

## **Faulconer, Vernon Edward**

*June 4, 1939—August 7, 2015*



Vernon Faulconer was a Grinnell College trustee for 19 years (1984-2003) and a life trustee for another 12 years (2003-2015) and regarded this service as one of his great pleasures. When he completed his trusteeship in 2003, the College awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. (His recent photo is to the left.)

The development and construction of buildings on the Grinnell campus bear his imprint and financial support: the Bear Recreation and Athletic Center, the Noyce Science Center and the renovation of Mears Hall and ARH. Vernon and his wife, Amy Hamamoto Faulconer, '59 also have made significant financial contributions to the College's annual fund (the Pioneer Fund).

The Bucksbaum Center for the Arts was especially important for Vernon. His 1999 letter to the board's Committee on Fine Arts stated the Center's "mandate should be to help enrich and support the exploration of art, theatre and music through a variety of formats, including performances, exhibits, lectures and workshops." Key for Vernon and Amy was the creation of space in the Center for exhibition of the visual arts in the gallery now named in their honor.

Since the Faulconer Gallery's opening in 1999, Vernon has partnered with Lesley Wright, its director, to build the venue and its collection. "The Faulconer" is now renowned as a home for exhibitions whose intelligence and sophistication exceed their modest dimensions: shows that have captivated and inspired countless students, faculty, staff, alumni, and visitors.

In a tribute, Wright said, "The chance to work with Vernon over all those years has been a great gift. Vernon was blessed with a mind that was quick, unpretentious, and curious. He was such a pleasure to talk with because ideas were, for him, very real treasures. He often downplayed his intelligence, but I never accepted his self-assessment. He was a very smart guy. When I learned that asking questions was one of his delights in experiencing art, it made perfect sense. Art, the oil and gas business, and travel were his life-long liberal arts education."

Six weeks after Vernon's death, the Faulconer Gallery opened the exhibition "Start by Asking Questions; Contemporary Art from the Faulconer and Rachofsky Collections," (Sept. 16-Dec. 13, 2015). The exhibition featured world-class 20th and 21st-century artworks from The Warehouse, the Dallas, Texas collection Vernon and Amy built with their friends and collecting partners, Cindy and Howard Rachofsky, the four of whom

were recognized as among the world's top 200 art collectors. In his own dedication for the exhibit, Vernon offered the following comments about his approach to art:

- “When I first began collecting art about 35 years ago, I was uncertain where to start. I hadn’t studied art, I didn’t understand contemporary art, and I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to collect. But I was intrigued and wanted to know more. I kept an open mind and tried to learn all I could about the works that I liked, or that baffled me but had significance I couldn’t figure out. . . . Collecting art for [Amy and me] starts with a personal passion to own wonderful objects, and to live with them over time. The experience of a work of art seen almost daily is very different from a one-time museum or gallery visit. With art on the walls in our homes and offices, we learn what we want to live with, what sparks new questions, and even what doesn’t hold our interest for very long. . . . Art has opened our minds and our eyes.”

Other Texas art organizations also drew Vernon’s attention. He served on the boards of trustees for the Dallas Museum of Art and the Chinati Foundation, the latter of which operates a museum for large-scale pieces of contemporary art in Marfa, Texas.

Vernon’s generous philanthropy also included the Tyler (Texas) Junior College, where he created the Faulconer Academic Incentive Award for Minority Students, which he regarded as his proudest achievement. Another beneficiary was the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, which in 2008 received the couple’s \$1 million gift to endow the Amy and Vernon E. Faulconer Distinguished Chair in Medical Science.

For this generosity Vernon was named the 1998 “Philanthropist of the Year” by the East Texas Community Foundation and the 2000 “Hearts and Hands Across Tyler” Kreeleene Van Cleef Humanitarian Award while he and Amy were named Tyler’s Outstanding Citizens in 2005 with the T. B. Butler Award.

The primary source of wealth that made this generous philanthropy possible is a successful oil-and-gas business he started and operated for the last 45 years (n/k/a Vernon E. Faulconer, Inc.). It is an acquisition and production company that specializes in enhancing the production of marginal oil and gas wells. It does not drill. Over the years it has steadily grown to include operations in Texas and eight other southwestern states.

All of these accomplishments and wealth were unimaginable when Vern in 1957 left the family dairy farm near El Dorado, Kansas, to attend Grinnell College, sight-unseen, on the recommendation of his high school librarian. He remarked, “He had no idea of what the College would be like.”

Living in South Younker Hall, Vern was active in speech activities as a member of the College debate team and as an extemporaneous speaking contestant. (His photo from the 1959 Cyclone is to the right.) He later confessed he was not a good student and did not take advantage of what the College had to offer. I disagree. He and I met our first semester in the Freshman English course, and as we became friends, I saw Vern as a soft-spoken, serious, intelligent fellow student when we both were impressed, and somewhat intimidated, by Professor Norman Springer. During the next spring break he visited my parents and me at our home in Perry, Iowa. In more recent years Vern and I occasionally caught up with each other by emails and phone calls.



His true Grinnell accomplishment, however, was wooing and winning the heart of a fellow Grinnellian, Amy Hamamoto,'59, whom he married in December 1959. (Their more recent photograph is to the left.) He then dropped out of Grinnell on the advice of a friend who persuaded him that a college education was not necessary to be successful and on Vern's recollection that all the wealthy people near his hometown seemed to be in the oil business.

To pursue this dream, Vern and Amy moved to the small Kansas town of Marion, where he was unable to find a job in an oil company. With the help of a small bank loan, he instead became an entrepreneur, buying and selling oil and gas leases and used drilling equipment. Four years later they moved their family and the business to Wichita, until they relocated in 1970 to Tyler, Texas, 100 miles southeast of Dallas. There the business gradually improved and eventually became the previously described successful oil and gas business.

Vernon died on August 7, 2015, of a heart attack at Dallas' Presbyterian Hospital after a gall bladder operation. He is survived by his wife Amy; their three children (Grant Albert Faulconer and his wife Catherine; Sara Jane Faulconer Sands; and Galen Arlen Faulconer and his wife Renee); nine grandchildren; a brother (Don Faulconer); and a sister (Gylaine Faulconer Zimmerman). The memorial service was at Tyler's Marvin United Methodist Church, where Vernon was a member.

This obituary refers to his many "resume virtues" in David Brooks' terminology. But "eulogy virtues" are there too: compassion, generosity, graciousness, humility, optimism, curiosity, inquisitiveness, intelligence and enthusiasm. As the College said on his passing, "Vernon Faulconer was an outsize presence in Grinnell's recent history:

warm, affectionate, generous, and visionary. A friend, colleague, and mentor to many, he will be sorely missed." Amen.

*Duane W. Krohnke*