

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

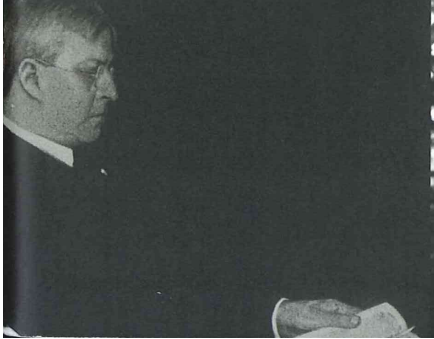
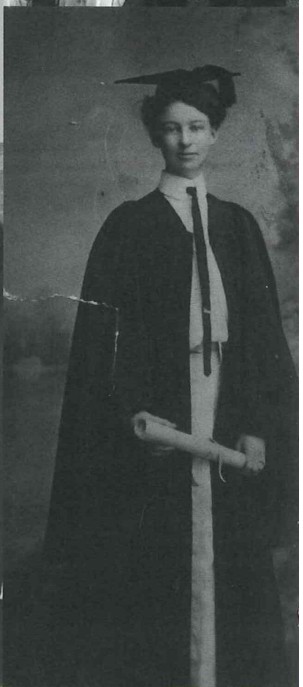
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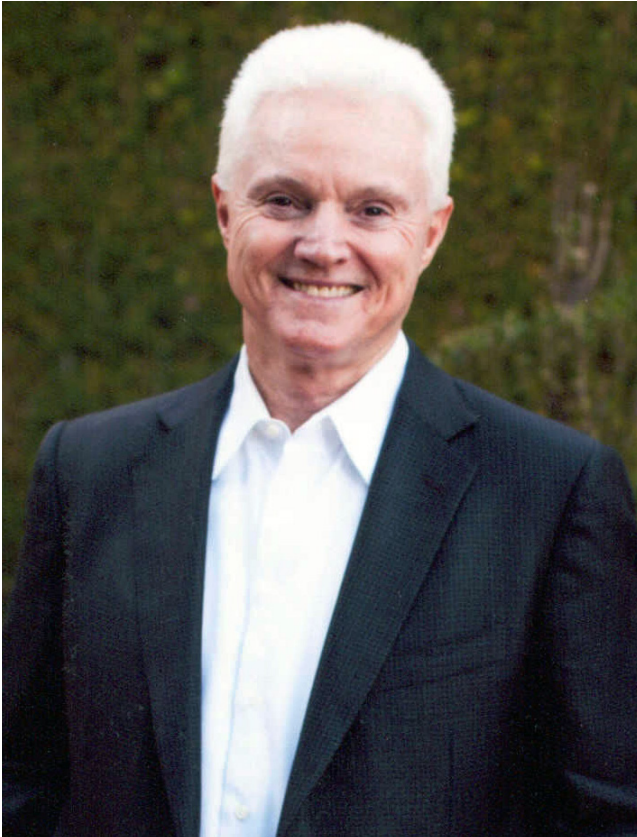
Alumni

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Tom Lewis '71 Seeing blue and making a difference...

UK grad becomes one of the nation's premier home builders and transforms lives through philanthropy

“Tom Lewis comes from a long line of Kentuckians and grew up in Lexington,” says Mike Richey '73 '79 AG, UK vice president for Development. “Through education, hard work and ingenuity, he created one of the nation’s most successful home building businesses in Phoenix, Ariz. His remarkable success as an entrepreneur places him among the ranks of the University of Kentucky’s most outstanding alumni.”

Richey continues, “Even more extraordinary, however, is Tom’s thoughtful generosity and his phenomenal philanthropy. Through the foundation he has established, Tom and his wife Jan are helping many deserving college students achieve their academic dreams at the University of Kentucky and at other institutions. They are assisting children and families in multiple ways, especially in times of crisis and need. And they are enriching their community through support of cultural and environmental organizations.

“Tom’s life story is fascinating, and his penchant for reaching out and helping others in transformational ways is inspiring.”

Kentucky roots

Lewis is a seventh generation Kentuckian and proud of it. His mother was from Letcher County, and his father was from Leslie County. Lewis traces his direct ancestry back to Squire Boone, the father of legendary Kentucky frontiersman, Daniel Boone.

As a boy, Lewis was influenced by the leadership qualities of the men in his extended family. “My maternal grandfather, Buck Jones, was a wonderful man and a role model for me,” Lewis shares. “He lived on a big hill in Neon and worked for the L&N Railroad for 50 years as an engineer.

“My paternal grandfather was a lawyer, and my paternal great-grandfather served as a circuit judge in southeast Kentucky.”

Lewis continues, “My father was an outstanding athlete in



Lewis, center, receives an academic award from Gov. A.B. “Happy” Chandler '24 LAW, left, and UK basketball coach Adolph Rupp, right, at a Bryan Station High School football banquet in 1966.

his high school and college years, becoming a collegiate welterweight boxer. Through regional and national tournaments, he eventually achieved fourth-place in the National Golden Gloves competition.

