

# The Stephenson Standard

As longtime University of Oklahoma supporters, Charlie and Peggy Stephenson were not surprised, only curious, when OU President David Boren called them out of the blue last year and asked if they would like to take a look at a new project on the Health Sciences Center campus. The building on the corner of NE 10th and Stonewall was a just a shell, but during the walk-through Boren announced, "This is going to be our new cancer center."

"Charlie poked me in the ribs and said, 'Peggy, this is your cause. This building—it's your cause,'" Peggy remembers.

Anyone who is part of the OU community knows that the Stephensons are two of the University's most committed donors. The Stephenson Research and Technology Center and the Stephenson Life Sciences Research Center anchor the south research campus in Norman. The Charles and Peggy Stephenson Chair in Petroleum Engineering helps recruit and retain outstanding faculty. Charlie is a founder of Sarkeys Energy Center, serves on the Board of Visitors for the College of Engineering and the College of Earth and Energy, and is a trustee for the University of Oklahoma Foundation.

What is not public knowledge is that the Stephensons had taken a very personal look at cancer care when Peggy was diagnosed with breast cancer 15 years ago. Just as they have confronted every other obstacle throughout more than 50 years of marriage, they quietly battled the disease together, making trips to The Mayo Clinic until doctors pronounced the magic words, "cancer free."

Since that time Peggy has been active in Tulsa Project Woman, which offers free breast health education, diagnostic procedures and surgical services for women with no health insurance and limited financial resources. In addition, the couple serves on several boards in the Tulsa area including the Philbrook Art Museum, the Salvation Army, Boy Scouts of America and the Tulsa Historical Society.

As founders of Vintage Petroleum Inc., an international oil and gas exploration company, the Stephensons have the resources to give back to their community, their state, and their alma mater.

But this was not always the case.

Childhood sweethearts in the tiny southeastern Oklahoma town of Antlers, Charlie grew up working in the family grocery store with a strong work ethic and a desire for higher education. Peggy's first visit to the OU campus was to attend a football game with Charlie when he was a student in the late 1950s.

Although technically not a graduate, Peggy earned her honorary alumna status as a newlywed putting Charlie through school. She also learned a thing or two about football. On campus one day she saw a bulletin that Bud Wilkinson

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was teaching a class on "How to Watch Football" for women. "I signed up and away I went!" she recalls. To this day, those who watch a football game with the petite brunette will tell you her knowledge of the game rivals that of any coach in the Big 12.

After Charlie's graduation, the Stephensons began a nomadic life in the oil and gas industry, moving 20 times in as many years. "We went where the paychecks were," says Peggy.

In 1971, Charlie joined Andover Oil Company as vice president of operations, becoming president in 1974. He co-founded Vintage Petroleum in 1983 and served as president, chairman and CEO.

The Stephensons' most recent \$12 million gift to the Peggy and Charles

Stephenson Cancer Center provided \$5.5 million to complete construction of the seven-story facility, \$6 million to fund two endowed positions and \$500,000 to endow a Healing Garden. When the center held its dedication June 30, doctors and donors were joined by cancer survivors and their families, who had come to celebrate a comprehensive cancer facility within state lines.

"It was pretty moving," says Charlie, who lost both his parents to lung cancer and Peggy's mom to melanoma. "We've had our share of experiences with cancer.

"We were fortunate enough to be able to go to Mayo when Peggy needed treatment. To have even better facilities in Oklahoma City, and to be able to put the right research teams and doctors in place through these endowed faculty chairs, will allow us to have world-class cancer treatment facilities for the people of Oklahoma. They won't have to go out of state."

Jari Askins, associate provost for external relations at HSC, says being able to observe the Stephensons at the dedication was a wonderful experience.

"There are hardly two better words to describe the Stephensons than humble and gracious," says Askins. "They are not attention seekers, so getting to watch their delight as people walked through the building and realized what had come to Oklahoma in terms of cancer care made me smile."

Love for OU is something that runs deep in the Stephenson family. Son Steve attended OU as a petroleum engineering major, and daughter Cindy was a cheerleader during the Switzer era while earning her degree in petroleum land management. Today, the couple has six grandchildren, two of them currently at OU.

"It was through my University education that I was able to get a job and get into business, so giving back was a natural," says Charlie. "We have a broad giving base—the church, education, health, community, the arts. The University has meant a lot to me and Peggy, so it's easy to give back."

—Lynette Lobban