



A Dream Come True

The McNamara Alumni Center would not have gotten off the ground without devoted alumni [Larry Laukka](#), [Fred Friswold](#), and [Dale Olseth](#). By Shelly Fling

Fred Friswold ('58) describes how, for decades, visitors to the University of Minnesota found their way on the Minneapolis campus. "They'd drive to the river flats, park their car, start walking in the direction they thought campus was, and wander around," he says. "There weren't any signs that showed them where to go. They'd try to find a student who could direct them to a building, and they'd get three or four different answers. Finally, someone would say, 'Well, if you're looking for admissions, go down this row on the Mall, into a tunnel, under a couple buildings, and you'll find it.'



"It was terrible! The fact is, we didn't have a front door to the University." Friswold, CEO of Tonka Equipment Company in Plymouth, laughs about that ridiculous scene now, but he spent a dozen years earnestly trying to fix the problem. The only person who may have been as determined to build an alumni and visitors center—a front door to the University—is Larry Laukka ('58), president of Laukka Jarvis, Inc., in Edina and a fraternity brother of Friswold's. They teamed up with Dale Olseth ('52), CEO of SurModics, Inc., in Eden Prairie and longtime friend of Friswold's, and took up the task to build an alumni home on campus. They weren't the first high-minded individuals over the years who—out of a deep sense of gratitude to the University—had set out to get the job done, but they would be the last.

It is safe to say that, even if Friswold, Laukka, and Olseth knew how long it would take to get the alumni center built they would do it all again. Their commitment to the University is that strong. The threesome volunteered thousands of hours to see that the alumni center was built, and when the McNamara Alumni Center, University of Minnesota Gateway, opens in February, it will be the fulfillment of a 43-year dream.

Building an alumni center had been on the alumni association's agenda since 1957, when after years of operating out of cramped quarters it expressed that the best solution would be to have its own freestanding building. But membership

was barely over 15,000, and financing such a project was not feasible. Since its founding in 1904 the association had enjoyed rent-free office space. Every few years, the wish for an alumni home would surface with a growing sense of urgency but then reluctantly discarded for the same old reason. And the peripatetic organization moved to various buildings on and off campus to accommodate its increasing staff and purpose.

Until the late 1980s. Fred Friswold was the University of Minnesota Alumni Association national board president in 1987–88, and during his term a series of unrelated events forced the UMAA's hand. The University administration announced its plans to take over Morrill Hall, where the UMAA had since settled in, and the new vice president of finance for the University had plans to put a line in the operating units' budgets for rent. The UMAA faced yet another move and to space that would no longer be free.

Then came the regrettable unraveling of Ken Keller's presidency following news reports of extravagant spending to renovate Eastcliff, the president's home, to make it a more public facility. "We ended up losing a president and almost all of the vice presidents of the University. The regents were backing away from Eastcliff so fast you could see the leaves swirl behind them," Friswold recalls.

Friswold found himself trying to maintain relationships with the public and the legislature. Among the many phone calls and notes he received from alumni concerned about the goings-on at the University was a letter from his old friend Larry Laukka, who wasn't at all happy about the state of things. "Fred called to say he agreed with me but then said, 'Why don't you come down here and help?' Laukka recalls. "I said, 'That's a fair question,' and the next thing I knew Margaret Carlson [UMAA executive director] got ahold of me and asked me to consider running for the board."

Laukka's 25 years of experience in real estate development made him a good fit for the job of putting together a plan to build an alumni center. "A few others had tried over the years, but its time was right for me and for the University," he says. "I decided

I wouldn't let it sit; I'd get it done. I really did it out of my personal feelings for the University. I felt that this was a contribution I could make and that it would be a worthwhile contribution so I should be able to live with adversity and overcome what obstacles needed to be overcome."

Like many alumni, Laukka believes that his life was transformed for having attended the University. He points to professors and experiences that influenced his life. One of those events took place in his junior year, when he volunteered to assist the chairman of the homecoming committee. "We worked for a year together on this thing," he says. "We had to do everything. We even produced *Oklahoma!* on the stage of the Northrop. Homecoming was a big deal. It was sponsored by a car dealership and we were all given our own automobiles. It was a business, and I got my first taste of revenues and expenses." Especially revenues. Homecoming that year made money, and Laukka was changed. "Throughout my 40 years of work in this community, I've been a passionate volunteer because I gained so much from that wonderful experience."