“He was pursuing a career as an attorney when World War II interrupted his education. He served on various ships during the war and eventually became a Navy career officer. After the war, he was stationed at several different ports, and when he retired from the Navy, he settled our family in Kentucky. We moved to Lexington when I was 13.”

The family lived on Eastin Road and Lewis attended nearby Bryan Station High School, playing on the varsity football team for two years. When he graduated in 1967, he received the A.B. Chandler Academic Award for having the highest grade point average of all the players on the team. He was also vice president of his senior class, a National Honors Society student, an officer in Key Club, and he received the American Legion Award for Bryan Station High School for 1967.

UK education

When it came time to enter college, Lewis quite naturally chose the University of Kentucky. He explains, “I can’t ever remember making the decision to enroll at UK. It was just always a given fact that I would attend college there. I never thought about going anywhere else. I had lived in Lexington for the past several years, and I was a big UK football fan. Kentucky was the school for me.”

His mother, Ruth Jones Lewis, was a strong advocate for education, and at her urging, Lewis enrolled as an engineering major. He recalls, “My mother’s father had worked for one employer his whole career. She wanted me to have that kind of stability with an engineering degree. She also encouraged me to major in engineering because I was good in math.

“My mother and I were very close. She was always my biggest fan and supporter.”

Lewis received a full tuition scholarship to attend the University. He remembers, “A local consulting engineer, G. Reynolds Watkins [’38 EN], was killed in a plane crash at Blue Grass Airport my senior year of high school. His family established a scholarship in his memory at the University and I was the first to receive it.

“The cost to attend UK at that time was only \$115 per

semester, but to be able to say that I was awarded a scholarship was very meaningful to me. The selection criteria included ‘outstanding academic record, leadership and sportsmanship qualities.’ ”

Although he took a serious approach to academics and studied every night in a basement cubicle in the Margaret I. King Library, Lewis also enjoyed the opportunities for



Lewis spent many long hours studying in the Margaret I. King Library.

social activities and student leadership on campus. He pledged Sigma Chi and lived in the fraternity house for three years, becoming vice president his senior year. He was also chairman of the Greek Activities Steering Committee, served on the Interfraternity Council, and was selected Greek Man of the Year his senior year. He likewise participated in many campus events including the Little Kentucky Derby.

“I remember walking across campus every day with books and a slide rule under my arm,” Lewis reminisces. “It was a busy, fun, exciting time of my life. And when I’m on UK’s campus today, I feel that same excitement and energy.”

He continues, “Even though I have lived in Arizona for the past 35 years, and I only spent 10 years in Kentucky, Lexington still feels like home to me.”

Early career

As he neared graduation from the University of Kentucky in 1971, Lewis decided to enroll at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the MBA program. UK President Otis A. Singletary had mentored Lewis during this time, and he wrote a letter of recommendation for Lewis when he applied for admission.

“I obtained an engineering degree, but I was not cut out to be a mechanical engineer,” Lewis relates. “I realized this career choice simply did not play to my strengths.

“I had a summer job in contracting, and I liked the business side of it,” he continues. “When I graduated from UK, I went straight to grad school in business. Because my family had experienced some financial hardships when I was growing up, I wanted to make money and become an investor.

“As it turned out, my quantitative background in engineering proved valuable for me at Carolina. The academic discipline and my strong study habits gave me a leg up.”

Lewis entered the home building industry right out of

New Developments

graduate school. For six years, he worked for large high volume firms. This took him to Pennsylvania, Virginia and Ohio. Not only was he involved in extensive training programs, he also gained practical experience at all work levels.

“I spent my first six months in the home building business in the field as a laborer. It was a very valuable time for me, sweeping out houses and tarring basements — with my MBA,” he laughs.

Lewis was quickly promoted through company ranks, but he did not enjoy relocating. “I didn’t want to move,” he remembers. “I’m a southerner in my heart. I thought I would go where the work took me for a few years, gain experience and then come back to Kentucky.”

Lewis was recruited by a leading company in Arizona in 1979, however, and this triggered a rapid series of life events. He recalls, “On a Thursday, I closed on the two houses I owned — one in Virginia and one in Ohio. This put \$40,000 in my pocket. On Friday, I left my job. On Saturday, I got married. On Sunday, we departed for Arizona. And a month later,” he laughs, “my hair turned white. I was just 30 years old.”

Remarkable success

He worked for the next six years for UDC Homes in Phoenix, and then joined Trammell Crow Residential, launching that firm into the home building business in the late 1980s. In 1991, Lewis bought the home building division of Trammell Crow and began his own firm. He notes, “I had spent 18 years working for big companies, and this was my opportunity to step out on my own.

The award-winning T.W. Lewis Co. is known for its design, workmanship, attention to detail and customer service.

Jan and Tom Lewis began their foundation in 2001.

“In forming T.W. Lewis Co., I based it on my core values — honesty, hard work, reliability, integrity, achievement and compassion.

