

Izzy and Gwenn LaFleur Scholarship



As a group, North Dakotans tend to be a bit “tight-lipped” when it comes to passing out compliments and kudos. We admire others, but finding just the right words to tell them is often a tall order ... too tall! William (Bill) Wakefield found an innovative solution.

Growing up as a backdoor neighbor to Izzy and Gwenn LaFleur, Bill developed an admiration for the “only other guy in town” who got up as early as the Wakefield family of pilots. Besides sharing the sunrises, the Wakefield and LaFleur families shared a work ethic that remains a guiding principle for Bill today. Bill Wakefield established this scholarship and asked that it be named for Izzy and Gwenn LaFleur. The LaFleurs were surprised and honored by this request. Happily, they accepted.

Izzy’s legendary work ethic seems to be a family tradition. His father, Izadore

LaFleur, Sr., was the oldest child of a large family trying to eke out a living on a small farm north of Montreal. He left home early, when it became apparent there just wasn't room for everyone, and took a job with the Hudson Bay Company driving horses and cooking in lumber camps. Eventually, he arrived in Minot where he met and married Izzy's mother, Loretta Huff. She was the daughter of an electrician, and soon her new husband became her father's apprentice. But, the newly married couple wanted to make it on their own and moved to Williston where they opened the LaFleur Music Company. *"The advent of the jukebox provided a way for Dad to combine his interests in music and electricity,"* explained Izzy. The piano store became the entrepreneurial base for an amusement business which grew to include a territory that stretched from Williston to Devils Lake.

In 1938, when Izzy was a sophomore in high school, the family moved to Devils Lake, leaving a partner to serve the Williston end of the territory. Izzy's plan to take on a larger role in the family business after graduating from high school was put on hold by World War II. After basic training, Izzy was one of one hundred recruits sent for special training at the British Radar School in Ontario, Canada. He was then selected to be one of twenty to be sent for further training in the American Air Force Weather Service. Before being sent overseas, the trainees were to practice their new skills by setting up weather stations in the United States.

Izzy was sent to Pittsburgh, and he was introduced to a team member's cousin, Gwenn Yeagle. Their fate was sealed! Izzy spent much of the war managing weather stations, dodging

Japanese bullets on a Pacific island and making plans for life with Gwenn after the war. In 1946, they married and moved to Devils Lake on the "five-year plan"—if she didn't like it, they would find another place to live in five years.

Fifty-plus years later, they are still here, and so is the business, I. F. LaFleur and Son, Inc., which is now operated by their two sons. The LaFleur business specializes in coin-operated amusement machines, including video games, jukeboxes, pool, and darts.

Izzy and Gwenn have each left very positive marks on this community. They have raised three children and can now boast about the accomplishments of ten grandchildren, as well. They have been involved in many community activities, especially those which benefit children—theirs and others.

Gwenn, a tiny bundle of energy, is renowned as a crafter extraordinaire. *"She can fix your knitting over the phone,"* Izzy explained proudly. For his part, Izzy has been a leader in many community organizations—Rotary, the Elks, and the Shriners to name a few. One of the biggest projects he tackled on behalf of the community was the seven-year fund-raising effort to build the Burdick Arena. Izzy's dogged determination and "patented" persuasive strategies helped to see the project to a successful end.

From a five-year trial to a lifetime commitment, Izzy and Gwenn LaFleur have become deeply rooted in the Lake Region and committed to all that makes this community a great place to live and grow. They are grateful to Bill Wakefield for his unusual tribute and proud of the recognition and support that this scholarship provides for students attending Lake Region State College. ♦