

Peter C. and Emajeane Cook



“This campaign isn’t primarily about facilities, or classrooms, or laboratories. It’s about people. It’s about the superb job that Hope College and its faculty and staff do in developing leaders for tomorrow’s society.”

--Peter C. Cook

A philanthropic couple from Grand Rapids, the Cooks have left their mark on Hope College. Neither Peter C. nor Emajeane Cook attended Hope nor even completed a four-year college degree, but they both recognized the importance of Christian academic institutions and used their financial gifts to help not only the Hope student body, but also many other charitable causes. Despite their impoverished beginnings, Peter and Emajeane Cook gained a fortune through Peter's work in the automobile industry. Not content to simply accumulate wealth, he and his wife Emajeane proceeded to give away millions of dollars, using their success to further God's purposes.

Born in Grand Rapids in 1914, Peter Cook was raised amid Depression-era financial hardships. Peter's father worked as a mechanic who continually struggled to support his large family. Despite the economic challenges his family faced throughout most of his childhood, Peter later fondly remembered his youth. The family's financial status did not discourage Peter's father and mother, though they had to provide and care for five children.

Peter recalled that even through their own struggles, his parents were still concerned with the welfare of others who were less fortunate and gave what they could to help people in the community. The Cooks relied on their faith to see them through the hard times. During Peter's childhood, the family attended Grace Reformed Church in Grand Rapids and he remained connected to the church his whole life. Several of Peter's first leadership positions were connected to the youth organizations of this church.

Peter spent most of his free time at Grace Reformed Church, but he also enjoyed other activities during his childhood. While he attended South High School in Grand Rapids, Peter spent time playing neighborhood basketball. He also picked up the trumpet and joined the high school marching band.

As the oldest son, Peter contributed financially to the family by starting to work at a young age. During summer breaks in high school, he began working in construction alongside his father, who had lost his mechanic business during the Depression. In order to help his parents, he had to make personal sacrifices regarding his own future goals. As a promising student, he had originally planned to attend a four-year college or university followed by law school.

When the economic hardships of the Great Depression affected his family, however, Peter turned to full-time work immediately after his high school graduation in 1932. At this time, any employment at all was hard to come by, and Peter did not have the option of looking for an ideal position. Instead, he took one of the rare jobs available, working on the assembly line at the Kelvinator refrigerator plant. With his employment secured, Peter began saving money for his future, which included his upcoming marriage to his high school sweetheart.



Emajeane "Pat" Vandersluis Cook, 1997

Emajeane Vandersluis was also a native to Grand Rapids, born in 1915 and adopted by the Vandersluis family. Throughout her life, she went by the nickname of "Pat" because she was born the day after St. Patrick's Day. She and Peter attended different high schools and also lived in different neighborhoods, though only about a mile apart. Grace Reformed Church was the means by which Peter and Pat came to know one another. They were active members of the church throughout their high school years. Both sang in the choir and participated in Christian Endeavor, a youth leadership group within the church.

According to Peter, in an interview with a biographer, “meeting Pat was one of the best things that ever happened to me.” The couple dated for at least eight years, starting before high school graduation. The years of their courtship were happy, though not always easy. His job working construction forced Peter to spend time away, taking him to the Upper Peninsula, where he spent summers with his father.

Pat stayed in Grand Rapids and the two could only communicate by sending letters. By the time Pat graduated from high school in 1933, Peter was busy working at the Kelvinator plant; Pat first worked as a secretary for the Interstate and Associated Truck Company and then for the Grand Rapids Gas Company as a teller. While he worked on the assembly line during the day, Peter also took night classes at Grand Rapids’ Davenport Business College, focusing on secretarial classes while also studying accounting, business, and economics. With this additional education, Peter hoped to develop marketable skills to move him off the assembly line and into office work.

In 1940, all of their hard work and times of separation were rewarded. Peter and Pat exchanged vows at their home church, Grace Reformed. Pat discontinued her work as a teller to become a full time wife and, with the adoption of two sons, Thomas and Stephen, mother. With her support, Peter was able to take on increasingly high-ranking positions at Kelvinator and work to advance his career.

