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Memories of Fred Meijer
Millennium Park
September 6, 2012
By Arend D. Lubbers

Fred told us that his father was his best teacher. He was a great learner. He liked to tell that he persuaded his father to keep Lena on the store's payroll because she could get the work done at a lower cost. I am not convinced that was the only reason, but it must have convinced Henrick Meijer. High value at low cost did become Fred's mantra, and Lena has stayed a long time.

Fred parlayed the lessons learned from his father into one of the most successful retail operations in the country. Fred was verbal. He shared his experiences so we could relate to him and his company as it made remarkable progress over his adult years. He was smart. He knew what to do, who to hire, and who to promote. As the company grew he promoted Harvey and Earl; two of his brightest employees to manage, react, and advise. He created a brain trust with his energy as its source, and his brain actively engaged with the others. That created wealth which leads to our celebration tonight because Fred became a philanthropist. His enjoyment of people, his ability to relate, his innate goodness, and his belief in the pursuit of happiness for everyone made being a philanthropist natural for him.

He grew into philanthropy. In the early years all his thought and energy, his vision, were consumed in building the business. As he succeeded he attracted those who needed private assistance to reach community goals. I was one of them. I asked Fred for \$5,000 in 1970. He thought it was quite a substantial ask and so did I. He talked about many subjects not germane to the solicitation, as was his custom, and finally he agreed to my request. He really felt good about it and so did I.

As Fred and Lena's capacity to give increased, they gave. They initiated and they partnered in their philanthropy. This great Millennium Park, one of many community projects emerging from Peter

Secchia's vision, was one they helped come to fruition and continued to support. The trails they have prepared and contributed to West Michigan and the State, which shares tonight's spotlight, claimed Fred's special interest. They are a great and lasting gift.

Fred was always ready to listen to other philanthropists who had their sights on a better Grand Rapids and West Michigan, and they were attentive to him. As individual donors and partners with others, Fred and Lena are significant in the renaissance of our city and region in the later half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st.

We all know Fred the communicator, but we may forget that he listened and observed intelligently. Though he had strong opinions he liked to consider all his options. One day Fred accompanied me to Fremont to call on the president of Gerber. On our return he was eager to show me an acreage north off Alpine where he was planning to build a botanical garden that he said Lena insisted upon. When I saw it I thought it was too remote, and told him so. Others must have told him the same. Subsequently he worked his way to deciding on the present location of the Frederick Meijer Gardens; a wise decision. He listened and then made up his mind.

What Fred did through business acumen and philanthropy created jobs. He is a poster boy for both present presidential candidates. His belief in high value at the lowest possible cost works.

One day when we at Grand Valley had accumulated money to construct an academic building in Holland I decided to look at three parcels of vacant land on Waverly Road between Meijer's Thrifty Acres and Davenport University's center. None were on the market, but they were desirable to us. One was owned by Meijer's. As I was hiking over the land I looked toward Waverly Road and saw a Meijer truck pass by with a big sign painted on it. "Why Pay More." That gave me an idea. I made an appointment to see Fred. When I sat down with him I said, "Fred, I am here to practice what you preach." He looked at me quizzically. "I saw on your truck "Why Pay More," and I am here because of

that sign to ask you to give the land south of Thrifty Acres for an academic building. You can help me not pay more for our campus in Holland.” That brought a smile to his face, and he did contribute the land. He practiced what he preached, too.

Beautiful Millennium Park, the trails used by thousands, lovers of plants and flowers, artists and sculptors, heart patients, school children who need help, college and university students, thousands who are dependent on the service of not for profit organizations, are the beneficiaries in perpetuity of Fred Meijer. What a legacy for the boy from Greenville. Fred liked people. That is why it was easy to like him. He is among the nicest, smartest, most generous, shrewd people I have known.