

Marquette Transporters: Ray and Kay Eckstein

The Roots of an Historic Gift

BY BRIGID O'BRIEN MILLER

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ou might expect a man such as Raymond Eckstein to have a lot to say about the extraordinary success that he has achieved after more than four decades doing business on the Mississippi River. But after making a \$51 million gift, one of the largest in history to an American law school and the largest individual gift ever to any university in the state of Wisconsin, he is still remarkably humble, a man who would rather live his values

than spend a lot of time talking about them.

Catholic education provides a foundation

Ray Eckstein knows discipline. He says that it started early on, with the Catholic education he received during his early years in Cassville, Wis. (pop. today ca. 1,100).

In 1939, he went to Campion High School in Prairie du Chien, Wis., a Jesuit boarding school. "I got an excellent education, but they were tough," Eckstein recalls. "The Jesuits had a stern hand."



Ray and Kay Eckstein, flanked by Dean Joseph D. Kearney and Rev. Robert A. Wild, S.J., President, stand on the site of the future Eckstein Hall, just south of Gesu Church and the current Law School.

At about the same time in Chicago, Kathryn Henderick was also experiencing the rigors and joys of a Catholic education provided by the Benedictine sisters at St. Scholastica High School.

Both would credit these formative years with the life they would end up leading together, but neither would have predicted exactly what shape that life would take.

Relishing the college years

Ray enjoyed a high school basketball career good enough to get him noticed. In 1943, he left to attend Marquette University on a basketball scholarship. It was his transition from small-town boy to city life, and he was forced to play, quite literally, with the big men.

“I’m about 6 feet and that was pretty tall, but I had the honor of playing against the ‘first of the big boys’—George Mikan, towering above us at almost 7 feet, who was playing for DePaul at the time. I

enjoyed two years on the team and realized I better turn my attention to my studies,” remembers Ray.

Eckstein started out in medical school, and it was after an anatomy exam in 1945 that he would have a chance encounter he would not soon forget.

“I was with a buddy of mine, having a few beers at the Ardmore after the test, when I saw two nice-looking coeds eating dinner. I told my friend, ‘I saw them first, and I get the one on the right!’”

Ray was fortunate that Kay Henderick returned his interest, and the courtship began. The couple remembers their time in Milwaukee fondly. Ray recalls, “We just loved our years at Marquette. I’ve always told my children and grandchildren, the college days are the best days you’re going to have.”

In 1948, Ray and Kay were married. Sixty years, eight children, and 28 grandchildren later, their partnership flourishes.

Building a career

Eckstein realized while at Marquette that law school was a better fit for him. He graduated from Marquette University Law School in 1949, while Kay earned her bachelor's degree in speech the same year. His first job at a Milwaukee insurance agency as a claims adjuster carried some perks. "For the first time in my life, I had a car. I remember thinking it couldn't get much better than this," he recalls.

Ray tried to set up a law practice in Milwaukee but fell short of the connections needed to thrive in the big city. With Kay expecting their first child, the couple returned to his native Cassville in December 1949, and Ray became a sort of "traveling attorney."

"The Mississippi River cut you off geographically," he says. "There wasn't a lot of legal business in any one small town, so you just traveled to all the various towns to piece it together."

An entrepreneurial vision

It wasn't long before Ray saw an opportunity that would take him in a new direction.

A power and light company was building a plant nearby, and it planned to bring on 50 permanent employees and scores of temporary workers. Knowing that these transplants would need places to live, Ray purchased land, subdivided it, and constructed homes on the plots. He sold them as well.

"In order to get the village to agree to put in the utilities, I had to guarantee the tenants, so I

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— Ray Eckstein

just took it on myself—both constructing the homes and then filling them," he explains.

It was the Mississippi River that would play host to a second opportunity—one that would change the course of Ray Eckstein's life.

The same power and light company was bringing in hundreds of barge loads of coal on the river, but the process of unloading them, in Cassville and other towns, was inefficient.

Ray's cousin convinced him to buy a small switch boat that could be used to speed up the process, and Ray found that he could charter other boats from larger companies.

In 1961, he founded Wisconsin Barge Lines. With a small fleet of tugboats and barges, the company carried commodities from port to port along the Mississippi River. After selling his first company, Eckstein formed a new company in 1978, naming it Marquette Transportation after his alma mater and the French Jesuit priest who had explored the Mississippi River with Louis Joliet. He continues to serve as a member of the board of the business, which is now headquartered in Paducah, Kentucky. The company's 38 tugboats and nearly 600 dry cargo barges serve some of the world's largest suppliers of food and commodities.

Legal education critical

Ray Eckstein is a quintessential entrepreneur. He sees opportunity and, with subtle confidence and steady discipline, turns an idea into a solution.

For all his humility, he says it's quite simple. "A lot of people have the ability, but they are afraid to take the risk," he says. "They don't have the

confidence to take on the debt, or they are more comfortable letting someone else do it. A real entrepreneur knows he won't fail, and I guess that's what distinguishes him or her."

