

Grand Island Public Schools Foundation receives \$2.4 million estate gift for Charles & Bessie Frith Scholarship Fund

She always said she wanted to invest in students who had the “fire in their belly” for success.

Bessie Frith of Grand Island, made good on that promise with a \$2.4 million estate gift to the Grand Island Public Schools Foundation to endow the Charles & Bessie Frith Scholarship Fund.

Bessie passed away in December 2021. Her first husband Charles (Chuck) died in 2010. They both had been educators with Chuck later changing careers to pursue his passion for the outdoors. The Grand Island Public Schools and the students were always part of their family. The bond ran deep. In Bessie’s case, she first stepped into Stolley Park Elementary in 1942. Stolley was a two-room country school when Bessie entered as a “beginner.” She stayed at Stolley through eighth grade and credits the beginning of her affection for school to the two teachers who taught her for the entire duration at the rural Stolley Park School. Bessie then moved on to Grand Island Senior High as her mother Letha (graduated 1927) had before her. Bessie graduated in 1955. It was just the beginning.

“I went into teaching, because I liked school so well, I didn’t have the guts to quit.” – Bessie Frith, 2014

Fall of 1955 took Bessie off to Kearney State College where she earned a two-year teaching certificate. She returned to Grand Island for the 1957-58 school-year to teach Kindergarten at West Lawn Elementary. With the money that Bessie earned that year, she went back to Kearney for two more years to earn her Bachelor’s Degree in Education. In 1960, Bessie returned to West Lawn, teaching some of her Kindergartners again, this time as their 3rd grade teacher!

Over the years, Bessie taught and/or was principal at West Lawn, Wasmer Annex, Starr, Stolley Park, and Howard. She retired in 1997 after a 38-year career in education. Truly, Bessie spent a lifetime with Grand Island Public Schools, as a student, as a teacher, as a principal, and later an ardent supporter of school and students.

Chuck and Bessie started the Charles and Bessie Frith Scholarship fund with the Grand Island Public Schools Foundation in 2007 and made their first scholarship award in the spring of 2008. To date the fund has made \$41,350 in scholarship awards

to 15 students. With the addition of the estate funds, the scholarship awards will grow substantially.

The criteria for the scholarship includes the following: the student must be a graduate of Grand Island Senior High. The student must demonstrate financial need by qualifying for the federal free or reduced school lunch program. The student must have the ability to succeed in college, however, an honor roll grade point average is not necessary. A 2.0 – 3.0 is acceptable. The student must demonstrate the ability to work hard for desired goals and must demonstrate good character and citizenship. And, finally the student must attend a public Nebraska trade school or University.

In 2014, Bessie Frith gave a \$5,000 challenge gift to the Grand Island Public Schools Foundation Staff Campaign. When asked why she said, “I don’t think you ever retire from Education. You continue to care. I gave my heart and soul to Grand Island Public Schools and I want to do what I can to help students succeed.”

“Bessie was the kind of person that commanded presence in a room. She never minced her words, and you never had to guess how she felt. But, she loved fiercely and her north star was always the staff and students of Grand Island Public Schools. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her and though I miss her deeply, I am thrilled to see this final investment from her estate...ensuring that her legacy and her impact will be felt forever,” said Traci Skalberg, outgoing Executive Director of the Grand Island Public Schools Foundation.

The Grand Island Public Schools Foundation invests, manages and awards scholarships and grants to benefit the students of the Grand Island Public Schools. Over the years, many individuals have donated to support individual scholarships or other funds to grant students their dreams of a higher education. Some have donated annually or through payroll deductions, while others have established endowed scholarships in their family's names or in honor or memory of someone special.

The Grand Island Public Schools Foundation is a separate non-profit entity from the school district and is governed by a volunteer board of directors. The Foundation serves as the official tax-exempt vehicle for philanthropic gifts to enhance the education at Grand Island Public Schools.

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