

First Opportunity Scholarship opens doors for students

Opportunity has a long memory in **Bill '67** and **Rita '69 Neff's** lives.

When they attended Whitman College, the school was "very generous" with scholarship assistance, Bill recalls. "Rita and I were two of many recipients of that generosity," he said.

The Neffs want more students — especially students whose families did not have the money to attend college — to have the same opportunity. To that end, the couple has

created the First Opportunity Scholarship Endowment at Whitman.

"Rita and I feel that it's important to have a diverse student body at Whitman," Bill said. "Diversity has all sorts of components, of course. We want to reach students of lower-income families, regardless of race or gender."

Whitman has always operated by the tenet of access to education for all. Stephen Penrose, the college's third president, often noted that the college had no intention of being a place of privilege or exclusivity, and that principle continues to guide the school. This year, 51 of 428 first-year students (Class of 2011) are the first in their family to go to college.

"The admission staff and I remain sensitive and committed to providing access to a Whitman education," said **Tony Cabasco '90**, dean of admission and financial aid. "A campus community that is diverse in ethnicity, race, socioeconomic class, gender, political orientation and international experience is an important component

of a Whitman education. We value the perspectives that talented students from all backgrounds bring to the classroom and our community."

Cabasco himself is a beneficiary of a Whitman scholarship. "As immigrants to this country, my brother and I — and our family — would not have been able to afford a Whitman education were it not for the financial assistance that we received," he said.

The First Opportunity Scholarship is a vital step forward in the college's commitment to equal access. Bill views the fund as "a way of breaking the cycle of the haves and have nots," and he and his wife hope the Whitman community will help build the endowment and others with the same aim. "The best way to change the cycle is to make the experience of higher education available to all people," he said.

The Neffs came to Whitman from large public high schools. Bill attended Stadium High School in Tacoma; Rita went to Westminster High School in Westminster, Colo., near Denver. Their own transforming "first opportunity" at Whitman was "the one-on-one education" they experienced at the college.

"It made all the difference for us," Bill said. "Both of us appreciated and got a lot out of the close relationships with faculty and the ongoing dialogue we were able to have."

Another manifestation of opportunity at Whitman, Bill said, was the chance to study "the full gamut" of academic subjects. He was a double major in chemistry and German, yet the course he remembers most was a history class on the Civil War taught by Tom Edwards.

"Our experience at Whitman demonstrated to us that a liberal arts degree prepares you for anything," Bill said.

Forty and 38 years, respectively, after they graduated, the Neffs recognize not only the value of a college education in the main but also the special opportunity that four years of liberal arts study at Whitman afforded them.

"An academic degree is the great equalizer in society," Bill said. "Whitman was a great academic experience. More important, it was great preparation for the world."



Tony Cabasco '90



Bill '67 and Rita '69 Neff joined other alumni on a trip to the Galapagos Islands.

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