

We Leave with Mixed Emotions - Dwight and Phyllis Corley returning to Metroplex

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Saturday, 23 August 2014 10:53

Eleven years ago, Dwight Corley walked into the Hopkins County Chamber of Commerce office looking for an opportunity to volunteer. It was 2003. Corley and his wife, Phyllis, had retired to Sulphur Springs earlier that year, hoping to spend their time fishing Lake Fork.



As he tells it, “I was down at the chamber of commerce within a few months. Even though I tried, you just can’t go fishing on Lake Fork every day. I told the lady there I wanted to become involved in the community because, at that point, all I was doing was taking. I wanted to give something back.”

The lady there said, “At this moment, the board of directors of the symphony league is meeting in our conference room. Would you like to step in there and say, ‘Hello’?”

And, the rest, as we say, is history. Corley served on the board from 2003 until 2008, when he was named president, a position he held until the end of 2013.

“Things happened,” Corley admits. “In a hurry.”

Corley came to the symphony board with an impressive resume.

For 15 years, he was manager of human resources for Central and South West electric power companies, an electric utility holding company in Dallas, retiring in 1999.

He earned the distinction of being a Senior Professional in Human Resource, a “professionally relevant certification that requires significant experience, education and a mastering of complex examination.”

Corley says the SPHR initials were an “absolute requirement for my position.”

“I’ve never thrown around the initials, but I am quietly proud that I achieved them,” he confessed.

Asked to expound on his previous job, Corley had a quick answer.

“I hired a lot of people,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes. “I fired a lot of people. I downsized and right-sized and reemployed a lot of people. The toughest is not firing people. They’ve earned it. Hiring people was easy, too. You get to pick the cream of the crop. The hardest part was the redeployment. To pull someone out of their comfort zone was hard.”

Before joining the utility holding company, Corley was the human resources manager and regional operation manager at a computer company headquartered in Washington, D.C.

“At that time, we were providing data services for the Environmental Protection Agency across the United States,” he explained.

Before that, he was with a temporary personnel service that specialized in computers.

He also worked at the Dallas Chamber of Commerce as the membership manager in 1968 and 1969.

Corley started working with computers in 1968.

“I was one of the first people to get involved in the digitalization of all the chamber of

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commerce records,” he said. “I learned how to spell ‘computer.’”

Again, Corley’s timing was perfect.

“If I had been 10 or 15 years later, I would be computer adverse today,” he admitted. “As it is, I’m the first to try to bend something.”



Corley used his considerable computer knowledge to update the symphony league’s use of technology.

He developed the league’s website, created a spreadsheet of contributors’ information, created a spreadsheet to keep track of the league’s annual auction and introduced a process for annual billing statements.

In addition to those milestones, Corley was responsible for creating the Committee of 1,000 – individuals who contribute at least \$1K in cash or in-kind contributions; for getting the league on Facebook; and for overseeing the purchase of new violins, cellos and violas for SSISD’s Strings Program.

Exposing children to the arts is a passion for Corley.

“We expanded the annual children’s concert to include third, fourth and fifth graders from across the county and also invited students from private schools and home schooled students,” he noted. “The symphony is now performing for about 1,400 students each spring.”

The children’s concert is one of two major events the league hosts every year. For 23 years, they have hosted an annual Independence Day Celebration on the square in Sulphur Springs.

Hosting means the league is responsible for paying a director, professional musicians and making sure everything runs smoothly.

“We worked hard,” he said. “We got a lot done, thanks to the board members.”

To fund the events, the league holds a live auction.

“We were the premiere aired auction activity in Northeast Texas,” he said. “Everybody else has jumped on the auction wagon.”

Corley used his SPHR experience to recruit new members.

“I’m honest with them and manage their expectations,” he said. “They know what they’re getting into. When I talked to people and told them what we can do for the community and our students, everyone said, ‘I want to be part of that.’”



Corley was also instrumental in a joint effort to bring The Dallas Opera’s touring company to the middle school, a huge accomplishment considering it was the first time TDO2go, the educational arm of the company, had ventured outside the metroplex. Corley put together a lunch for the singers and staff after the performances in 2013 and 2014.

“If we can expose our kids to classical music, it might give them a leg up,” he noted.

His dedication is appreciated.

“It was a 50 hour a week job for him for five years,” says Kayla Price, current league president. “Dwight made such an impact on our community.”

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Corley wasn't quite as successful when it came to courting Phyllis, his wife of 54 years. "It took a little coercing," he admitted. "She was literally the girl next door, my next door neighbor in Clinton, Oklahoma."

In the end, it was a matter of transportation that brought the two together.

"Phyllis didn't have a car," he said with a chuckle. "She was without a ride on football night, so I said, 'Well, I happen to own a car. Why don't we just go to the football game?'"

She agreed and he thought had hit the jackpot. But Phyllis had other plans.

"She had me go by three girlfriends' houses," he said. "I took four women to the football game."

Instead of being thrilled, Corley admits to being disappointed. But he did not give up.

"I tried again," he explained. "And we decided to be friends."

Phyllis worked as vice president of professional and executive lending at Chase Bank/Dallas, retiring in 1995.

After retirement, the couple spent five years living in a motor home, touring much of the country and a lot of Canada.

"We had a blast," Corley confessed. "We would do it again if Phyllis trusted me not to have a heart attack in Saskatchewan."

The couple learned a lot about the essentials of life during their motor home years.

"Phyllis and I have always been kind of conscious that we have a lot of stuff," he confessed. "I'm going to be 80 this year, and we did not want to leave [the job of settling our estate] to our children. We just refused to do it."

So, they made an agreement that Phyllis could not purchase anything during their travels without getting rid of something else first.

"It worked out perfectly," he beamed. "We became very frugal with our acquisitions while we lived in that concentrated space."

Upon moving to Sulphur Springs, Phyllis became active in Beta Sigma Phi and PEO.

The couple has two children – David, who lives with his wife and three-year-old son in Buda, near Austin, and a daughter, Marcy, who lives in Frisco with her husband and two sons, ages 15 and 12.

Earlier this year, the Corleys made the difficult decision to sell their house and boat, downsize and move to a retirement complex "four minutes" away from their daughter.

They are going to live in a one bedroom apartment and let the paid staff take care of things.

"We've made a pledge to ourselves that we're not going to sign up for something that takes us away every Tuesday and Thursday to go manage something," he said with a laugh. "The facility has a full time activities director who takes care of things for us."

He said the couple is leaving with "mixed emotions. We are sad and excited."

When asked what they were going to miss most, Corley got uncharacteristically quiet.



"Just the circle of friends," he said softly. "We thought we would come over here and fish three or four years and meet the waitress at the hamburger shop at the lake. But that's not the way it happened. We found new people every day. I've met a lot of people in my walk. What a nice group."

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He will miss his neighbors who worked on his car before a road trip to Colorado and those who mowed his lawn while he and Phyllis were gone.

Although the community will feel their loss, it's comforting to know Dwight and Phyllis are not closing the door on this chapter of their lives.

He says the couple will just be a phone call or an email away.

"I've told the board if there are problems or questions that come up, they can get in touch," he said. "I might even wander back for trivia night at Muddy Jakes."

Godspeed. You have made a difference.