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Growing Entrepreneurs

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Bill Crotty graduated from both the University of Dayton and the school of hard knocks, where he learned "most of the valuable lessons of life the hard way."

That's why the 83-year-old former chief executive officer of Van Dyne-Crotty Inc. is backing young entrepreneurs at his alma mater.

As the University of Dayton prepares to celebrate another national ranking for its entrepreneurship program, the University honors the charismatic 1952 alumnus who founded and endowed the L. William Crotty Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership on campus with a \$1 million gift in 1998. Bill and his wife, Marilyn, recently committed another \$2.5 million to the center that bears his name.

Entrepreneurship at the University of Dayton (pdf) (url: http://www.udayton.edu/images/documents/entrepreneurship_statistics_09212010_pdf.pdf)

The couple has donated more than \$5.7 million to the School of Business Administration, with gifts that have helped fund the renovation of Miriam Hall, which includes a striking atrium, team-learning classrooms for business students and a student-run gourmet coffee shop.

"Bill is a visionary who dreams big," said Daniel J. Curran, president of the University of Dayton. "He developed the blueprint for the Crotty Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership and the foundation for an academic program that ranks among the very best in the country. What a mark this center has made. We are so grateful for his family's generous and continuing support."

Raised in Detroit by his grandmother during the Great Depression, Crotty learned the value of hard work. He ran errands for an elderly widow, worked as a stockboy, sold shoes, delivered the *Detroit Free Press* and learned the ins and outs of business as a clerk in a haberdashery.

"Raised as a semi-orphan taught me the value of self-reliance," he said. "Having to get out and hustle made my life much more fulfilling. What often starts out as a negative is largely an opportunity in disguise."

Tours of duty in the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army honed his leadership skills. "Going from high school graduation and departing my home city of Detroit for a foreign land named South Carolina and a very different residence called Parris Island dramatically changed my life permanently," he said. "It was a marvelous learning experience that I treasure to this day. I also can't forget my experience during the Korean War. Being an airborne infantry officer was special."

Crotty attended the University of Dayton on the GI Bill and reunited with his father, who helped found a Dayton-based uniform rental and sales company. During Crotty's years at the helm, he used marketing savvy to expand the company into one of the premier privately owned uniform companies in the country. In 2006, Cintas Corp. acquired most of the company, which had grown to 1,800 employees in 18 states.

"We chased a dream," he said. "Van Dyne-Crotty earned a reputation in the industry as very innovative and strong, with an *esprit de corps*. It grew by leaps and bounds."

Crotty planted the seed for the Crotty Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership with Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., past University of Dayton president, and continued discussions with Curran about the center's role as "an incubator" for another generation of entrepreneurs. Today, entrepreneurship is the hottest major in the business school.

"When I was a trustee at the University of Dayton, I discovered that the business school was doing a marvelous job of preparing students for individual disciplines — whether accounting, whether marketing — which was fine, but I know that most of the excitement is in start-ups," Crotty said. "So many people have great talent, great character and great ideas, but they can't get over the hump and start a company. This is the essence of the Crotty Center."

Through the center, sophomore teams launch microbusinesses, each with \$5,000 start-up capital. The students develop business plans, set up inventory and cash control systems, learn about proper pricing and how to market their products. The

companies are liquidated in the spring, with students donating profits to local charities. Later, in their senior seminar, entrepreneurship majors help real entrepreneurs solve problems or develop business plans for new ventures they want to launch after graduation.

"It gives me a great sense of personal satisfaction and energizes me when I sit in," said Crotty, who's involved in limited partnership companies and invests in other ventures. "Where's the hope for our economic future? Sitting in with these students opens my eyes."

Surrounded in his Centerville, Ohio, office by photos of his beloved wife, seven children, 16 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, Crotty spins stories of how the University of Dayton changed his life. With Irish charm and self-deprecating wit, he loves retelling how he met his future wife, Marilyn, on campus. Though "she was booked three months in advance," he convinced the elementary education major to date him. When she snared the lead role in the UD Players production of "Jenny Kissed Me," he sold out the Dayton Art Institute auditorium – displaying the kind of business savvy that he would later employ in business ventures.

Nearly six decades later, he's still deeply in love with the same woman – and the university that brought them together.

"From the very beginning, I was very impressed with the spirit on campus," he said. "The University of Dayton has always been blessed with a special spirit."

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