

Vollum Award for Lifetime Philanthropic Achievement: Jan and Steve Oliva



Steve and Jan Oliva

Nov 1, 2021

"To whom much is given, much will be expected."

Jan and Steve Oliva have taken that line of wisdom to heart.

"We are joyful givers. We've been successful, worked hard and enjoy giving from the fruits of our labor. It gives you purpose as you get older. You look outward, at other people," Jan said.

The couple, who have been married nearly 58 years, bought the Hi-School Pharmacy in 1967, growing it from a corner store in downtown

Vancouver to a 45-outlet chain. They sold some of the stores to Walgreens, but continue to operate Ace Hardware stores and pharmacies under various names in towns across Oregon and Washington.

Jan and Steve are full-time philanthropic leaders. The depth and breadth of nonprofits benefiting from their generosity of time, talent and treasure is inspiring and includes the arts, education, health care, social services and environmental causes – specifically, the Boys & Girls Clubs, Salvation Army, Open House Ministries, Vancouver Symphony, Literary Arts and many more.

They both have served on boards of the former Southwest Washington Medical Center, now PeaceHealth. As a couple they were honored with the First Citizen award in 2005 in recognition of their community contributions.



The Olivas' philosophy for giving is simple: "We receive more from giving; the joy comes back to the giver. We feel a profound sense of responsibility," Jan said.

If left to their own desires, the Olivas would much rather stand in the shadows than the spotlight. But they understand the necessity for giving major gifts publicly to motivate others.

“We think how can we enhance that gift, and we strategize, getting other people to match or stretch it out somehow,” Jan said.

Civic pride propels the Olivas. They believe in philanthropy that transforms a community and individuals. They are champions of Southwest Washington and put special emphasis on capital projects that contribute to the quality of life there.

“We make annual gifts to nonprofits like Friends of the Gorge, Meals on Wheels, Boys & Girls Clubs, Council for the Homeless, and the Clark County Parks Foundation, and then there’s major giving that changes as the needs of the community change,” Jan said. “So we focus on unmet needs, capital campaigns where nonprofits need our help to make it happen.”

Jan spearheaded the effort to pass a \$43 million bond measure to build and upgrade libraries, plus the Olivas generously gave an extra multimillion-dollar gift benefiting the downtown Vancouver library, along with support for the Vancouver Waterfront Park and Clark College Early Learning Center campaigns.

“We look at nonprofits and who they’re bringing to the project. What are the long-term chances of success? You can find money by collaborating with government and other nonprofits,” Jan said.

The flip side of working on capital projects is helping people one-on-one.

In 2000, Jan and five others founded the Vancouver Women’s Foundation, pooling their money and giving it to women for needs like a car and tire repairs to get to work. “You can change a person’s life with a small but vital gift, providing stability before they fall into a bottomless pit of poverty and lose their job, kids, house,” Jan said.

As longtime donors, the couple has seen exciting trends in philanthropy emerge. Currently, there is crisis giving. With hunger, COVID, fires and other disasters, people are responding. Another trend they see is an increase in giving locally; people want to see impacts at the local level. Social justice is accelerating donations to education and inequities of

service. And people are starting to give now, while they're living, rather than making bequests for after they die.

Steve cautions not to be disappointed when a nonprofit's leadership changes. "You must believe in the mission of the organization. You can't base your giving solely on the personality of its leadership," he said.

Steve and Jan Oliva have been longtime catalysts for positive change, permanently and immeasurably transforming Southwest Washington.