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Derek Gee / Buffalo News file photo

Mystery donor leaves UB medical school \$40 million

Physician, who felt the university transformed his life, lived simply, invested wisely and planned his bequest for many years

By Jay Rey

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If you met him, you probably wouldn't know he was a millionaire many times over.

He was a physician, who graduated from the University of Buffalo's medical school during World War II.

He practiced medicine in a small community.

He lived a private, simple life in a modest house.

But he also was a savvy investor, and by the time he died, he had amassed a fortune -- much of which he bequeathed to his beloved alma mater.

The good doctor left UB medical school \$40 million, a historic donation that will be announced during a news conference this morning.

It is by far the largest gift the university has ever received from one person.

But his identity will remain a mystery.

UB will say little about its millionaire philanthropist -- where he lived, even when he died. The donor made the school promise to keep his name anonymous.

"This is somebody who came to UB to get a medical degree and basically felt that UB transformed his life," said UB President Satish K. Tripathi.

"It's an incredible gift in every way," said Michael E. Cain, dean of the School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. "We knew it was going to be a large gift, but it's more than I thought."

The timing couldn't be better for UB.

UB announced in the spring that it's fast-tracking a plan to move the medical school from the South Campus on Main Street to the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus within the next five years.

Linking the medical school with the rest of the region's health care community is considered a key to developing a thriving downtown medical campus. Now, university leaders are in the process of identifying a site, discussing designs and putting together a \$375 million financial package to build the new medical school.

The \$40 million gift -- to be used at the discretion of the medical school dean -- will not, however, be for construction.

Instead, the money will help bolster the quality of the medical school by hiring more faculty and attracting top-notch doctors and scientists.

UB hopes to bring in 100 new medical faculty members by the time the new school is open.

"I think the donor would be pleased," Cain said. "I had several chances where I was able to meet and socialize with him. He knew the vision we all have for the School of Medicine, and he was very supportive of that."

While UB is careful to abide by the donor's wishes and not divulge his identity, two friends offered to provide some insight into the multimillion-dollar philanthropist:

The donor came from a middle-class background and dreamed of being a physician ever since a country doctor made an impression while treating him for a childhood illness.

When the time came for medical school, he applied only to UB. Getting that acceptance letter, he would later say, was the happiest day of his life.

He entered as the youngest student in his class and quickly fell in love with both the school and the city.

"It was the defining moment in his life," said one of the friends. "He became an adult and fulfilled his dream of becoming a physician. Buffalo gave him that chance."

He graduated during World War II, left town, married, lived in a small community and practiced medicine as a general physician.

But he never forgot Buffalo.

He was grateful for what UB medical school had done for him and felt an obligation to give back. So decades ago, he plotted a plan to strategically invest his money with that purpose in mind.

"It's not something he suddenly thought of in his final years," Cain said. "His life's pursuit was to save and invest his money to someday benefit the school."

All the while, he lived simply as the quintessential doctor's doctor. He saw patients after hours and welcomed them without appointments. He relied on a photographic memory to recall the names of those he delivered years earlier.

He was known to wear a buffalo emblem, as a nod to his adopted city, and enjoyed visiting the library daily to scour the periodicals. He liked to golf.

"If you met him," said the other friend, "you would not automatically assume he'd have that kind of money. He didn't define himself by his wealth."

As a proud UB alumnus, he gave to the school over the years -- but nothing out of the ordinary.

Long ago, he disclosed to UB that he planned to leave the bulk of his estate to the medical school. Then, he spent years cultivating a trust and relationship with the school to ensure his fortune was in good hands.

The exact dollar amount of his bequest became clearer about a year ago, Cain said. By March, his \$40 million gift to UB was set -- along with the stipulation no one know his identity.

He didn't want a building named for him. He didn't want the attention on him or his family.

Otherwise, he felt it wouldn't be a gift.

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Comments

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Thank you, doctor, whoever you are. Way to show Ralph Wilson how it's done.

JACQUELINE KUMA, BUFFALO, on Wed Sep 21, 2011 at 02:02 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

A wonderful gift for UB! I hope his request is honored? Historically speaking private philanthropy lifted a region, community, and city out of the doldrums and poverty was mitigated. Buffalo's past wealthy elites did fantastic things for the city (Albright Know Art Gallery) and the currently wealthy can do the same as well if they so choose! So for those who denigrate the well to do in life a kind word and a gracious heart can go a long way in changing this area for the better. Class warfare is pointless....May we all thank this man from our hearts and rejoice in his kindness and generosity!

J. CHRISTOPHER HAGLER, AMHERST, NY on Wed Sep 21, 2011 at 12:57 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

That was one of the most sincerest acts of faith I have ever heard of. Hopefully UB Medical School will be able to take on more of its own alumni, to be students. I know many who have tried to get into UB Medical School, and this would clearly be a stepping stone to not only the student's future but to Buffalo's also. This gentleman certainly deserves to be honored.

ELAINE SINIBALDI, EAST AURORA, NY on Wed Sep 21, 2011 at 08:16 AM

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Too bad his name wasn't revealed because he deserves praise for being a real humanitarian. Who knows, maybe a major medical breakthrough (that will benefit millions of sick people) will be brought about because of his gift, thank you.

WALTER REEVES, WEST SENECA, NY on Wed Sep 21, 2011 at 07:23 AM

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there is not many people like this , he must have been a wonderful , thoughtful man. then you have mr. wilson.....football team worth near 1 billion , and he donates 1 million and they wanted the press coverage. thank you who ever you are, this will help ub to be on the way to being a world clas med. school.

DAVE OLDREAD, BUFFALO, NY on Wed Sep 21, 2011 at 07:12 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

when you spend that money try to buy American

DANIEL ROBERTS, BUFFALO, NY on Wed Sep 21, 2011 at 06:40 AM

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