

6-1-2011

## A Legacy of Service

Jim Stewart  
*Furman University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

---

### Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim (2011) "A Legacy of Service," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 54 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss2/8>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact [scholarexchange@furman.edu](mailto:scholarexchange@furman.edu).

# A LEGACY OF SERVICE



*“All of us search for a way to understand what our role in life is. How do we serve? And how do we serve God? In my opinion, the best way is to serve his children.”*

— Max Heller

THE JUNE 13 DEATH OF MAX HELLER, A FURMAN TRUSTEE AND FORMER MAYOR OF GREENVILLE, WAS FOLLOWED BY A CHORUS OF ACCOLADES, REMINISCENCES AND WORDS OF APPRECIATION ABOUT A MAN RECOGNIZED AND ADMIRER FOR, AS HIS OBITUARY STATED, HIS “GOOD HEART, KIND DEEDS AND HUMANITARIANISM.”

*The Greenville News* called him “one of the visionaries behind Greenville’s European-style rebirth.” *The Greenville Journal* lauded him as “the patron saint of the city’s downtown renaissance” and said that Greenville is “known nationally as a shining example of revitalization.”

As mayor in the 1970s and as a community leader for years, Heller was deeply involved in the efforts to transform the downtown area, which 30 years ago was little more than a ghost town marked by vacant stores and empty streets. His commitment (and the resulting renaissance) was remarkable; today Greenville’s Main Street and West End are alive with restaurants, retail stores, parks and courtyards, a gleaming fine arts center, and high-end condominium developments and hotels, and the city is packed with people day and night.

Max Heller was a Jew who in 1938 escaped the growing Nazi oppression in Austria with the assistance of Mary Mills, a friend from Greenville who helped him arrange to immigrate to the States. Soon after his arrival he landed a job as a stock boy at Greenville’s Piedmont Shirt Company. There, he was introduced to Furman.

One day a colleague tracked him down and told him, “A judge wants to see you.” In recalling the incident, Heller said he didn’t like the sound of this summons and wondered, “Why would a judge want to see me?”

## Furman and Greenville are better places thanks to the vision and leadership of Max Heller.

The judge happened to be John L. Plyler, president of Furman from 1939 to 1964. Having heard Heller's story and knowing of the young man's work ethic, Plyler became his mentor and arranged for Heller to take English lessons. "It was most touching," Heller said, "and it's something you don't forget."

The Plyler-Heller connection marked the start of a lasting relationship between the Heller family and the university. Heller would go on to build a successful business, be elected to Greenville City Council, and eventually serve two terms as mayor. With his wife, Trude, who also immigrated from Austria, he maintained and expanded his ties with Furman, establishing scholarships and supporting many university programs. He and Trude received honorary degrees from the university, and Max would serve several terms on the board of trustees.

As Richard W. Riley '54, current chair of the Furman board and former governor of South Carolina, told the *Greenville Journal*, "Most people don't realize how much Max did for Furman."

The Furman cause with which the Hellers are most closely linked is Service Corps, the volunteer organization that is one of the university's best known and most active student groups. The Hellers were good friends with Betty Alverson, the group's founder, and during the early years they worked to establish many of the relationships Service Corps maintains to this day.

In 2002 Furman announced that a \$1.5 million endowment, provided by family and friends of the Hellers, would ensure the future operation and growth of the organization — and that it would be known from that time as the Max and Trude Heller Service Corps. At the announcement, civic leader Minor Mickel Shaw said the Hellers deserved the recognition because "they have inspired generations of Greenville citizens with the story of their lives and the way they live."

Max was often heard to say, "I believe in miracles, I just don't depend on them." But at the Heller Service Corps announcement, he recounted

how his own miracle — his chance meeting with his "angel," Mary Mills, at a dance in Austria — led to his escape from Nazi oppression. It also, he said, helped shape his philosophy of "sharing oneself with others."

"All of us search for a way to understand what our role in life is," he said that day. "How do we serve? And how do we serve God? In my opinion, the best way is to serve his children. And what you in Service Corps do — you're doing God's work. You have made people better, and you have become better people while learning what life is all about."

A few days after Heller's death, former Service Corps leaders Andrew Barnhill '10 and Conor Dugan '09 wrote an editorial for *The Greenville News* extolling Heller's contributions and impact. They concluded with these words:

"As we move into the second decade of the 21st century, we are reminded of the overwhelming needs of our community. We are reminded of the people with disabilities seeking opportunities to exercise their own agency in our places of work and play. We are reminded of the children, those without mentors and guardians teaching them to read and helping them navigate the challenges of adolescence.

"And we are reminded of the projects not yet born, seeking a Furman student or Greenville resident to bring them to life. But most of all, we are reminded of Max Heller — his propensity for action, and his legacy of service. As he reminded us, living is more than just existing. Living is giving."

Max Heller died at the age of 92. "Popi Max" is survived by his wife; daughters Francie Heller (a member of the Furman board) and Susan Heller Moses, and son Steven Heller and wife Margaret; 10 grandchildren; and 15 great-grandchildren.

Memorials: Max and Trude Heller Scholarship Fund or Max and Trude Heller Service Corps, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Hwy., Greenville 29613, or the Max and Trude Heller Education Fund at Congregation Beth Israel, 425 Summit Dr., Greenville 29609. |F|

— JIM STEWART