After completing his college studies, Peter Cook moved into the accounting department at Kelvinator before finding the opportunity to become involved with the automotive industry, where he would remain for the rest of his career. After leaving his job at Kelvinator, he took on another accounting position at the Ranger Reel fishing equipment company. In the 1940s the company switched from fishing supplies to automobiles and began to import and sell European cars.

By 1949, the business had evolved into Import Motors. Having grown up with a mechanic as a father, Peter was well-acquainted with the industry. His familiarity in working with cars along with his talents and experience as a salesman soon permitted Peter to become successful.

In 1954, Peter’s leadership skills were officially recognized when he was named president of Import Motors. After staying with the company until 1977, he then founded another automobile business, Transnational Motors. This company focused on the import of Mazdas and became an almost immediate success. Peter was able to expand his sales to include one hundred twenty-seven dealerships and the name of the company was changed to Mazda Great Lakes. After twenty-three years of owning and serving as the president of this corporation, Peter sold Mazda Great Lakes to the Ford Motor Company in 2000 and retired.

As his professional life flourished, Peter and Pat also had the chance to enjoy time with their family and members of their church and community. Throughout his life, Peter liked to hunt, fish, and golf, as well as to collect Western-style art. He stayed active in Grace Reformed Church, serving as a greater consistory member and became involved with the local Rotary Club. Pat was remembered by her friends as “a very beautiful lady and very dignified.” She was involved as a board member with the Welcome Home for the Blind and the Blodgett Hospital Guild. Both of the Cooks were public figures in Grand Rapids, “often attending parties and social events together.”

The Cooks’ life changed drastically with Peter’s enormous success in business. Though Peter and Pat had both grown up amid financial troubles, they were now economically well-off. As the Cooks became successful, they started to consider the best possible use for their wealth. Although Peter had been involved with the business of Mazda Great Lakes, giving money away was a project that the couple always undertook together. They both knew that as stewards of the money they had earned, it was their responsibility to use their blessings to help others.

They gave to their church, but saw this donation as a duty. “Tithing is something you owe, the ten percent you owe. Beyond that you give,” Peter remarked. The couple wanted to give because they recognized how much their own lives had been changed. “When Pat and I were first married,” Peter said, “we were lucky to be able to tithe.” With the excess wealth they accumulated, the Cooks found multiple causes to support.

The couple founded Cook Charitable Foundation, an organization for the distribution of their wealth, in 1959. The Cooks appreciated education, a privilege they were not able to afford when they were young. They gave sizeable donations to several institutions, enough to have buildings named for them at Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Valley State University, and Davenport University, the successor of Peter’s alma mater, Davenport Business College. They also funded political candidates and charitable organizations, such as the Van Andel Institute for Medical Research and Education.



Peter Cook with a Hope student, 1997

In addition to giving money away, Peter also gave his time. Peter served as a trustee of the Porter Hills Foundation, an organization providing Christian homes for seniors. This foundation, grateful for his support, remarked that “Peter has been a tremendous asset to the organization as well as a wonderful advocate and good friend.”

The Cooks also found a passion for supporting the arts, becoming involved with organizations such as the West Michigan Opera Company and the Broadway Theater Guild. In fact, the Cooks’ contributions to the life of Grand Rapids were so significant and widespread that a Van Andel Institute executive observed that it was “safe to say that the skyline of Grand Rapids would be a lot less impressive today had [Peter Cook] not been born or endowed with the spirit of generosity that has left such a giant imprint.”

Their reputation for philanthropy led to the Cooks’ relationship with Hope College, which took visible form in the hall now named for them. Although Peter and Pat were natives of Grand Rapids, they were also “long-time Hope enthusiasts.” Their son Thomas had attended Hope, graduating in 1967, as did their grandson Ryan. After his time as a Hope parent, Peter served on Hope’s Board of Trustees from 1977 to 1989, helping to oversee projects like the Van Wylen Library. When Peter retired from the board, he became an honorary trustee and retained his connection to the school.

