

Walter Neustadt Jr.
1919–2010

“Despite our difficulties in these trying years, we are well placed in America for superior methods of building. A nation with almost inexhaustible native resources, and in our population a fused stock of people abounding in vitality, inventiveness, and skill, we have an old world heritage and still a new world enthusiasm. It is the function of educators today to pour this civilizing heritage into this generation, so that we may more intelligently explore the sources of nature and mind, and pass on to posterity a truer comprehension of the forces physical, mental, and spiritual which combine to balance the individual, the state, the world.”—Walter Neustadt Jr., “A Challenge to Educators” (1940)

I first met Walter Neustadt Jr. on a hot day in August 1999. I was new in my job as the executive director of the *World Literature Today* organization at the University of Oklahoma, and my wife, Julie, and I were meeting Walter and Dottie in Dallas for our first dinner with them. During that dinner, Walter talked about his mother, Doris Neustadt, and how she endowed the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, an award second only to the Nobel Prize in global importance. He talked about the importance of maintaining the prize’s focus on literary merit and absolute integrity, matters dear to his heart. But then Walter visibly brightened and became even more animated, as if a lightbulb switched on over his head, and he began to talk about supporting students. He had a long-cherished dream to empower large numbers of students beyond anything the Neustadt programs at OU had done before. As I watched the energetic and steady gaze of this distinguished man, I felt lifted by his passion and empowered by his dream. I remembered Kierkegaard’s dictum that purity of the heart is to will one thing, and here was a man fully focused on this one large and encompassing goal. During that dinner I readily signed on to his cause—who wouldn’t?—and vowed to direct the Neustadt programs to be an engine working on behalf of large numbers of students as never before.

What Walter and his family had already done for the University of Oklahoma was impressive in the extreme. Walter Sr. and Doris Neustadt gave the land to the University of Oklahoma that became Max Westheimer Airpark, the home of OU’s aviation program. Doris Neustadt was also the first major private donor to support OU’s library.

Walter’s own career began with a bachelor’s degree in geology from Yale University and a master’s from OU. When Walter chose to offer his service to OU as a way to give back to his school and his state, he was soon on the advisory board for the University of Oklahoma Press, and he and Dot helped found OU’s Seed Sower Society, which honors donors of \$1 million or more. Then, along with his brothers, Jean and Allan, and their sister, Joan, Walter made a \$2 million gift to OU to expand the Bizzell Memorial Library.

Walter was also an Endowed Founder of the OU President’s Associates Program, and he went on to serve on the OU Board of Regents from 1969 to 1976, the last two years as chair. For

thirty-one years, from 1965 to 1996, he served as a trustee of the OU Foundation—think about that for a moment: thirty-one years of volunteer service—and from 1976 to 1986 he served as the Foundation’s chair. In 1992 he received the Governor’s Arts Award as one of the state’s most dedicated supporters of literature and the arts, and then in May 2005, Walter received a Doctor of Humane Letters award from the University of Oklahoma, and it was one of the proudest moments of my life to speak on Walter’s behalf for that occasion and to stand beside him at the lectern.

I have discovered that it is impossible to know someone like Walter Neustadt Jr. and not be affected by his passion for service and for making the world a better place. I was always struck that a very special kind of innocence persisted in Walter’s relations with others. I saw this every time we met. He was a savvy businessman, but he had developed the habit of believing the best about people until they proved incontrovertibly otherwise. His tendency to believe in people around him so readily might have seemed naïve to someone who did not know him, but in reality it was a principled act of courage—a courageous willingness to extend credit to people until doing so in a particular instance was no longer possible. Over time, I learned, too, that this ability to believe in people was an effective strategy for demanding excellence from others as he demanded it from himself.

At the University of Oklahoma, we will miss Walter’s lively intelligence and his generosity of spirit, and many, many of us will miss the friendship of our dear friend. We must remember, even when doing so is difficult, that there is no tragedy in Walter’s passing. Walter gave the gift of his life to the people he loved and cared about, and he was able to do that far longer than most can. He was also more successful than most in achieving his dreams and in being the dedicated servant of causes he believed in. Walter’s life remains an inspiration to us all, and the gift of what he achieved in his life will be felt by many for years and years to come.

Robert Con Davis-Undiano