

Bob and Melida Excellence in Social Work Scholarship
Bob and Melida Excellence in Nursing Scholarship
University of Wisconsin Madison

Bob and Melida Wagner have lived a life of service to others. Bob discovered and fed his passion for helping others with a diverse career in social work that has had a positive impact on thousands of underserved people throughout the State of Wisconsin. Melida celebrated her caring nature with extensive education, training, and teaching in the nursing profession. She also provided care and comfort to people in pain in both her native Colombia and later throughout Wisconsin.

Bob and Melida are grateful for the many blessings that impacted their lives and increased their abilities to support and aid people and communities. They desire future students to have similar opportunities that allow them to follow their passions in the service of others. The couple happily raised their family in Wisconsin, and, along with Bob, three of their four sons are graduates of the University of Wisconsin - Madison. With their close affinity and attachments to this university, Bob and Melida are extremely proud that the Bob and Melida Wagner two scholarships, the Excellence in Social Work Scholarship and the Bob and Melida Wagner Excellence in Nursing Scholarship, have been established in their honor.

Bob Wagner, along with his identical twin brother Bill, was born in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in 1937. Along with their older sister, they grew up in a modest home. Their family, like all American families during that time, dealt with the challenges of the depression and then those of World War II. Bob's mother's side of the family was very musically talented. He and his brother took piano, trumpet and tuba lessons, but discovered their interests were geared more toward playing baseball and football.

Bob attended Sheboygan North High School, where he thrived academically, athletically and socially. Despite his small physical stature, Bob lettered in baseball for four years and two years in football as a starting halfback. He made the Honor Society his senior year and was also elected school president.

Following high school, Bob enrolled in a program to serve six months active duty in the United States Army with a commitment of five additional years in the reserves. He enrolled at the University of Wisconsin – Madison (UW-Madison) in January 1957, which began his lifelong relationship with the Badgers. After his first semester, Bob faced financial difficulties necessitating a year at Lakeland College, outside of Sheboygan. He returned to UW-Madison in the fall of 1958 and graduated from the School of Business with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration in December of 1960.

Bob most enjoyed his labor economics courses and recognized a personal interest in being involved in the lives of people. After college, a Catholic social service agency in La Crosse, Wisconsin, offered Bob the chance to earn a master's degree in social work. Bob thought the recent election of John F. Kennedy as President of the U.S. would make for an exciting time in our nation's capital. In the fall of 1961, he began his studies at the Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C. Traveling to Washington, D.C. at that time turned out to be a good decision for Bob...

Melida Rincon Tavera was born in Chaparral, Tolima, Colombia, a mid-sized city about five hours south of Bogota, in 1933. She was the oldest of 12 children in her family and was a precocious and bright girl. Melida attended Catholic mass daily, was taught by Catholic nuns and initially considered a calling as a missionary nurse.

Melida enjoyed learning and was able to skip a few grades before entering high school at an early age. When she was 17, she enrolled in nursing school at the University of Antioquia in the city of Medellin, Colombia. Melida loved the hands-on and nurturing aspects of nursing. She graduated in 1956 and was immediately busy in assisting in the planning and organizing a new nursing school in Ibague. After a few months, Melida moved with some nursing colleagues to Cali. There they again assisted in the planning, organizing, and opening of the nursing aspects of the new University Hospital. Following this experience, she began working in public health nursing.

Her desire to gain more knowledge led Melida to travel to the United States in December 1959. She was immediately hired as a graduate nurse at Doctors Hospital in Washington, D.C. Melida entered the School of Nursing at the Catholic University of America in the fall of 1960. She continued to work while studying, until she was awarded a Kellogg Foundation scholarship. This allowed her to solely concentrate on her academics. In the fall of 1961, Melida and some fellow foreign students were honored with a special invitation to a reception at the White House. They were personally greeted by President John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy. Going to Washington, D.C. at that time also turned out to be a good decision for Melida...

The Rosary House in Washington, DC was a property overseen by Catholic nuns that housed about 15-20 young women from Latin America, many of whom were studying at Catholic University. On a spring night in April 1962, Bob and his roommate decided to go to a party at the Rosary House. Upon arriving, Bob convinced an attractive woman who was leaving to instead stay and accompany them back inside. Melida's acceptance of Bob's invitation led to the couple's lifelong union.

Bob graduated from Catholic University with a master's in social work in and returned to Wisconsin to work with Catholic Social Services. Melida graduated from Catholic University with a bachelor's degree of Nursing and returned to Colombia per the expectations of her Kellogg Foundation scholarship. Melida taught nursing at her alma mater, the University of Antioquia, until she married. Bob and Melida had agreed upon a wedding date of September 14, 1963, and were married in Colombia, where they stayed for a month as newlyweds.

Bob and Melida then began their life together in the United States in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, in a one-bedroom apartment. Within a year, Melida gave birth to the couple's son, Bobby, and their family gradually grew to include three additional sons, Paul, Joe and Mike. When Melida's mother was diagnosed with cancer in 1965, Bob and Melida began a two-year process to allow her parents to immigrate to the United States. On Jan. 26, 1968, Melida became a very proud U.S. citizen. On October 1, 1968, her parents arrived in Wisconsin. Over the next one to three years, Melida's siblings were also able to immigrate to the United States.

Once settled in Wisconsin, Bob began his career in social work. During his two years with Catholic social services, Bob enjoyed being involved with adoptions, foster care and counseling. In 1965, he began a 33-year journey working for the State of Wisconsin, primarily with the State Division of Children and Families. Bob was excited to work on community planning and development, fighting poverty in various counties in Wisconsin as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's programs. He worked with Native American tribes throughout central and northern Wisconsin and implemented programs for thousands of migrants who worked in central Wisconsin. These efforts included Head Start programs, Day Care, Early Education and some healthcare. Bob was instrumental in helping to develop many community action agencies that still exist in numerous counties.

Later in his career, Bob was involved with developing programs to prevent juvenile delinquency and, when he served as Chief of Regulation for a region in Wisconsin, he was responsible for licensing daycare and family centers, childcare institutions and group homes.

Even though Melida was very busy raising their four sons, she continued her career in nursing. She worked in coronary and ICU care for many years, before eventually being hired by the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay as a student health nurse.

In the late 1970s, Melida left nursing as a career to help her son operate his own business. Melida continued to use her nursing talents to aid others. Her fluency in Spanish made her an asset to community clinics and she was active in caring for young immigrants to Wisconsin. She and Bob also became involved with residential real estate. As part of this side business, the Wagners purchased, remodeled and rented some 20 units in five properties.

Both personally and professionally, Bob and Melida are thankful to live a life of positivity, commitment, and care for others, whether family, friend or strangers. Through the annual awarding of these scholarships, they hope many others will discover and experience similar joy and gratitude that has defined their life together.