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The Art of Giving

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The Art of Giving

To inspire change, Bill Wartmann '57 finds his inspiration in the wisdom of the past.

**Story by SARAH (ZELLER)
JULIAN '07**

When a fully staged production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* opened in Edgerton, Wis., this year, music lovers from as far away as Madison and Milwaukee were drawn to a town with a population of just 5,000 — thanks to an endowment created by William ("Bill") Wartmann '57 and his late wife, Joyce.

With the goal of making Edgerton "an important cultural force," in Bill's words, he and Joyce supported the town's Performing Arts Center, built in 2000. The Wartmann Endowment for the Performing Arts Center Fund has so far provided more than \$600,000 to sustain the center and its programming.



Bill Wartmann, holding his beloved dog Pong.

The Teatro Lirico D'Europa company's performance of *Madama Butterfly* before a packed audience at the center's 598-seat auditorium was a special moment for Bill, who regards opera as "one of the greatest art forms."

Keeping opera, and all of the arts, alive for future generations is vitally important to Bill. "If we don't do something in our education system to open the arts to people, we're going to lose all these wonderful experiences," he says. "The arts are what can really soften us, by their sense of immediacy, by the aliveness of thought that can connect with us."

Over the years, the Wartmanns' philanthropy has benefited a wide range of causes. They created an endowment for the Madison-based Opera for the Young, which brings opera to more than 75,000 middle- and grade-school children each year. The couple also established several scholarship funds for students at Illinois Wesleyan, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and

Edgerton High School, as well as Oak Park and River Forest High School, which Bill attended as a young man.

In addition, the Wartmanns founded a lecture series on human sexuality at the First Unitarian Society of Madison, and Bill has been recognized for his long advocacy on behalf of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

“The reason I give this philanthropy,” Bill says, “is that, in a very simple manner, I was taught by my immigrant parents that you have to give back to the world.”

Despite the challenges of growing up in a Chicago neighborhood that “was declining into a slum,” Bill’s parents ingrained in him that education “is the key to social mobility,” he says. He attended IWU as an art major with a minor in education. Later, he earned an M.F.A. in sculpture at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Bill says he “had a great experience at Wesleyan, although it was not easy for me socially. My teachers were very, very good. I have no regrets about Wesleyan, or even the students whom I had some difficulty with at the time. I didn’t understand them, and they didn’t understand me.”

Bill’s fascination with the arts began as a teenager, he says, and helped him overcome the many obstacles he faced as a bisexual man living at a time when such a sexual orientation was considered radical.

“With all of the disasters in life, the one comfort is always art and music and literature,” he says. His liberal arts education brought with it the understanding “that people before us have experienced the same pain and anguish, in stories that are thousands of years old, yet reflect what we feel today. That realization creates continuity in the human experience. It reminds us that we are not alone — we have a relationship with the universe, and with each other, despite our differences.”

Bill’s keen appreciation for the past is reflected in his occupation as an antiques appraiser and in his decades-long project to restore an 1850s-era Federalist style home he purchased near Edgerton while in his 20s. “It was falling down; there was four feet of snow in the corners of the house, the windows were broken,” he recalls.

During his 10-year relationship with architect Michael J. Saturnus, the two made roof-to-foundation renovations of the house. As they worked, they also lived in the home, despite the fact that it had only one electrical outlet and the plumbing frequently froze. The pair eventually parted, and Bill met and married Joyce Brach, a former mezzo-soprano with the Chicago Lyric Opera, with whom he continued the home’s restoration. In all, the work took 45 years to complete.

The house and surrounding acres of restored prairie are now the site of the Wartmann Concert on the Prairie. The concert is held annually the evening before the start of the Madison Early Music Festival, a weeklong program of medieval, Renaissance and early baroque periods that Bill supports with an endowment. He regards the prairie concerts as a fitting tribute to the two great

loves of his life: Saturnus, who died of AIDS in 1990, and Joyce Wartmann, who died of complications from Parkinson's disease in 2003.

Bill also counts among his greatest losses the close friends who have died of AIDS — nine in all. The experience pushed him to advocate for those affected by the disease. In pledging \$1 million for a new organ at Madison's Overture Center for the Arts in 2000, Bill asked that it be dedicated in honor of those who had died of AIDS throughout the world, but says the request was refused. "I was absolutely crushed by that, briefly." The irony is that many organists worldwide have died of AIDS, he says, adding, "Perhaps with our knowledge today of this worldwide epidemic, things would be looked at differently."

At age 75, Bill looks back on his own life with satisfaction. "I lived my life the best that I was able to. Each of us does the best we can, however crazy it may sound. I hope to help others find a path to be able to explore their own qualities, to give back to themselves first of all, and then back to the world."