Lived, Learned, Gave

Remembering Katherine Harper’s Charity, Drive & Legacy

On Saturday, May 3, 2014, Katherine Harper, who with husband Ron built their namesake Harper Corporation of America, passed away. She was 80. The entire flexographic printing, packaging and converting community mourns the loss of Katherine, who was a devout supporter of the industry and numerous charitable and philanthropic endeavors.

Katherine was born on Aug. 23, 1933 in Charlotte, NC to parents James and Margaret Hodges. Her childhood years were spent there, often frequenting her father’s restaurant, Jim’s Grill.

In 1951, she graduated from O’Donoghue Catholic High School. That same year, she met Ron in Wilmington, NC and would go on to raise a family of five children and see grandchildren and great grandchildren through their decades of marriage.

In 1971, Ron and Katherine founded their manufacturing company Harper Corporation of America and installed facilities in Charlotte and DePere, WI. Katherine served as president of Harper’s licensee in Bangkok, Thailand named Harper/Asia Pacific until 2006, when she retired after 36 years at the company’s helm.

Katherine details the company’s early years in her book, *The Longer I Live, The More I Learn*. She kept her day job at Wachovia Bank while Ron worked out of the back of their home, “selling unengraved printing press rollers to customers he had been dealing with in his former jobs, taking orders and ordering the production of rollers from machine shops.” Her hard work was exemplified in the innovations she pushed forward and masterminded, her ability to solve problems and her steadfast resolve working with others.

Katherine was no stranger to leadership roles in organizations, serving on and leading a number of committees and boards throughout the flexographic world. She served as chair of FTA’s Annual Forum in 1995 in Orlando, FL.

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My thoughts and prayers go out to the Harper family. Katherine was truly the most generous person, along with Ron. She will truly be missed by everybody who knew her.”

— Leigh Ayers, Former Flexo in High School Program Instructor, South Mecklenburg High School, Charlotte, NC
becoming the first woman to do so; many of her accomplish- ments came with the distinction of being the first woman. In 1999, FTA bestowed her with its President’s Award and that same year, the Business Journal honored her as its Business Woman of The Year.

In 2007, FTA was in the midst of preparing its Technical Education Services Team (TEST) program. Its goal was to author, update and host state of the art curriculums to meet the needs of an ever changing industry. When Katherine and Ron were presented with this aim and a sound business plan, they decided to give a $1 million gift to TEST to help make the program’s vision a reality.

“We believe this will prove to be one of the most important projects ever undertaken by the organization and that it will make a sig- nificant positive difference in the success and lives of both current and future flexographers,” the Harpers wrote in FLEXO’s October 2007 issue. “We believe that the potential for rapid dissemination of information, as envisioned in the TEST business plan, can make an unbelievable difference in the future global quality and growth of the flexographic process.”

Citing specific tenets of the TEST plan such as its standardized curriculum, accreditation program for instructors and teachers and the FFTA Virtual Print Campus (now named the TEST Virtual Campus), Katherine and Ron shared FTA’s vision of bringing relevant, constantly updated education services to current and potential future flexographers. Seven years later, TEST’s successes can be directly tied to that leap of faith Katherine and Ron took.

TEST is just one of many examples of their desire to inspire future generations to pursue a path in the world of flexography. The Harper name is well known in the industry, not only because of Harper Corporation of America’s role in its evolution but also because of these charitable endeavors. They are many and include:

- The Ron And Katherine Harper Flexo Lab at Chicago’s DiTollo Flexographic Institute
- The Harper Endowment, at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA
- The Harper Scholarship Fund and Harper Flexo Technology Wing, at Fox Valley Technical College, Appleton, WI
- The Ron And Katherine Harper Scholarship Fund and Harper Center of Graphics Technology, at Dunwoody College of Technology, Minneapolis, MN
- The Katherine Harper Teacher’s Education Fund, from the Phoenix Challenge Foundation

“Katherine left a legacy in the flexographic industry,” said Harper Corporation of America’s Alex James. “Her gener- osity, along with Ron’s, has touched many lives and through their varied contributions to numerous educational institutions, she will continue to have a positive impact on edu- cation of future flexograp- hers.”

FTA President Mark Cisternino, who had the chance to work with Katherine on a number of occasions throughout his career, recalls her dynamic, strong willed personality in a time when there weren’t many females in leadership positions.

“You’d think that this might be intimidating. Quite to the contrary, though—Katherine’s work routinely began when someone (usually a man) told her ‘It can’t be done.’ Her many successes in life were a direct result of this inability to sit idly by and let others call the shots,” Cisternino says. “Katherine and Ron were instrumental in establish- ing so many educational initiatives around the globe. Their significant positive impact on students of all ages cannot be overstated. I have always been honored to know that Mr. and Mrs. Harper chose to funnel their financial resources, time and talent through FTA and, more importantly, that they considered me their friend.”

“We believe that the key to any successful endeavor—and a happy life—is education,” the Harpers said of FTA. “That is why we choose to support education in an industry that has been so good to us and to an association that has been one of the primary resources for our education during the past 54 years.”

“I am fortunate to have known and worked for Katherine. I know she and Ron are looking out over their family with a great sense of love and peace based on a job well done!”

– Paul Sharkey, President/CEO, FLXON, Inc.

All photos courtesy of Harper Corporation of America