

The University of Texas of The Permian Basin



Investing in a Sure Thing

Giving Back in Perpetuity

After living for more than 30 years in the oil-rich, west Texas town of Odessa, William (Bill) and Ordelle Watts have witnessed, firsthand, how the heightened expectations of an oil boom can quickly come crashing down. That's why they decided to invest in something that has far more staying power in the region: The University of Texas of the Permian Basin (UTPB). In June 2014, the couple donated \$100,000 to establish the William and Ordelle Watts Professorship in Engineering.

"We are extraordinarily proud of what UTPB has achieved," says Bill. What began as a two-year, upper-level university on a square patch of land has grown into an institution that no one from those early years would recognize. Bill, who joined the UTPB staff in 1976 as a business officer, continues to marvel at UTPB's expansion and progress.

Along with new facilities such as the Wagner Noël Performing Arts Center, the university's academic offerings have recently gained recognition, including notable rankings in national magazines. The engineering program, which took a hit during a previous oil bust, is now on the rebound and has been endorsed by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET).

Establishing an endowed professorship will strengthen efforts to continue building that engineering program. Although Bill and Ordelle were more inclined to fund scholarships, as they've done in the past, the couple's respect for UTPB President David Watts (no relation) encouraged them to consider a different strategy. "We cornered President Watts in the hall and asked what the university needed most," says Bill. "He pondered for about 10 seconds and then told us he needed to recruit and retain the very best engineering faculty and that a professorship would help a lot."

Considering the needs of UTPB comes naturally to the Watts, who both enjoyed employment at the university. Ordelle, who moved to Odessa in 1981 to merge her life with Bill's after many years apart, joined the UTPB staff in 1995 as a departmental secretary. She found that her previous experience as a 4th-grade teacher had given her skills that would prove most useful in working with faculty members.



Bill and Ordelle Watts are a long way from their alma mater and meeting place: Western Illinois University. They would eventually reconnect in Odessa and each would bring children to their union. Those nine offspring are spread out across the continent, from Washington State to Illinois and other places in between, so "we could live any number of places," especially in order to be closer to those children, says Bill.

Still, the couple is staying put. "Our church and our association with UTPB is what keep us here," says Ordelle. "A lot of our life is in that school."

"The word was that William could go, but that Ordelle was needed too much to be allowed to leave," recalls Bill, with a chuckle. He himself would return to UTPB post-retirement to serve as the interim dean of the business school. He now holds the title of Professor Emeritus.

"We're just two retired school teachers," says Bill.

"Neither of us ever earned more than \$50,000 in one year," adds Ordelle.

Together they have lived what they described as a "frugal" life. Still, Ordelle notes that the optional retirement plan that UTPB offered its employees "was particularly beneficial for us," and the couple's investment in stocks enabled them to do what they most wanted to do: Pay back.

"This area deserves a good university because of the contribution it makes to the region," says Bill.

"We don't give to UTPB because it's struggling," Ordelle adds, noting that, in fact, the university is well-supported. "We give to UTPB because it's a success." And the Watts, working as one, plan to keep it that way.

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UTPB President David Watts (no relation) with Bill and Ordelle and the painstakingly carved University seal.

If one needs a physical reminder of Bill and Ordelle Watts' generosity to UTPB, it can be found standing on a tripod near the board room, just outside the President's Office. There, meticulously carved from a hunk of cherry wood that Bill carried to Texas from Illinois, rests a rock-solid rendering of the University's seal.

The seal, which is 36 inches in diameter and about three inches thick, is "nice and heavy," says Bill. He estimates that he spent about 100 hours shaving off slivers of wood to create this long-lasting work of art.