As the new point person for the alumni center issue, Laukka began taking a closer look at sites around campus. An idea that had been brought forth in the mid-1980s was to combine an alumni center with a new art museum. But that plan fell apart, the Weisman Art Museum built its own space, and alumni center discussion moved to the edge of campus, at the corner of Washington Avenue and Oak Street Southeast. To fuel the imaginations of alumni and the University, drawings of a 100,000-square-foot, semicircular, brick alumni center were produced. While that gave alumni center champions something more tactile to sell, the problem of funding would not go away.

But then Laukka remembered a bit of information he had picked up from a friend who was vice president of finance at the University. Laukka had paid him a visit after he joined the UMAA board and mentioned his plans to finally build an alumni center on campus. "He said, 'It's a great idea, but don't ask the University or the state of Minnesota for any money. And good luck,'" Larry says. "Then he said, 'By the way, the University rents more than 300,000 square feet of space from the private sector.'"

While many had accused alumni—for wanting their own

home—of thinking too big, it became apparent to Laukka that all this time they had been thinking much too small. By that time, in the early 1990s, Memorial Stadium had been torn down (the Memorial Arch bricks salvaged and stored), and the proposed site had moved to University Avenue and Oak. "I determined that we needed something bigger than what we were going to build or we were underutilizing this important corner of campus," he says. "I went back to our board and told them we can structure this as a commercial real estate deal where we can use rental income

off of office space to support debt. That was where Fred began to play an important role because finance is his business."

The vision that Friswold and Laukka shared was beginning to take on a new dimension. It was no longer going to be an alumni association building; it would be a multifunctional center for the entire University. The University of Minnesota Foundation's decision to join the UMAA in the venture gave the project a giant step forward, but it still faced dozens of unresolved issues, including finding financial resources and addressing every one of the University's conditions.

"The reality is that working on a project like this is like running through two feet of wet cement," says Friswold, a trustee for the University Foundation who had worked at Dain Bosworth for 32 years, including as CEO. "We had to come up with not

only the vision and the building and the organization, but we also had to come up with something that was acceptable to the University." In the end, they had worked with three University presidents, at least six financial vice presidents, and a board of regents whose members rotate every couple of years. "And then we had myriad departments at the University—including the Real Estate Office, Facilities Management, Master Planning, and Parking and Transportation—each of which has a stake in anything that happens on campus. And we still didn't have any money.

"A turning point came when we struggled through resolving several issues for the third or fourth time. We went to President Nils Hasselmo and said, 'Every time we turnaround someone's raising another problem, another issue to be resolved.' He gathered his people together and said, 'This is an important project,



Dale Olseth (left), Larry Laukka, and Fred Friswold

Photo by Mark Luinenburg

and it needs to get done. I want you to figure out how to do that, and I want to know if it's not on track and not moving forward.'

The 230,000-square-foot alumni and visitors center would have two aspects: an office block with space for 700 employees and public areas, including Memorial Hall, the Heritage Gallery, meeting rooms, a restaurant, and a memorabilia store. Friswold's job was to convince the financial community that this \$40 million project was sound—despite that it hadn't been completely designed and had no history, no current revenue sources, and no equity. In addition to the bonding deal, he then had to structure a cash-flow strategy to pay debt and cover projected annual operating expenses of \$4 million. "It was really a business, not just a building," he says. "And if it doesn't work financially, it doesn't survive long-term and fulfill its mission."

Due to the financial backing of the University Foundation, the alumni center project ended up getting a AA rating. The nonprofit Gateway Corporation was formed after the Minnesota Medical Foundation became the third owner and the search for a world-class architect was under way, but the public spaces in the building—those not supported by rent rolls—would need financial support from private donors.

"Brick and mortar can be a very, very tough sale," says Dale Olseth, a former colleague of Friswold's at Dain, trustee of the University Foundation, past chairman of the Minnesota Campaign, and a seasoned fund-raiser. "But I had the knowledge and background on who has capacity to give—number one—and who's *likely* to give."

