

The Clarence and Ruth Erlandson Memorial Scholarship

"With education, anything is possible if you have desire and are willing to work hard."

—Clarence A. Erlandson—

For Clarence Erlandson, former superintendent of Devils Lake Public Schools, this statement was a credo which he often shared with students he was counseling. He would encourage them to never give up their dreams, to sacrifice and work hard, and most of all, to continue their education ... Then he'd help them find a job to make it possible.

For a man who is remembered for his prudent financial management and institutional vision, this was a different kind of formula. It was this formula, however, that generated his success in life. He believed that if HE could acquire an education in spite of all obstacles, anyone could. From his early years, it became his resolve to help others wake up to their potential, follow their dreams, and make something of themselves through education.

Clarence Alvin Erlandson, born December 30, 1906, was one of ten children born to Norwegian immigrants Evan and Carolyn Erlandson who homesteaded near Aneta, North Dakota. His lilting brogue revealed that Norwegian had been his first language, until he went to school and learned English. As the fifth child and second-oldest son, he was expected to finish eighth grade and then fulfill his duty, working on the farm and helping his father until he married and got his own farm. These expectations weighed even more heavily when his mother died in childbirth. Clarence was just eleven.

But, Clarence had a dream. He loved learning and wanted to get his high school diploma so he could go on to college. He persuaded his father to allow him to work on the farm all summer, help bring in the harvest in the fall, and start school late. What an inspiration he was to his siblings as he rode off in the morning on a horse, the first of his family to attend high school in Klotten several miles away.

Not having money was never an excuse for Clarence. He always found a job so he could pursue his education. To pay for high school supplies and expenses, he worked for a

bachelor farmer in Aneta. This kindly man admired his determination and loaned Clarence some money to attend Mayville State Teachers College. To pay for his room and board, Clarence got up at four-thirty in the morning to clean in a restaurant before classes. During the fall, he translated his athleticism to the college football team for which he

received a scholarship. So willing was he to go beyond his comfort zone that he had to be restrained from going back into a game after he broke a bone in his leg.

After graduating from Mayville with an associate degree, Clarence began teaching in a one-room schoolhouse near Aneta and helping his father on the farm in the summers. When Clarence met the beautiful Ruth Cardin of Cooperstown, North Dakota, times were rough, but his love for her became his fuel to work even harder. This quiet man once confessed to Ruth that he loved her so much that he could shout it to the rooftops. They married and began their family as Clarence became superintendent, principal, teacher, coach, and janitor in a consolidated school in Peltó, North Dakota.

As he moved his young family to Dahlen and then to McVillie as superintendent, he continued to wear many hats, coaching basketball and football teams and directing school plays. During summers he pursued his education in stages. In 1941, he earned his bachelor's degree from Mayville State Teachers College. His family, which now included three children—Michael, Marilyn, and Linda—camped in a trailer park at Mayville while he went to school. Even as his children were preparing for college themselves, Clarence earned his master's degree from the University of North Dakota. As they were beginning their careers as dentist and teachers, he continued with post-graduate work at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, and at the University of Oregon completing all but the dissertation for his Ph.D.

Although Clarence believed deeply in teaching as the most important and most rewarding of professions, education



was one of the poorest paying. This didn't stop Clarence. He always found a way to make some money in a little business on the side. He was an entrepreneur and understood multiple streams of income long before they were popular. Eventually, his management and entrepreneurial activities were so successful that he was given an opportunity at a partnership in the Ford garage in McVie. He did this for several years and was able to provide for his family handsomely. But every time he heard the school bell ring, it bothered him. He wasn't in the place he wanted to be. He missed the young people and the opportunity to make a difference in their lives. He left the business world and went back to education with renewed determination to find a way to bring his talents all together.

Perhaps the only thing Clarence loved as much as education was fishing. One can only imagine that in hours of quiet solitude he must have contemplated the old adage, *"Give a man a fish, and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and feed him for a lifetime."* For Clarence, it didn't stop there. He wanted to make sure that young people could 'get the fish into the net and into the pan,' just as he had. For him, the aim of education was knowledge, not merely of facts but of values.

