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Fred and Lena Meijer Tribute, delivered on May 15, 1997

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Fred and Lena met in 1941 when she was hired in the first Meijer store in Greenville. She was working at Meijer as a cashier when a hardware store offered her $2.00 a week more than Meijer was paying her. Fred went to his Dad and told him, and Hendrik said, “Go ahead and increase her wages.” Fred said, “Why pay more? We will have to increase the other cashiers’ wages too and that will cost us an additional $12.00 a week just to keep her, and she isn’t worth it.” Hendrik said “Go ahead anyway.” So when Fred first uttered, “Why pay more?” they did, and it was to keep Lena. And evidently Fred changed his mind about her value.

Those must have been the days when Fred was shy. It was three years after she began working at the Meijer store that a veteran cashier encouraged Lena to invite Fred to a square dance, and 53 years later they are still dancing together in a relationship characterized by love, respect, and kindness.

Most people think “retail giant” when the Meijer name is mentioned. That’s natural when you observe what they have built and own. After knowing Fred and Lena for more than 25 years and Hank and Deb, Doug and Star, and Mark and Mary Beth for a considerable time as well, I think family. I don’t hear Fred and Lena preaching family values. They are a family value. You aren’t with Fred very long before you know about his origins in Greenville and even about his free thinking Dutch ancestors. The energy and creativity for the business derived from the partnership between father, Hendrik, and son Fred. The business continues to be family, its beginnings recorded in a book the grandson, Hank, wrote about his grandfather.
I remember walking into Fred’s office 25 years ago to ask him for a contribution. First we talked politics, then economics; after 30 minutes we were into religion and that continued for some time. I was really enjoying the conversation and I think he was too. I had to remind myself that this man is a successful businessman and I was there to ask for money, but then we began talking about art. Finally, finally the conversation turned to business and the creative ideas and experiences that were building the Meijer family enterprise. That led to talk about the enterprise I represented and gave me the opportunity to pop the question. I think he gave me $500.00. He thought that was a sizable gift and I was happy. Why pay more? But he and Lena did, and over the years they have, more and more and more until our west Michigan community is invested with so many good things Fred and Lena have given and done. Art work, bicycle and hiking trails, public television and radio, recreation areas, civic buildings, education of children, youth, and adults, and now a university campus in Holland are bearers of the Meijer stamp of participation. Fred and Lena are givers.

Fred is also energy packaged. Whether its hiking the Milford Track with Bill Schroeder, skiing with Bill, Ken Bergsma, and Marv DeWinter, developing and refining the “one stop shopping philosophy,” traveling the world, or engagement in philanthropy, he sets his course and charges. Sometimes Lena sets the course, and I think that may be the case in their largest philanthropic venture - the Botanical Gardens that bears Fred’s name and gives us cause to be here tonight. What a jewel in the west Michigan crown it is. Fred and Lena have poured themselves and their treasure into the project. It gives them pleasure, I know, but imagine the pleasure it holds for generations to come. If there is anything to the doctrine of reincarnation,
Fred and Lena may someday come back as new and beautiful plants because of the beauty they have provided today.

Before I conclude these remarks, I must give honor to the business itself. After all, it is the economic engine that profoundly influences Fred and Lena’s lives and makes possible most of what they want to do. It is Meijer, Inc. that is one of the three or four most influential institutions shaping the destiny of west Michigan. It is the business that has the highest volume of sales of any west Michigan corporation. Many people participate in the building of Meijer. To know Harvey and Earl is to know that Fred can pick people, but one man had the vision and the drive. With 107 stores and 12 more moving toward opening, with tentacles spreading throughout the midwest, Meijer is one of the nation’s leading retailers. Anyone who can get tickets to the Masters Golf Tournament anytime he wants is one of the nation’s leading retailers. Though Fred isn’t much of a golfer and Lena can beat him, he can get the tickets.

In some ways, Fred appears an unlikely business tycoon. He is so friendly, he is so approachable. He is so interested in others; what they do, what they think. He has so many interests and spreads himself around, yet inside there lurks the single mindedness to build a large and complex company. Lena, too, appears an unlikely tycoon spouse. She is not haughty; in fact just the opposite. She is generous in spirit and kind to everyone. There is no hint of self importance that she might rightly claim as the power behind the power. These are the qualities that make it so easy for us to honor you both tonight, that make us feel good being here to salute you and tell you we admire you and love you.