

In Memoriam: John Olson '57

His quiet philanthropy had a huge impact in N.H.

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In his lifetime, John Olson '57 shied away from recognition and accolades. He turned down awards, preferring instead to quietly support causes he believed in. But all the while, gifts from John, his wife Elinor and the manufacturing company he led for more than 40 years were having a huge impact on the Granite State.

By time John passed away in August 2018, his philanthropy had supported scholarships and programs at UNH, and his work as president and CEO of Whelen Engineering helped transform the company into a major employer in Sullivan County.

His passing came just weeks after the grand opening of the John Olson Advanced Manufacturing Center at UNH's Durham campus, a state-of-the-art facility linking UNH students and faculty with the Granite State's booming manufacturing industry.

"At the core of John's relationship with his alma mater was his commitment to students being engaged beyond the classroom. He really felt that learning wasn't simply about rote memorization, but about problem-solving and making a difference in the world around you," says UNH Provost Wayne Jones Jr. "The Olson Manufacturing Center is consistent with his vision that the best learning is hands-on learning."

The facility was funded by a \$5.3 million gift from Whelen Engineering in honor of John, as a tribute to his four decades of leadership of the company's Connecticut and New Hampshire plants.

A native of Connecticut, John joined the company just two years after graduating with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (CEPS). The company designs and manufactures warning and safety lights and sirens for the aviation, automotive and mass-notification industries.

The Olsons made gifts to create scholarships for students in CEPS and supported the precision racing team and robotics competition. They also were lead donors to UNH's CEPS Tech Camp, held each summer for students in grades 6 through 12. Their generosity stretched beyond CEPS, with support for Dimond Library and study-abroad opportunities. In 2007, John was so moved by the mass shooting on the Virginia Tech campus that he donated an emergency notification system to UNH.

"When I thought about students, faculty, staff and everyone's families in Virginia, I knew I could help out my alma mater," John said at the time. It was the same year that he received the CEPS Distinguished Alumnus Award.

At the Olson Center grand opening, John spoke about his start at Whelen, recalling the fateful day he went to the company to fix a boiler. He was hired almost immediately as Whelen's first full-time employee. Today, Whelen Engineering has grown to some 1,900 staff members and is the world's largest manufacturer of emergency warning lights. "UNH was my start," he told the audience. "I very much enjoy coming back and seeing what has happened here in the past 60 years."

John met Elinor LaFleur Olson '55 at a Greek dinner while they were both students at UNH — he was a brother at Acacia; she a sister at Phi Mu. Elinor says that, in addition to their shared affinity for UNH, she and John shared a deep devotion to their family, which includes two sons, six grandchildren and two great-grandsons.

"We were married 57 years. It's been a good life, and I was very lucky," she says, adding quickly, "Well, speaking as an educated woman, I guess he was lucky to have me too!"

Elinor says she respected how honorable her husband was about what he knew and what he did. "John knew so much but was never bombastic about it. He had an ability to pick the right employees to do the job."

Says Jones, “I always think of John as a true self-made man; he supported himself by helping to build a company and an industry here in New Hampshire. He was a big advocate for students engaging with industry early on in their academic careers, and he was always trying to help students by giving them the start they needed to build their own careers in that way.”

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