

WALSAA MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

From Cows to Crew: Bill & Jean Ehrke's Passion for Education, Badger Sports & Community

Bill and Jean Ehrke have a long history of giving back starting with their time on campus. Their passion for education, sports, and leadership development inspired their dedication and commitment.

It began when Bill grew up near Fort Atkinson where he and his brothers milked cows, cleaned the barn, and made it on the school bus at 7 a.m. In high school, he was encouraged by his county extension agent and agriculture teacher — both Wisconsin grads — to attend the UW. His teacher helped him apply for a scholarship, and Bill was awarded \$100/semester, which covered his tuition as he pursued a degree in dairy science.

As a student, Bill decided to join the Badger football team. "At that time, anyone could walk on. I foolishly thought I was good enough and big enough to play football. I cracked my ribs. As a student, if you weren't in a sport, you had to take physical education. We were doing an endurance run for class when Norm Sonju, the UW crew coach, saw me and asked me to join the team. I rowed for four years."

There weren't any D1 scholarships, so Bill rowed for the love of the sport. Competitions took place on the East or West Coast or in Florida. The team rode trains to the Intercollegiate Rowing Regatta (IRA) to row against schools like Navy and Yale.

"In 1957 at the IRA, we rowed on Onondaga Lake in Syracuse, New York. It was 105 degrees and the air smelled like rotten eggs due to a nearby solvay plant. We persevered. I rowed in the 3-seat winning the 2-mile race."

Classes and clubs kept Bill connected to his agricultural roots. He joined the Saddle & Sirloin Club and participated in the Little International where he won the Dairy Fitting & Showing Contest. He was on the dairy judging team and judged at the International Show in Chicago and Waterloo Dairy Show. He was the first out of his family's ten children to attend a 4-year college, graduating in 1959.

After college, Bill served in the Marine Core Reserve. When he returned, he worked for Dane County Dairy Improvement as manager while Jean finished her degree in home economics education at the UW.

After obtaining her master's degree in clothing and textiles from the UW, Jean taught for 30 years at Fort Atkinson High School. She belonged to the county and local homemakers organizations and the American Association of University Women.



Bill and Jean's family dress in Badger Red for their Christmas card. The tradition - excluding wedding and anniversary photos - has continued for 30 years.

Bill and Jean have given back to their college, their state, and their community in so many ways. In their free time — while raising their children Cheryl and Scott — Bill and Jean inspired others with their love of education. As president and scholarship chairman of the Fort Atkinson UW Alumni Association, Bill helped raise funds for student scholarships.

"As scholarship chair, it gave me insight into the scholarships needed for rural students. That's why we give to WALSAA."

Numerous times, the Ehrkes have donated to WALSAA's silent auction at Fire-Up.

Bill and Jean's passion for the Badgers spans generations. They've been Badger football season ticket holders for 58 years, for a while holding 10 season tickets. Bill has only missed seven home games. Bill, his daughter, and granddaughter attend every home game.

"This will be the 30th year that our Christmas card has a picture of everyone in Badger Red. It started when our first grandchildren, Cierra and Clayton, were born in 1995. Initially, Jean sewed all the grandchildren matching red outfits. This year, our great grandson will join the tradition."

Bill and Jean's love of the UW and history of philanthropy touches WALSAA student scholarship recipients, Badger athletes, fellow dairy and beef producers, and families and youth in their community. It keeps them young at heart and often in Badger Red clothing, a model we can all follow.



The 2-mile race at the Intercollegiate Regatta, Bill is in the third seat from the front of the winning boat.