

The Limitless Potential of Giving

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In 1955, a young man with an irrepressible will and a voracious appetite for learning embarked on a degree at Stanford University. One of five children born and raised in Inglewood, California, he's now among Silicon Valley's most active real estate developers and one of America's most generous philanthropists. His latest act of generosity, announced last week, is the remarkable gift of \$151 million to Stanford University, its largest ever from a living donor.

The man behind that gift is my father, John Arrillaga Sr., a spectacular community servant and an unparalleled parent. Few people demonstrate more powerfully the way that generosity's impact outlasts the act of giving. That is to say, when we give, we transform the lives of individuals who themselves may become impassioned givers -- fueling a circle of giving with limitless potential.

For John Arrillaga, that circle of giving began in college. For what enabled him to attend college was a basketball scholarship. Through the generosity of someone he'd never met -- an individual who believed in fostering the potential of an unknown youth -- my father was awarded a basketball scholarship.

His work ethic at Stanford was exceptional. His scholarship paid his tuition but not living expenses, so while completing his studies (he achieved stellar grades) and excelling at his athletic requirements (he eventually became an All-American basketball player), he held six jobs, from washing dishes to delivering mail and working as a gardener.

My father's philanthropy came long before his business success. He made his first gift to Stanford -- a two-figure donation -- just after graduating. It was what he could give at the time, and even then the gift stretched him financially.

Soon, his service and generosity would be shared with my late mother, Frances, a sixth grade teacher and also a Stanford graduate. A few years after my mother graduated, the couple fell deeply in love, married and started a family life.

Theirs was a beautiful partnership of family, service and generosity. Together, they embodied the philanthropic spirit at its finest, creating the Arrillaga Foundation and contributing to countless causes. They were an incredible team -- my angel mother was the public face of their giving and served on dozens of nonprofit boards. My father was the silent force behind her volunteerism, supporting her with stability, resources and love.

For my father, writing checks is not enough. Over the past three decades, he's dedicated at least half of his time to his philanthropic efforts -- still working seven days a week at the age of 76. He believes, as I do, that successful philanthropy means combining financial resources with brainpower, skills and networks to amplify the number of lives he can touch and help transform. His philanthropy is actional not transactional -- and his model is one that in my own life I strive to follow. In fact, just prior to my mother's death I committed my life to service and giving, and my parents' complete dedication to giving is the torch that lights my own philanthropic fire.

His first nine-figure donation to Stanford went far beyond money. He single-handedly led and managed construction of the university's state-of-the-art football stadium, making decisions on design and landscaping while scrutinizing every detail -- he selected the palm trees, worked out the best form for every structural element and created his own designs for the seating. And, in a remarkable achievement, he completed the stadium construction in just 42 weeks-and under budget.

Over the past five decades, he's used his deep expertise, financial resources and business acumen to complete dozens of essential building projects for local schools, universities and nonprofits within the broader Silicon Valley community.

The project nearest to my heart is Stanford's Frances Arrillaga Alumni Center. As an active member of the Stanford alumni board my mother identified a significant disconnect between the university's development office and its alumni association. To honor her memory and to meet a critical need, my father created a building that achieved both a physical and institutional integration of these two departments.

My father taught me many important giving lessons, but two stand out. First, always give as much as you possibly can. And second, give equally from among your resources -- your time, your mind and your capital. These are principles I live by.

As my father's example so compellingly demonstrates, what we do for others defines who we are. And because the way we express our generosity is among the few things in life we can control, we must think carefully about how to write the giving chapter of our lives. We have the ability to shape our legacy from start to finish and work, as my father has done, to combine all our resources to maximize their impact. We must always give to our greatest potential.

Reflecting on my beloved father's latest gift to Stanford University and his immeasurable philanthropy to date, I find the beauty of his giving chapter breathtaking. For, in his generosity to the university, he has created a new circle of giving -- one whose impact will, by providing a better education for countless others, have limitless potential.

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