A leader is one who sees possibilities that others have not yet brought into focus. All of Clarence's experiences prepared him well for his future role as an administrator of then Lake Region Junior College, as he worked with the community to articulate a vision for a new campus for the struggling institution. After being principal in Rugby and superintendent in Columbus, North Dakota, Clarence brought his family and youngest child Kathy to Devils Lake when he was hired as junior high principal in 1953. When Clarence became superintendent of Devils Lake Public Schools in July of 1959, he also assumed the role of chief administrator for Lake Region Junior College.

The college was in financial trouble, and the Devils Lake School Board was pondering its fate because the spiraling costs of education could not be met with student tuition alone. The college could have folded, but Clarence had faith in the future of the struggling college and believed in its importance to the community. He had taught at the college when he was junior high principal, and it was located in the Pershing Building wing of the high school. He saw the college's potential for growth and excellence before it had any prestige. He knew it could be great; it would allow every youth in the area who wanted to go on to post-secondary school the opportunity to do so right in their own back yard.

Clarence worked with other advocates from the community and spurred a drive to make the college an area institution rather than a purely local one. Under his guidance, the Community College Foundation was formed to assist in boosting enrollment so the college could qualify for state aid. This was the turning point in the college's financial status. They raised \$3,300 in scholarship funds, and enrollment went from thirty-four in 1959 to 107 in 1960. The sixties was a time of explosive growth for the college, with enrollment increasing from thirty-four in 1959 to more than six hundred

in 1970. During this time, land was acquired for the present site of the college, and two major building phases were completed—the 1.3-million-dollar main campus facility and the 500,000-dollar vocational building, which was completed in 1967 and fittingly named the Erlandson Building. Clarence retired from Devils Lake Public Schools in 1970.

Clarence was active at St. Olaf Lutheran Church and on various boards and clubs—as chairman of the March of Dimes and United Fund and Exalted Ruler of the Devils Lake Elks Lodge, among others. He was a leader in chapters of state and national education organizations and following his retirement served for a year in the North Dakota State Department of Public Instruction in Bismarck as coordinator of Federal Title 1 funding for elementary schools. Personally, he was a quiet man who had a twinkle in his eye when he told a joke. He was at his liveliest when he was singing Norwegian songs to his grandchildren as he bounced them on his knee. All of his professional accomplishments were motivated by the fact that he was a devoted husband and family man. He anticipated his retirement with great enthusiasm. He had bought land and was preparing to build a house when he died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-six after just one year of retirement.

For Ruth, this shocking loss demanded that she create a new life for herself, one for which she was not prepared. Despite the fact that she had attended Mayville State Teachers College and had been a substitute teacher prior to marriage, she had dedicated her talents to being Clarence's partner and supporter, making a home, and raising their family. She was his helpmate in everything they did, and his accomplishments were hers. Her strong faith in God was her bulwark as she became a woman of courage and forged a new way of living.

If Clarence could stretch a dollar in the professional environment, Ruth could at home. She worked hard. She sewed hers and her children's clothes, made the best home-baked bread and cinnamon rolls, and was tireless in keeping her home. She painted walls and later some wonderful canvases in art class, sanded floors, and hung wallpaper. But she always found enough time to work in the community, serving on the Women's Club and at St. Olaf Church where she was on dozens of committees. She always had a kind word and thoughtful action for others, which is why she had so many wonderful friendships. Grandma Ruthie, as she was known to her nine grandchildren and sixteen great grandchildren, had been full of spunk and fun and determination. Ruth died June 28, 2002, at the age of eighty-nine.

Both Clarence and Ruth were grateful for all the gifts they were given through their hard work, prayers, and determination. Clarence would have been very proud that Ruth established an endowment through the Community College Foundation to benefit the future of talented students who will be able to pursue their education at Lake Region State College. He would be even more thrilled that this scholarship was one of so many given by community supporters who believe in and support the institution he loved so much. ■