



Eternal /ə 'tərn(ə)l/ Adjective; 1 Last or existing forever; without end or beginning. Legacy / 'legəsē/ Noun; 1 A gift of property, especially personal property; a bequest.

By Devin Girod, Associate Development Officer, College of Humanities, Social Sciences & Arts

Danny and Susan Richter received the call parents never expect on January 9th, 2011. The day was icy with inclement weather moving through the Dallas–Fort Worth area. James and Laci Betterton, their son and daughter-in-law, attended the morning service at Westview United Methodist Church in Greenville where they served as music ministers. As the couple returned to Rockwall on Hwy 66, an oncoming truck crossed the center line, lost control due to ice, turned over, then ended in a head-on collision with James and Laci.

James Betterton, 23, and Laci Strickland Betterton, 25, were recent graduates of Texas A&M University–Commerce, receiving baccalaureate degrees in Music Education. James started teaching music in November of 2010 at Freeman Elementary School in Garland, Texas while Laci taught music at Pullen Elementary School in Rockwall, Texas. “They had a heart for children and music. I used to tell James to go make a difference, or go MAD,” says Danny. That is exactly what James and Laci chose to do in their short lives.

James began identifying children that needed help at Freeman Elementary. He noticed two young boys were devouring their breakfast and lunch. He eventually learned the school provided their only food source, so James and Laci purchased groceries for the boys. Later, it was helping a group of five students – all fourth grade friends – with behavioral issues. With the principal’s approval, James began to spend his free time mentoring and playing sports

with them. The boys began to open up and share their struggles with James.

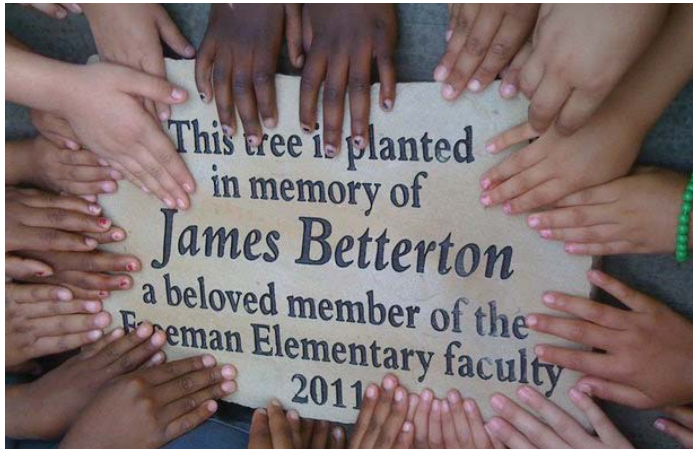
After James’ passing, the school dedicated a Magnolia tree and a plaque in his name. Susan shares, “Those five little boys sat in our laps and just cried. They could not understand why their James was gone, why it had to be James. They loved him. He really touched them and he really bonded with them.” Danny adds, “They saw a need and did everything in their power to help. That’s what makes me proud”.



James and Laci did not have the opportunity to complete their legacy – a legacy bound to be full of kind wishes and selfless acts. In their honor, A&M-Commerce alumni, students, faculty and staff began to support their memory by accepting donations to name chairs in memory of this amazing couple. Students also held a benefit concert in their honor. Danny and Susan were able to attend the A&M-Commerce Christmas Holiday Gala in 2011, spending the evening in James and Laci’s chairs. Shortly thereafter, Wyman Williams and Dr. Chris White, former Department of Music head, visited

the Richter’s to discuss a scholarship endowment in their names.

“When Wyman and Chris approached us, we were uneducated (at how scholarship endowments are established),” Susan begins. “We originally had a miscommunication with the Advancement staff and thought we would give \$10,000 to be awarded as a one-time



gift. Once we understood it was awarded from earnings, we made the initial gift and a planned gift." The planned gift, 15% of a life insurance policy, will come close to doubling the endowment at Danny's passing. In addition, the Richters plan to give quarterly or annually to ensure that the students are receiving a larger gift from the earnings.

The Richters' modesty will not allow them to take credit for James' character and his contagious personality. "We had something to do with it, but the college really developed who he was," says Susan. James was the first college graduate in the family pursuing all of his scholarship applications and completing his annual FAFSA to ensure he had the opportunity to further his education. His independence was important.

Susan continues about James' autonomy. "James didn't want help, but I believe the help (from James and Laci's scholarship) will encourage other students to pursue an education when they know the help is there. I don't know what the dropout rate is, but I feel students will stay in school and not have to take out as much with student loans. . . We are now giving to the next generation, and we're putting it at the place that James was happy. And that was Commerce."

"I always thought that I'd go first being the parent. That's the way it's supposed to happen. James was just 23 and Laci was 25. I always told him he had to stick around and not let his mama (Susan) be by herself," Danny says. However, something happened that night that brought some comfort in tragic conditions. "Something that is always significant to me is the couple that stopped—the first people on the accident scene—had just left a Catholic mass. That Sunday was called "reaffirmation of baptism" in Methodism. James was playing piano in church that morning. Everyone went up, including Laci, but James did not since he had to play. Well, the couple that stopped—the wife had paramedic training; she went to James first and tried to start an airway

on him, but could not, so she baptized him with some snow and prayed over him. To me, that was nothing but God, for her to have the presence of mind to pick up some snow and baptize him, in her own way, then pray for James and Laci."

A mother and father are left with a bittersweet memory. They are comfortable with James and Laci's eternal place, and are happy to have formed a relationship with the A&M-Commerce faculty, staff and students. In addition, the Richters are happy to know their life insurance policy will affect even more students as the scholarship endowment grows. They met the first recipient of James and Laci's scholarship, mentioning how he has the same contagious personality James possessed. It is easy to see these qualities in Danny and Susan. Happiness. Optimism. Benevolence. However, two sets of parents are left without children.

"I wish we could have formed this relationship without James and Laci having to go through what happened," Danny says toward the end of our conversation. The sense of loss doesn't go away, but Danny and Susan know James and Laci's legacy lives on as their scholarship endowment continues to impact Lion students for years to come.

