PROLOGUE

Jim Harlow made a life’s work of stepping forward

E
eytime I read an obituary or attend a service commemorating a life well lived, I cannot help thinking, what a shame the departed is not here to read the testimonials, hear the eulogies. In the case of a prominent person—such as James G. Harlow Jr., long-time president, chairman and CEO of Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company, distinguished OU alumnus and, for more than a decade, chairman of the University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc.—tributes continue for sometime, pouring in from every group he ever served, every cause he ever espoused.

Only a few weeks passed between Jim’s diagnosis at age 62 and June 1, 1996, the day we lost him. But in that short time, everyone whose life he touched should have written him a letter or called him or stopped by to tell him of their high regard and affection for him. I know that many did.

For those who seized this opportunity to share their thoughts with Jim, his professional accomplishments probably were not foremost in their minds—although his position in the utility industry and the state business community was unassailable. Neither, I imagine, were they thinking of his yard-long list of offices held in civic, educational and cultural organizations—although they ran the gamut of worthwhile enterprises. And the honors he received—from OU’s Distinguished Service Citation to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame—were merely a public recognition of what we already knew: Jim Harlow was quite a man.

The people in Jim’s life are most likely to remember shared experiences, his love for his family and genuine concern for his friends and colleagues, his good humor and generosity of spirit. He did not fill his last days with questions or regrets for things undone; he did not save it all for the end.

What set Jim apart in many minds was his willingness to step forward when his name was called, to recognize a need and fill it, quietly, competently, asking nothing in return. When the going got tough, when others might have taken a sabbatical from accountability, Jim’s uncommon sense of loyalty, duty and responsibility would not let him wait for a more convenient or less controversial time. Nowhere was this trait more evident than in his relationship with his alma mater.

He loved the University of Oklahoma—and not your conventional memories-of-carefree-college-days kind of love. OU was home to Jim, the place where the best things in his life began.

Born in Oklahoma City, he moved as a teenager to Norman where he met Jane Bienfang, and his fate was sealed.

Jim and Jane were faculty brats. James Sr. taught physics and developed the first course in what would become OU’s renowned program in the history of science. He then became dean of the College of Education and later president of the University of West Virginia. Jane’s father was the popular, nattily attired professor Ralph Bienfang, role model for generations of young pharmacy students.

The Harlows began their 39-year marriage in 1957, shortly after receiving their OU degrees. Jim spent two years in the Navy, but the young engineer returned home to a job with OG&E, coming up through the ranks, from reading meters to heading the company. As CEO, Jim guided this major utility from the booming ’70s and early ’80s, through the economic bust following the fall of Penn Square Bank, to the prosperity of the ’90s.

In 1986, with the demands of his day job at their height, Jim’s other love intruded. An active trustee since 1973, as well as a personal and corporate donor, he saw the University of Oklahoma Foundation as the arena where his leadership abilities could best serve the institution—but penciled in for later in his career. Then Foundation chairman Jack Maurer died after only a few months in the position. Jim was the obvious choice to succeed; he knew it and stepped up.

The OU Foundation faced challenges in the late ’80s. When the president of one of the state’s smaller institutions went to prison for diverting funds from its foundation, all state educational foundations had to reaffirm their credibility with the legislature and the press. Jim Harlow stood his ground, successfully defending the University and its relationship with its Foundation. The oldest and largest of such state higher education organizations, the OU Foundation emerged with its reputation enhanced by the scrutiny it had undergone.

Private support was hard to come by when Jim became chairman, but he immediately took a leadership position with the $150 million Centennial Campaign, which was oversubscribed. In 1995 he accepted the chairmanship of President David Boren’s five-year $200 million Reach for Excellence Campaign. Fittingly, the $500,000 in memorial donations to the James G. Harlow Jr. Chair in Business Ethics and Service put that drive over the half-way mark in just 10 months.

While Jim never sought recognition or thanks or personal favors, he did make an occasional suggestion that was admittedly self-serving. He used to mention, rather plaintively, that Sooner Magazine might be printed in larger type “for the bifocal crowd.” In tribute, this column was intended to comply—but, Jim, there was just too much to say.

-CJB