Olseth's stepping up in 1994 to lead the private fund-raising gave the project tremendous credibility among the University's major donors. The goal was \$7 million, but raising money for such a broad, all-University project proved difficult. "We made so many calls on people we thought were good prospects, but it just didn't fit them," Olseth recalls. "They'd say, 'Yeah, we're sure behind it, but I'm from the School of Architecture and that's where I want my money to go, or I'm from the Carlson School. . . .'"

Eventually, a few high-six-figure gifts were made. And then Antoine Predock was chosen as the architect and the Board of Regents signed on as a tenant. The Gateway project—as it was called since 1989—was not only on the move, it was picking up speed. "When the Board of Regents said, 'We're going to move from Morrill Hall to the new Gateway,' that was like a big snowplow," says Olseth. "When at times there were three feet of snow, that snowplow could just kind of plow through the difficulties that encompassed this project because of its size and scope."

The Gateway Corporation raised its fund-raising goal three times and surpassed it each time. At the end of phase, I it had



Margaret Carlson outside her office on a balcony overlooking Memorial Hall

Photo by Mark Luinenburg

reached approximately \$13 million. Olseth will continue raising money to fund the completion of the plaza planned for south of the alumni center (see page 42). "I've been involved in pretty much all aspects of the community for many, many years, largely on the fund-raising side," he says. "And this one is very important to me personally because the University is the centerpiece of what kind of community we're going to have. This is the first place people can associate with an all-University feeling versus their own little college or big college. We've never had a place that those people can call home, and this will become a home now."

On groundbreaking day in November 1997, Larry Laukka had the sense that the impossible had been achieved. "The day we dug the hole in the ground—nobody ever ever ever thought it would

happen. Nobody did," he says and then pauses. "Margaret probably most of all thought it could."

"I didn't know if we'd succeed," says Margaret Carlson ('83), UMAA executive director since 1985. "But I just decided that there's no room for failure."

Throughout the late 1980s and early '90s, Laukka, Friswold, and Carlson shared a dream for an alumni home. They and some key volunteers and staff visited alumni centers at schools around the country and then endeavored to convince alumni, donors, and University officials back home that an alumni and visitors center is more than a building or a piece of real estate. "What I truly believe about higher education is that people come here filled with potential and desire and that universities change lives," Carlson says. "And then they go on to change the world. So if we could build a monument to that transformation of lives and then changing the world, it would be a great thing."

For Carlson, a major turning point came in 1994 when the national board hired Scott Meyer, of Mona, Meyer, McGrath & Gavin, to help with strategic planning. "Meyer said, 'If you can deliver on an alumni center, all of the other things you want to achieve will follow. Make the alumni center your number-one goal and don't deviate from that,'" recalls Carlson, who from then on structured all alumni association meetings with the alumni center item heading the list.

The alumni association had since relocated to Coffman Union, in 1992, a move Carlson saw as a step closer to the Gateway. Along the way she played a key role in helping Laukka, board president in 1994–95, understand the culture of the University and opening doors he needed opened. "When you're a volunteer on campus, you're really an outsider walking on people's turf," Laukka says.

"I visited with over half a dozen deans and countless vice presidents, just to talk to them and try to rest their fears that if we were going to go out and raise money it would not hurt their development efforts. Most of them began to realize we were really expanding their opportunities, not hurting them."

Now Carlson is looking forward to working with her colleagues at the University Foundation and the Medical Foundation to make the McNamara Alumni Center come alive—using it to send off the football team to a bowl game, honor outstanding faculty, and greet new students to the University.

"If I were talking to a group of freshmen in Memorial Hall today," she says. "I would ask them to look up at this building and to imagine that in 1994, when they were in the seventh grade, this was all just a dream. I would tell them, 'In your college years, in your job, or in your life, think big, think bold. When everybody tells you there are a hundred reasons that an idea won't work, ask them to help find the one way that it *will* work.'

"This building," Carlson continues, "is a testimony to courage and determination and the power of collaboration among those who shared a seemingly impossible dream."

Shelly Fling is editor of Minnesota magazine.