School, her participation and leadership in the classroom and extracurricular activities left her mark on her alma mater. Now, it will bear her name for all time.

Shannon and her husband Ted recently announced a \$1 million gift through their private family foundation to the Alma Education and Arts Foundation. The money will establish the Shannon and Ted Skokos Endowed Scholarship Fund, benefiting graduates of Alma High School who are pursuing college, trade school or other post-high school educational opportunities.

“It is truly an honor to give back to a school district that gave so much to me,” Shannon says. “My husband and I believe in the power of education and want to assist young men and women in pursuing their dreams. At the same time, we are excited to provide funding to enhance the performing arts center and to promote the education of the arts.”

The endowment will be combined with existing endowments the Foundation manages with the earnings used to fund scholarships each year. In recognition of their generous gift – some of which may also be used to make upgrades to the Performing Arts Center – the arts building will be renamed the Shannon and Ted Skokos Performing Arts Center. Shannon says the gift touches everything that helped shape her as a youth and a student growing up, and which led to future success after high school.

“The arts began shaping my life at an early age,” she says. “When I was just two years old, my mom enrolled me in ballet classes. By the time I was ten, I was playing the flute and at the age of seventeen, I served as principal flutist for the U.S. Collegiate Wind Ensemble throughout Europe and London, performing in underserved communities.

“That early exposure to the arts provided a personal outlet for expressive thought, provided a discipline honed through attention to detail, and provided a means of connection both with fellow performers and with audience members. Recognizing the value of those assets for young people is critically important, and I hope the Skokos Foundation gift will generate greater opportunity for that to happen.”

Shannon, a 1988 Alma salutatorian, would go on to win the title of Miss Arkansas in 1992, launch a successful law career and today devotes much of her energies to philanthropy. She says the investment teachers made in her in high school are what inspire her to invest in others today.

“Dr. Loretta Rhoads, Bruce Caselman and Coach John Grant, through their personal investments in me outside the confines of the class curriculum, taught me that the greatest positive influence one can have is made when no one is watching and nothing is expected in return,” Shannon says.

“The desire of our foundation is quite simple – to leave this earth just a little better than we found it and to inspire a few individuals along the way to shatter the societal and cultural bubble to think above and beyond. The curriculum of the Performing Arts Center is not only aligned with our foundation’s mission, but it is innovative and impactful in a way that I have not seen anywhere else in the nation.”

The Skokos duo has been a potent force for change and philanthropy in western Arkansas. Shannon’s husband Ted, a former attorney, businessman, Gulf War veteran and Fort Smith native, has been her equal when it comes to supporting the causes and institutions that lift people to become their best.

“We don’t wear our faith on our sleeves, but we do believe it is our responsibility to leave this earth better than we found it,” he says.

The Alma Education and Arts Foundation encourages high school students to pursue post-secondary education, promote education in the arts and provide arts exposure to the community. To date, the foundation has awarded \$1.5 million in scholarships to students in all academic areas of study to pursue post-high school educational opportunities. The Shannon and Ted Skokos Scholarship Fund will further support educational opportunities for students in the Alma School District.

Chuck King, Alma Foundation Executive Director, says the gift will accelerate the foundation’s work, reaching more students and seeding more futures. “This is such a tremendous opportunity for the Alma Education and Arts Foundation to grow and improve while supporting our students with plans for pursuing education after high school,” he says.

Shannon says she hopes the ultimate legacy of the gift is measured in the number of young people who are inspired to reach higher in continuing their education, pursuing their passion in the workplace and building stronger communities, one success story at a time.

“I wish I could impress upon all students to love themselves for the magnificent person they were created to be, to understand that we all make mistakes, and we are all flawed, and to appreciate that it is through our commonalities and shared experiences of joy and hurt that we find common ground, build bonds and share empathy,” she says.

“Being a teenager is not easy. There is much pressure to meet expectations. My prayer is that these young people can learn to look beyond the immediate to be kind to themselves and to one another, and to begin identifying their individual gifts and talents so that they may explore using them for the betterment of their career path and to find their own way to leave the earth just a little better than they found it.”