

# Estate Gift Honors Former Math Professors

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KU Connection

Martha Peterson proved early on that women can make it to the top. Peterson, a KU alumna and former KU dean of women, became the first female president of one of the colleges where she worked and later was the first woman to serve on the board of directors of Exxon.

Peterson died in 2006 at the age of 90. Recently, her estate gift of \$1.1 million was distributed to KU Endowment. Her bequest adds to an endowed math professorship she established in 2003 in memory of two of her KU math professors and longtime friends, Florence Black and Wealthy Babcock.

When establishing the professorship, Peterson said the two women were her greatest influences in regard to her successful career in college leadership.

Through her lifetime and estate gifts, Peterson provided more than \$1.9 million in support for the University of Kansas.

Peterson began her life in humble surroundings. Born near the north central Kansas town of Jamestown, she started life on her father's wheat farm on land homesteaded by her grandparents. She graduated from Salina High School, and at an uncle's encouragement, packed her bags and came to KU. After earning her bachelor's degree in math in 1937, she taught at high schools in Stockton and Ellinwood before returning to KU to continue her studies. In 1943, she completed her master's degree in math, and in 1959, her doctoral degree in educational psychology and counseling.

While studying toward her graduate degrees, Peterson began teaching math at KU. Ten years later, in 1947, she was appointed KU's assistant dean of women. In 1952, she became KU's dean of women, a position she held until 1956, when she left KU to become dean of women at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In 1967, Peterson's career climb continued when she became president of Barnard College, an affiliate of Columbia University in New York City. In 1975, she became the first woman president of Beloit College in Beloit, Wis.

Eventually, her success carried her into the corporate arena. She was the first woman to serve on the boards of three corporations: Exxon, Metropolitan Life Insurance and Dry Dock Savings Bank. In 1971, she became chair of the American Council on Education. A decade later, President Ronald Reagan asked her to join the President's Commission on White House Fellowships.

Longtime KU math professor Jack Porter, department chair from 1999 through June of this year, described his acquaintance with Peterson as one of the joys of his career.

Porter said Peterson had an impressive ability to make decisions, a trait that served her well in college and corporate leadership. "She was somebody who could get to the point of a discussion," Porter said. "There was no wandering around in the desert—she would zero right in."

Kathy Rose-Mockry directs KU's Emily Taylor Women's Resource Center. The Center honored Peterson posthumously in 2007 as its "Pioneer Woman." This award goes to women from Kansas who have made historic contributions of local, statewide or national significance.

"Martha Peterson was a trailblazer during an era in which it was far more difficult for a woman to excel in university and corporate leadership," Rose-Mockry said.

In her 1985 autobiography, Peterson said she was fortunate to have been born in the early 1900s, at a time when opportunities for women were expanding.

"It was a good time for women," Peterson wrote. "There was genuine concern that their much-needed abilities were not being fully used. I met discrimination, of course, but could usually ignore it as the misguided efforts of the unenlightened. Or, I could pretend superiority by saying, 'If you don't want me, I don't want you.'"

KU Endowment is the independent, nonprofit organization serving as the official fundraising and fund-management foundation for KU. Founded in 1891, KU Endowment is the first foundation of its kind at a U.S. public university.