Ray says his legal training was invaluable to his eventual business success. For decades the company never used an outside attorney. "When we started in 1958, we didn't have a lot of capital to work with, so it took a lot of hard work—24 hours a day. I was the attorney, worked the contracts, and handled the insurance claims. I just did whatever was needed to keep it going."

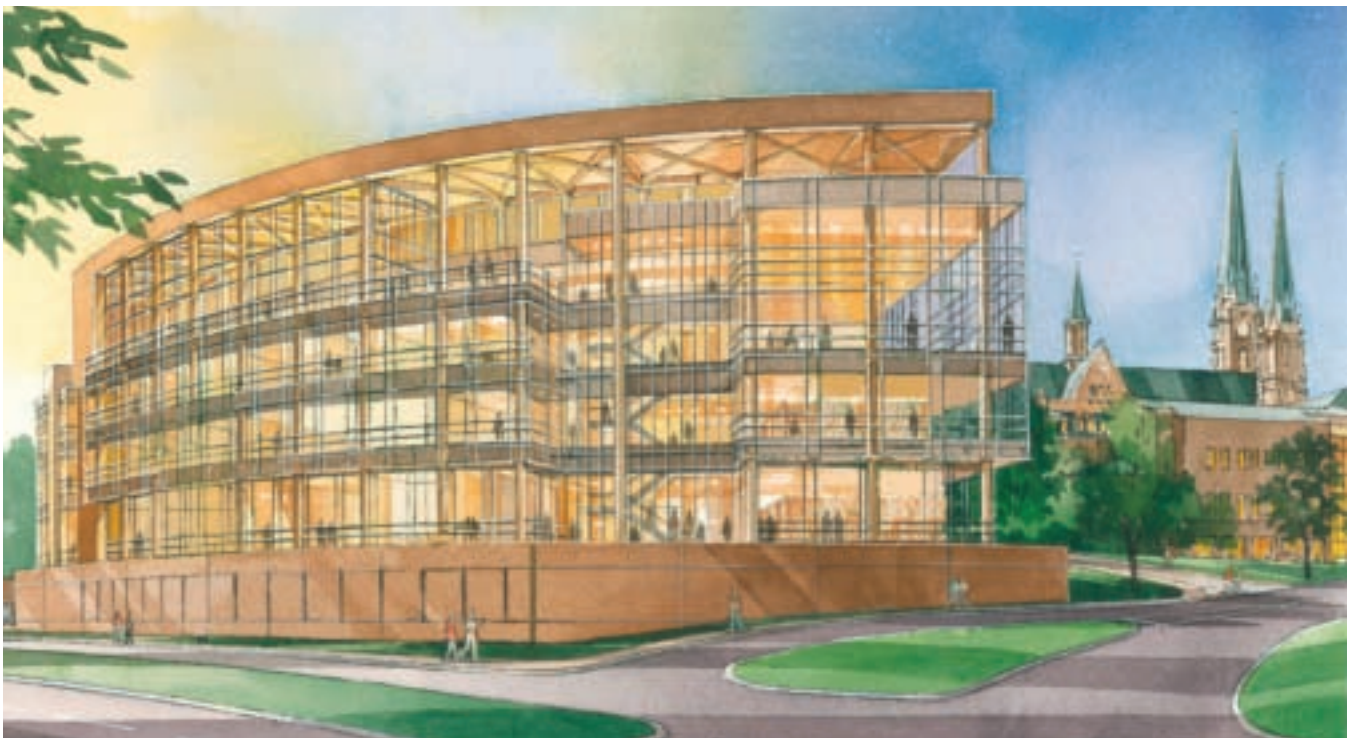
A vision for a lasting contribution

Business was kind to the Ecksteins. In 2005, the couple established the Ray and Kay Eckstein Charitable Trust to build on the philanthropic work they had already started, with a focus particularly on Catholic institutions. With his Cassville-bred humility intact, Ray Eckstein is typical in his understatement: "We just wanted to be able to do some good after we're gone."

It was a conversation with their granddaughter Kelly Erickson that got them thinking more seriously about a gift to Marquette Law School.

A 2006 Marquette Law School graduate, Kelly was honest when she told her grandparents that the law library could use an update. Ray and Kay began talking further with Marquette President Robert A. Wild, S.J., Dean Joseph D. Kearney, and others about what a new facility could really mean for the future of legal education at Marquette. Kay Eckstein says their granddaughter's recent experiences in the Law School had another effect as well: "We saw once again the caring, challenging environment that Marquette continues to offer its students."

Father Wild and Dean Kearney explained their vision that the Law School must continue to provide rigorous legal education for the men and women who will become leaders—both in their professions and in their communities—but that it also should become a place for public discourse,



Artist's rendering of Ray and Kay Eckstein Hall, as viewed from the Marquette interchange.

a place that serves the city and the larger region as an intellectual crossroads.

“We truly wish to provide a crossroads or commons for the region,” says Kearney. “The fact that we planned for our new building to overlook Wisconsin’s primary crossroads—the Marquette interchange—is a coincidence, but a happy and perhaps symbolic one.”

