
PROLOGUE

The Private Boyd Gunning Was Friend, Mentor, Godfather

Sooner or later, we all reach the age when we start losing our heroes. It's a painful experience, but one which carries with it moments of fond reflection. Those moments have come with some regularity in the weeks since the death, at age 77, of R. Boyd Gunning.

Boyd Gunning, the public figure, has been praised for his career accomplishments, for taking a University of Oklahoma Foundation that was little more than a name on a trust agreement and in 30 years building it into a major source of funding for the institution; for establishing the principle of private support for public higher



Boyd and Eleonore Gunning
on his retirement in 1978.

education in Oklahoma; for building a network of Sooner alumni support throughout the country; for transforming the Sarkeys Foundation from a modest to a significant private philanthropic organization; for leadership in the Episcopal Church, Rotary International and the board of Norman Regional Hospital. This is the stuff of which eulogies are made—but this is not the Boyd Gunning most of us remember best.

Those of us who grew up with Boyd as our mentor remember a deceptively low-key fellow, soft spoken, patient, gentlemanly, with a nice smile and a good sense of humor—and beneath it all a strong will and agile mind. Boyd always had a deal brewing. He could find a way around most obstacles, and if you were willing to listen, he would tell you how he did it. He loved to play the teacher, and those fortunate enough to merit his attention had a friend for life.

Boyd had his own way of doing things, and what worked for him is not to be found in any book on the subject. He wrote the rules for the evolution of foundations as he went along, much as he put his own stamp on OU alumni relations when he later acquired that responsibility. Boyd's business philosophy was based on good will, building it and keeping it. He never said "no," he always said "yes—but . . ." And it took a while to realize that he had turned you down.

He loved to organize, to set the stage, to bring people together, but contrary to popular opinion, he really did not like to ask people for money. Once he had cleared that hurdle, however, he knew exactly how to make the most of the gift. The growth of the OU Foundation from zilch to \$17 million at his retirement in 1978 was his proudest professional accomplishment.

Although not a journalist by trade, he wrote very well. He liked to see "executive editor" after his name on the masthead of the old *Sooner Magazine*, then the official alumni publication. But he gave his editors free-rein and backed them to the hilt. His monthly column, "Sooner Scene," was always late—and yet it was one of his favorite tasks; he just could not be hurried.

Maddening at times? You bet. When you became part of Boyd's "family," you took Boyd as your godfather for life. He wanted everyone to be happy, to share all the things in life that brought him pleasure. He'd order his favorite dishes for you in restaurants; he'd plan trips for you to his favorite spots; he'd make sure you were up-to-date with his favorite books; he'd meddle in your love life. But the most irritating thing about working for Boyd was that he was usually right.

When Boyd moved downtown 12 years ago to begin working his magic with the Sarkeys Foundation, he kept all his personal associations intact. He was always available with calm, studied counsel when called upon, which was often. His wealth of memories was invaluable to the preparation of the University's 100th anniversary publication, *Centennial: A Portrait of the University of Oklahoma*. He recalled the past vividly and with fondness, but his fascination was with the future. He grew older but never old.

If Boyd's accomplishments and wisdom had died with him, there would truly be cause to mourn, but they are firmly entrenched throughout the University. The lessons he taught us are lasting. He would be gratified to know, for instance, that *Sooner Magazine* still operates with the Gunning touch. This column was at least a week late.

—CJB
