



Tom Lewis, seen at his Scottsdale office, is known for his homebuilding company, named America's Best Builder in 1998. But he's also known for his foundation, which supports higher education.

A faithful rebuild

T.W. Lewis finds a new home for his philanthropy at GCU

STORY BY MARK GONZALES PHOTO BY RALPH FRESO

One of Arizona's most storied homebuilders did not have a college home for his philanthropy, which supports children and families in need and various nonprofit organizations.

But after learning about the pillars of Grand Canyon University, seeing the smiles on students' faces on their way to classes, and hearing about the vision of President Brian Mueller and other leaders, Tom Lewis felt right at home.

"The real power of Tom is not his checkbook, even though he is very generous," said Kevin Youngblood, an entrepreneur who introduced Lewis to GCU. "The real power of Tom is his knowledge and his character and his beliefs. So you pass those down through mentoring, disciplining and training, and he's doing that at GCU on a platform.

"He's been welcomed to speak to the students and have that intimate relationship where you can pass on those values. He's got a lot to give to all strata of life. ... He has that sweet spot for the college age."

That generosity came to fruition when the T.W. Lewis Foundation, started by Lewis in 2000 while he was running his successful

homebuilding business, committed to a \$2 million, five-year gift to the Colangelo College of Business, which will fund the T.W. Lewis Center for Student Success, scheduled for completion before the start of the 2025 fall semester.

"I think we're off to a good start," said Lewis, an Army brat who moved around the country as a youth and in his 20s before settling in Phoenix in 1979. "This is not my first rodeo here in terms of making gifts to a variety of organizations, including universities.

"But GCU has been a breath of fresh air, and I'm optimistic about it," as is business college Dean John Kaites.

"He is not only on board with the plans, he's excited about them," said Kaites, who speaks regularly with Lewis.

The journey to GCU has been a fascinating one.

Lewis moved every three years with his family until his teens, held six jobs over 18 years, drove from Akron, Ohio, to Phoenix in a packed Volkswagen Rabbit after marrying wife Jan in 1979, and started his homebuilding business 12 years later.

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Through a scholarship and his mother’s support, Lewis majored in mechanical engineering at the University of Kentucky. But he also joined a fraternity and a slew of campuswide groups.

A leader emerged.

Lewis, named the university’s outstanding male leader, went on to graduate school at the University of North Carolina; he was four years younger than most of his classmates.

He didn’t hesitate to move across the country after a strong job offer.

“But I had no idea Phoenix was going to grow like it did,” he said. “Sometimes you have the wind at your back, and other times the wind in your face, and sometimes it’s just good fortune.

“I think people who have goals tend to have a lot of good fortune.”

Setting goals was one of the key chapters of Lewis’ 2020 Amazon bestseller, “Solid Ground: A Foundation for Winning in Work and in Life.” It dispelled myths about setting a plan for a successful life and career, instead providing direction through wisdom and experience.

“Once you get clear in your goal, you tend to move in that direction,” Lewis said.

Quality was paramount to him when he started his homebuilding company. His company constructed more than 6,000 homes and earned America’s Best Builder Award in 1998 and the National Housing Quality Gold Award in 2009.

But his biggest challenge started April 7, 2017, five years after being treated for melanoma.

“All of a sudden, it’s in my liver, my lungs,” Lewis said of his stage-four diagnosis. “You just can’t imagine what that feeling is.”

Growing up as a Southern Baptist, Lewis recalled preachers talking about a personal relationship with Christ, and it’s something he resurrected at age 66, after the cancer diagnosis shocked his system.

“Now I felt it,” Lewis said of his religious bond. “It really drove my Christian faith deeper and (made it) way more important.”

Youngblood recognized Lewis’ passion for private colleges, so he arranged for Lewis to meet with Mueller and tour the campus, including a stop at Canyon Ventures, the startup accelerator. He also met with Mueller, Kaites and Paul Lambertson, College of Engineering and Technology dean.

“One thing led to another, and here we are,” Lewis said.

One campus visit stands out to Lewis. He met Kaites at 9 a.m., followed by another meeting before attending an “eye-opening” Chapel service where he soaked up the energy of 6,000 faithful students.

He saw those same happy faces after Chapel.

“That’s how you want it.” Lewis said. “That’s how it should be.” **G**

Student success center to help college ‘up the game’

Imagine touching a digital signage board in the Colangelo College of Business lobby that pulls up job and internship listings.

Or looking toward the ceiling and seeing a ticker posting stock market updates.

Or heading to a broadcast studio and a podcast room on the CCOB first floor to produce content.

They’re just a few of the proposed features of the T.W. Lewis Center for Student Success, funded by a five-year, \$2 million donation by the T.W. Lewis Foundation that’s slated for fall 2025 completion.

“(What the center) allows us to do is to really up the game to give students exposure to the marketplace, greater pathways to employment, and also greater tools,” said business college Dean John Kaites.

He said the facility will give the CCOB capabilities business colleges don’t typically have and will prepare traditional and online students for job opportunities through personal development.

The campus community already was treated in the fall to the T.W. Lewis Speaker Series, which brought prominent business executives

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to GCU to share their success, faith, wisdom and advice. Speakers will continue to interact with students “so they can see what it looks like to be a successful person who puts Christ at the center of their life,” Kaites said.

GCU alum Mark Petroff was hired in the fall to be the center’s director.

“He’s the complete package,” Kaites said of Petroff, whose has operated hotels over 20 years, including the elite Fairmont Scottsdale Princess.

Petroff will work with students and connect with GCU’s Career Services to cultivate relationships with employers.

“Our goal is to have our students be the No. 1 choice for anyone looking for a future business leader, future manager or future



supervisor,” Kaites said. “And if they want to start their own business? A future entrepreneur.”

Career Services also will provide a career advisor.

Said Aysha Bell, Career Services’ executive director, “This T.W. Lewis Center for Student Success is an incredible example of how GCU rallies together across colleges and departments (CCOB, Advancement, Career Services and more) for the betterment of our students in collaboration with innovative and servant-minded industry partners.” — MARK GONZALES