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Remarks in Remembrance of Fred Meijer
Delivered at U Club Luncheon Given by Bob Burnham
By Arend D. Lubbers
December 17, 2013

Fred was a Pearl Harbor baby before Pearl Harbor. He was twenty-two when his birthday became the day that would live in infamy! He tried desperately to join the army, and was rejected five times because of a hernia. The war years must have been tough for Fred, but they were not wasted. The seeds of expansion for the Meijer Grocery enterprise were planted, and shortly after the war Fred and Lena were married. The stage was set for Fred to revolutionize retailing, and as the last half of the Twentieth Century unfolded, he became one of the two or three greatest retailers in his field; certainly in the opinion of many, the first in creative thinking.

Today memories are on my mind. We remember Fred in ways future generations will not. He will be written about and read, but our memories have a singular quality because we lived when he lived. He influenced our lives directly. We learned from him and he, I think, gained insight from some of us because he listened. He sought out opinions and thoughts from others. We have what those in the future cannot; a personal relationship.

Bob is right in asking us to remember a friend who did great things in business so he could then do great things for our community. We can take this occasion a step further. Several who have had the means and the inclination to make the place where we live a better place have in recent years preceded or joined Fred in the new dimension. Fred could see the point in expressing gratitude for living here at a time of enheartening community advancement. We all know whom we especially appreciate. Let's take this time to remember those who lived in our time, who did wondrous things for us and those around us. Most of us can begin with our parents.

Fred was once quoted as saying he could be happy living in a double wide mobile home. That was Fred, alright. The glitter of wealth was so far down the list of his priorities that I wonder if it ever surfaced. He would far rather have a work force positively engaged in the enterprise he created than live in a palatial residence. Sometimes dealing with accoutrements of wealth takes a lot of time. Fred was never distracted by wanting or dealing with them. No one with Fred's means usually lives as modestly as he did, nor would Fred advocate his ways as the only or even the best way. Yet, I don't know how you feel, but for me his life and Lena's placed the right perspective on the value of material blessings.

As we reminisce there are so many stores and characteristics from which to choose. My first encounter with Fred was the time I called on him to contribute to Grand Valley. I think it was for the campaign to build the Public Television Station; a station that now bears the Meijer name. Jerry Ford had secured a \$500,000 Federal grant, the legislature had agreed to support the first year's operations and \$500,000 more was needed. I was there to ask Fred for \$5,000, but he started a conversation that never permitted me to carry out my business. When it became obvious that he was ready to move on I blurted out "I came to ask you for \$5,000." He said he would think about it and our very pleasant half hour together ended. He did send the check for the amount asked. That was early in Fred's philanthropy, an aspect of his nature that grew and flourished just as the Meijer business grew and flourished.

As Grand Rapids is discovered by list makers, who include on their lists best this and best that, Fred's contributions were significant in making the city list-worthy. One of those contributions was the creation of the Frederick Meijer Gardens. The evolution of that project demonstrated three of Fred's exceptional qualities. First, it expanded his philanthropic tendencies leading eventually to the Meijer Heart Center and the Holton Lemmen Cancer Center. Second, it showed us his ability to lead people in bringing a complex project to fruition, just as he had been doing in business for half a century. Third, it revealed once again how his capacity to listen led to the improvement of what he set out to accomplish.

Fred collected Marshall Fredericks' sculptures, almost exclusively when he decided that his gardens should be a place for their display. He knew that advice and planning might be helpful as the project progressed so he invited Henry Matthews, then Director of the Muskegon Museum of Art and subsequently the Director of Art Collections at Grand Valley State University, to chair a committee to work with him on the sculpture aspect of the Gardens. The first task as Henry tells it was to expand Fred's understanding of good art. As always Fred entered into the task enthusiastically, flying hither and yon to see what his committee perceived as our best art. At one point he said to Henry, "Now I understand. If I don't like it, it is good." He never lacked humor or prescience.

One of Fred's most heralded gifts was the creation of Leonardo da Vinci's horse. For five centuries the world had admired it on paper. Proposed for an image of Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan to straddle, the Duke was forced out of office before the huge sculpture could be cast. A clay model was used for target practice by invading French troops. You can imagine Fred hearing a story like that and wanting finally to have that horse. A group in the East had made a profession of trying to build the horse but Fred seized the initiative and now we in Grand Rapids have the horse, as does Milan, and a

world class sculpture garden. Emerson said, “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.” So it is with the Frederick Meijer Gardens as it is with Meijer Incorporated.

We are drawn to Fred by his friendly manner and inclusive spirit. We are won over by Fred’s inclinations to listen and act on what he hears and what he knows. We are forever in his orbit because of our appreciation for his legacies that make a difference in our lives. Fred even used his idiosyncrasies to positive effect in accomplishing what he wanted. When I reflect on Fred’s life, he was mentored by a wise father, he unleashed his energy, intelligence, and creativity to build on his father’s foundations; one of America’s greatest chains of retail stores, and then he evolved primarily into a philanthropist because he was captivated by ideas that required giving for their implementation. I think of a quote of W. H. Auden, selected by Bill Smith and Larry ten Harmsel in their book, *Fred Meijer: Stories of His Life*. “Money is, in essence, only a technique for the extension of love in space and time.” I think that expresses Fred pretty well.

Since on this occasion I am the reminiscer, I chose the reminiscences. I hope as I spoke you recalled your favorite Fred stories. One aspect of Fred I particularly appreciated; he was an exceedingly well read businessman. Our discussion of ideas that books contain were extensive, and led me to find in him a kindred spirit. We can all reflect on what made him important to us.

Let’s look to Fred, for an upbeat conclusion to our thoughts about him. He tells us, “Have fun! Leadership isn’t always serious.”