“Experience had taught me that details are also important. What I’ve done with the company for 23 years is appreciate the little picture as much as the big picture. Our

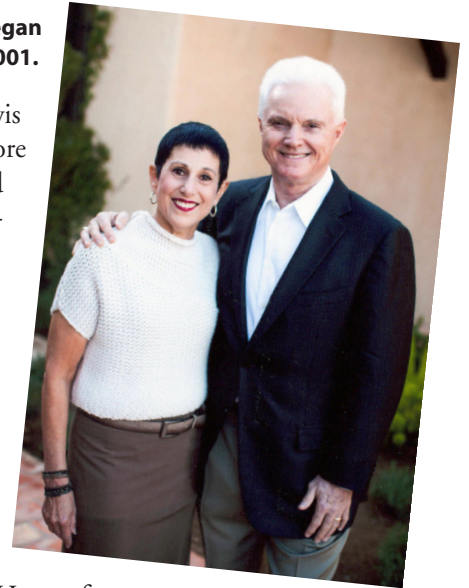
marketing slogan was ‘Homes for Particular People.’ We competed against the public builders and did well.

“Our mission statement was to become the best home building organization in America as measured by product quality, customer satisfaction and profitability.”

The housing market in Phoenix was growing in the 1990s, and in just a few short years, his company established a reputation as a leader in all these areas. T.W. Lewis Co. has received numerous industry awards including America’s Best Builder and the National Housing Quality Silver Award in 1998, America’s Best Design Center Award in 2002 and 2004, and the National Housing Quality Gold Award in 2009.

Individual industry awards given to Lewis include Arizona Real Estate Entrepreneur of the Year by Ernst & Young in 1994, Arizona Business Leadership Award in 2006, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from Professional Builder Magazine and the National Housing Quality Award Committee. In 2013, Lewis was the first inductee into the National Housing Quality Hall of Fame.

Since its inception in 1991, T.W. Lewis Co. has constructed between 250 and 350 homes each year, concentrating on its commitment to quality rather than quantity of houses built. Carefully crafted from the ground up, the luxury homes showcase the qualities the company is known for — design, workmanship, attention to detail and customer service. The homes sold for



an average price of over \$500,000, and more than 5,500 have been completed in the Phoenix area.

In 2011, Lewis developed a partnership with Houston-based David Weekley Homes. “It’s a match made in heaven,” Lewis chuckles. “They care about the same things I do.”

He explains, “As the sole stockholder in my company, I had to think of a succession plan. We have three great sons, but I didn’t encourage them to come into the business. All are in real estate, but they’re not particularly interested in home building.”

Lewis remains with the newly created T.W. Lewis by David Weekley Co., phasing out of his management responsibilities over the next few years.

Transformational philanthropy

In 2001, Lewis and his wife Jan formed T.W. Lewis Foundation to support education, character development, children and families in need, and a variety of other community charities and non-profit organizations.

Lewis says that this philanthropy has been funded with 10 percent of his company’s pre-tax profits each year since 2001.

Through the foundation, Lewis established an endowed scholarship fund at the University of Kentucky in 2006 named to honor his mother, Ruth Jones Lewis. He later began a second fund, and together these two endowments have awarded scholarships to more than 35 students from Kentucky.

Lewis recently changed the focus of his scholarships to eventually benefit up to 10 students per year in the UK Honors program with \$5,000 annual awards.

Half of the scholarships will be granted to students from Fayette County, and half will be given to students from eastern Kentucky (Letcher, Leslie, Knott, Breathitt, Jackson, Clay, Floyd, Wolfe, Harlan or Perry Counties).

“I’m very grateful for Tom’s vision and generosity,” Richey shares. “His philanthropy will assist generations of Kentucky students for years to come and impact the Commonwealth far into the future.”

Lewis also established a scholarship program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and since

2002, his foundation has provided college scholarships for more than 120 outstanding students in the greater Phoenix area.

“I do this because I believe in young people and in the value of education,” Lewis explains. “I want to help good students reach their potential.”

His philanthropy has helped many other individuals through the children’s charities and community service organizations in Arizona he supports, including: ANASAZI, a wilderness therapy program for troubled

teens and at-risk youth; Child Crisis Center – East Valley, which provides emergency shelter and resources for children and families; Florence Crittenton, an organization helping at-risk girls; A New Leaf, an agency providing homeless and domestic violence shelters and community and youth programs; Positive Coaching Alliance, which offers training for volunteer coaches to build character through youth sports; Jewish Family and Children’s

Services; Banner Children’s Hospital; Phoenix Children’s Hospital; Tempe Community Council; United Way; The Desert Botanical Garden; the Nature Conservancy; the Phoenix Art Museum; and many others.

“Tom Lewis is an exceptional philanthropist,” observes UK President Eli Capilouto. “He plans his gifts in such a way as to make a transformative difference in the lives of those his generosity touches. I am especially appreciative of all he is doing here at his alma mater to help students from Kentucky achieve their dreams for a college education and a bright future.”

Lewis says that his most basic reasons for giving come from answering this simple question: “What are you doing to help others?”

He muses, “I want my philanthropy to provide impact and joy. I think I have an obligation to give back — both my wealth and wisdom — to try to help others. And I have a deep love for the state and the University of Kentucky” ■



Lewis, bottom center, with several UK students who have benefitted from his scholarship program