Ray and Kay Eckstein were excited by the University and Law School’s vision. They called Father Wild in spring 2007—on his birthday, no

less. Ray reported that he and Kay wanted to make a transformative gift of \$51 million to Marquette Law School to support the construction of the new building, including the new library to be housed within it.

Ray hopes that the new building will help recruit and retain a “great team of faculty and the brightest students.” He says, “I think Marquette can be on par with the big law schools out East. I really do.”

The Ecksteins are anxious to see groundbreaking on the new building. “Our intention is for our gift

President’s Dinner Honoring Ray and Kay Eckstein, June 14, 2007

TOAST OF DEAN JOSEPH D. KEARNEY

Father Wild’s assistant called me late last week and suggested that Father Wild should do the invocation at dinner this evening and that I should do the toast beforehand. It is almost always a good idea to accede to the suggestion of the president’s assistant, but it is especially so when the president is a priest and when you, as dean, are scarcely trained to do the invocation. Of course, this left the matter of precisely what to say in the toast, but I appreciated the confidence of the president’s office in offering me no further guidance. For, after all, have I not made previous remarks as dean?

Nonetheless, the pressure was significant. For a toast must do several things. It must unify—it must bring everyone together at some essential level. It must uplift and inspire—it must speak, not to the mundane, but to the transcendent. We can agree as well that a toast must be brief. And beyond these various general requirements, there is another, imposed upon me personally last month by Father Wild at the Père Marquette Dinner, when he registered dismay (mock or other, I do not know) that, rather unusually, my comments that evening included no Latin. I was saved by one of my colleagues on that occasion, but Father Wild implied that never again should I speak formally in front of him without using, as he termed it, “the mother tongue of the educated class.”

Unifying, uplifting and inspiring, brief, and in Latin. I was at a loss. I considered what unified us. I thought that perhaps it might be Chicago. I trotted that out last night at dinner with Kay, a Chicagoan, pointing out that four of us this evening (the president, Kay, my wife Anne, and I) are all Chicagoans. My hopes were dashed when the response came from Ray, who noted that Kay, a north sider, always said, “The south side of Chicago was another world.” So that gambit was unavailing, even apart from the fact that we are in Wisconsin.

Of course, on the briefest reflection, it was clear that what unifies us is Marquette University (and its law school in particular). But where is the uplift, the inspiration, let alone the Latin, in a toast that says, “To Marquette University”? And then, as I walked along a downtown street after dinner last night, the matter became clear. It was before me, as plain as the seal of this great University. The only additional context that I shall provide is that, on this floor of the Alumni Memorial Union, two years ago, I told the trustees that our law school ranked fifteenth out of fifteen

to motivate others to get on board,” says Ray. “The Law School cannot accomplish greatness unless a lot of folks pitch in. Hopefully they’ll see the building project is a reality and want to get involved.”

For now, Ray and Kay are enjoying time to reflect on a life of hard work and relishing their ability to “return some of what the Lord has given us.” As Ray is apt to put it simply, “I’ll tell you this: I’m having as much fun giving it away as I did making it.” •

For more information about the effort to build Eckstein Hall and more broadly to reposition the Law School, contact John Novotny, Director of Development for the Law School (414.288.5285 or john.novotny@marquette.edu), or visit <http://law.marquette.edu/building>.

in terms of space among law schools whose names begin with the letter *M*. I had been forewarned that, whatever I did that day, I must not touch upon the entire then-unresolved nickname matter, *Golden Eagles* vs. *Warriors*. Yet I could not resist when one board member asked me, “How many letters of the alphabet did you have to go through before you settled on the letter *M*?” I responded, “Suffice it to say that we went with the name of the University, rather than the nickname, so that there would be no ambiguity about which letter of the alphabet we should use.”

I found the whole nickname matter distracting at best, particularly since, as I asserted to one of this evening’s guests (Julie Tolan, the Vice President for Advancement) at a Christmas party also in these quarters two and a half years ago, if the University should change anything, it should be its motto. “I mean,” I said, “*Numen Flumenque*—God and the river. What could that mean?” I appreciate that it was Father Marquette who explored the Mississippi River, but what did that have to do with Marquette University today?

I was not wrong. It had little to do with Marquette then. But I failed to appreciate that the motto was not so much a comment on Marquette University of the past or even that day as an augury of its future. Who knew that Ray and Kay Eckstein, the beneficiaries of Catholic, Jesuit education and the doers of remarkable things along the Mississippi River, were in the wings, waiting to unfold for us one of the largest gifts ever to an American law school, the most extraordinary act of largesse in the history of this University, an undertaking that will transform this University? And so it became clear to me last night, what the toast should be. It should unify, uplift and inspire, in Latin, and be brief. And so it is two words: “*Numen Flumenque*.” God and the river. Thank you to Ray and Kay Eckstein, to Father Marquette, and to the river. •



Seal of Marquette University in Sensenbrenner Hall