Their experience with Hope College taught Peter and Pat to appreciate the effect that the school has on each individual student. The Cooks believed strongly in Hope’s mission to provide education in a Christian environment and wanted to be a part of the lives of the students. With the college’s far-reaching purpose in mind, they gave generously to several Hope projects. The Cook Auditorium in the DePree Art Center is named after them, as is an endowed professorship in English. The most visible sign of their support, however, is clearly the Cook residence hall.

Cook Hall was the first dormitory to be constructed on campus since the completion of Dykstra Hall in 1967. Thirty years after this women's dorm opened, Hope College was again facing a housing problem. There were not enough rooms to accommodate all of the qualified students who wished to attend. The solution was a residence hall unlike any of the others at Hope, equipped with larger rooms and suite-style living. Cook's original one hundred eighty-three residents were fortunate to live in the new hall, to the envy of everyone else on campus.

Peter and Pat Cook had provided a luxurious living environment by all of the usual dormitory standards. "Hope College is very grateful to the Cooks for providing this facility," Dean of Students Richard Frost remarked, "I think when you look at Cook Hall, it's one of the finest facilities around. It provides the optimal living and learning facility for Hope College students."



Peter and Pat Cook (seated) at the dedication of Cook Hall

After the completion and opening of Cook Hall, Peter and Pat Cook remained closely involved in the life of Hope College. In 2000, Peter became a chair of the *Legacies: A Vision of Hope Campaign*, a fundraising effort that sought to construct new academic buildings, renovate older structures such as Graves and Lubbers Halls, and secure additional funding for the school's endowment.

By the end of the project, the campaign was responsible for the construction of the Schaap Science Center, the Martha Miller Center, and the DeVos Fieldhouse. An eighty-five million dollar endeavor, the Legacies Campaign was an ambitious project that ultimately became a complete success.

Despite all of their financial success and their well-earned reputation for giving, Peter and Pat Cook found their greatest happiness in their relationship with each other. Speaking of Pat, Peter said in his biography that "she has not only been a supportive wife but also a best friend. She was always there for me through the good times and the bad times. I could not have wished for a better life companion." Peter was known to "credit [his wife] and long, happy [marriage] with having a positive influence on [his] business success and philanthropy."



Peter and Pat Cook, 1997

Although it was Peter who had worked to earn the wealth that distinguished them in the community, friends remembered that “it’s never just Peter. It’s always Peter and Pat.” Their love for each other continued to be strong throughout their entire lives. The couple was married for sixty-seven years until, in the summer of 2008 at the age of ninety-three, Pat Cook lost a longtime battle with Alzheimer’s disease, leaving Peter a widower.

Peter and Emajean Cook demonstrated their love for Hope College by becoming generous donors to Hope, a school they never attended. They gave enough to provide residence for hundreds of students. With the recent expansion of Cook Hall, two hundred fifty students receive the benefits of their support each year. More than just their financial support, however, Cook residents and the greater Hope College community have a visible reminder of the character of the couple who made the building possible.

Peter and Pat Cook easily could have become decadent and self-absorbed by their wealth. Instead, they decided to take their personal blessings into the world. Remembered for their intense love for each other and their committed support of charitable organizations, the Cooks set a worthy example throughout their lives. A publication from the opening ceremony of Cook Hall declared that, “throughout their lives, the Cooks have demonstrated a devotion to family, to church, to community development, to the free enterprise system, to education and to Hope College. In all endeavors they have served others, and they have provided thoughtful leadership and commitment.”

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This project grew out of my own recognition that the Hope community could be enriched by an examination of the lives of notable persons in Hope's history. Words like "Phelps," "Dykstra," and "Kollen" are in constant use around campus but often with little understanding of the people behind the names. A knowledge of the people whose names we use in everyday conversation can serve to reconnect us with our heritage, as well as acquainting us with past and present visions for Hope College. At the suggestion and encouragement of several members of the Hope community, my idea evolved into a study of the eleven residence hall "ancestors."

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If you would like to learn more about all the individuals for whom the other ten residence halls have been named, visit www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls and click on each building. For more information about the history of Hope College, visit the Joint Archives of Holland at 9 East 10th St.

Laura Shears, August 2008