



Mrs. Full Charge

Donna Vanier left a legacy of service to youth and communities.

by *Grace Jacobson*

There are people who talk about getting things done and people who get things done. Donna Vanier was the latter. Her desk once displayed a plaque that read, “God so loved the world that He didn’t send a committee.”

Donna was born Oct. 24, 1934, and passed away May 23, 2020. Her legacy of humility and generosity will last for years to come.

“One can’t think of the HYFA Scholarship program and not think of Donna Vanier. Her philanthropic spirit started years ago when the Hereford Auxiliary was founded, and her vision lives on today. Donna was a true matriarch, and it is an honor to help carry on the legacy of such a special lady to the Hereford breed and agriculture community.”

— **Amy Cowan, AHA director
of youth activities**

“She was a wonderful, funny and loving person,” says Mary Vanier, Donna’s youngest child. “She enjoyed meeting and doing things for people.”

Donna grew up in a blue-collar family. After two years at the University of Kansas, she could no longer afford her tuition. She went back home and started a job as a clerk at a local grocery store in Salina, Kan.

Lesta Vanier shopped at the store. She was married to J.J. Vanier of the storied CK Ranch, and the mother of Jack Vanier. Lesta noticed that Donna was single and would tell Donna about her sons while checking out groceries. Jack Vanier and Donna married in 1955.

By 1966, Donna was raising three kids (Marty, John and Mary), in addition to tending to her responsibilities on CK Ranch and increasing her community involvement and leadership.

“Dad always called her ‘Mrs. Full Charge’ because she would just charge right into

whatever it was,” Mary says. “She would take projects on, figure them out and get it done. They would always be done to an extremely high level.”

Despite the busyness of her life, Donna could always find time for her children. She encouraged and helped them with their extracurricular activities, such as 4-H meetings and school clubs.



CK Ranch won the National Western Stock Show Hereford Carload championship eight times between 1951 and 1965. Here, accepting one of those awards are (l to r) Jack Vanier, CK Ranch herdsman, George Wilson and Donna Vanier.

“Whatever the kids were involved in, you knew she was involved in that too,” says Martha “Marty” Vanier, Donna’s eldest daughter.

Education and youth development were close to Donna’s heart since she was unable to finish her college degree.

“Neither of my parents actually graduated from college, but they clearly felt that education was important,” Mary says.

Marty recalled the time when she was deciding whether or not to pursue a degree in veterinary medicine, which was an often unattainable career for women at the time. Donna encouraged her to pursue her dream.

“Mom was always right there with me saying, ‘If this is what you want to do then get it done,’” Marty says. “She was going to make dang sure that we all finished school and did what we wanted.”

Donna and Jack’s belief in education led them to help develop and fund multiple philanthropic projects throughout their lives. Those projects include



Donna Vanier was honored by the American Hereford Auxiliary at the 1987 annual meeting in Kansas City, Mo., for her contributions to the Hereford breed.

multiple scholarships to different foundations and organizations.

“She really felt an obligation to do something good with all she had,” Mary says.

Helping Herefords

J.J. Vanier established CK Ranch at Brookville, Kan., in 1933. Three years later, the ranch acquired 20 head of Hereford cattle. Ultimately, CK Ranch became one of the largest registered Hereford herds in the nation. Today, CK Ranch is a commercial cow-calf operation managed by J.J.’s grandson, John Vanier.

While Donna did not grow up on a ranch, she was committed to helping in whatever way she could. Her responsibilities included everything from repainting barns



Donna Vanier (then Lindsey) christened a U.S. bomber jet named “City of Salina” in 1954.

and bunks to putting together and mailing sale catalogs. Typically, she would serve dinner to anyone who came over to look at cattle. Donna would prep, cook and serve all the food during the ranch’s sales — typically chili.

“You name it, she did it,” John, the middle Vanier child, says. “She did basically everything but get on a horse.”

The Vanier family welcomed a variety of visitors, from Hereford breeders of other nations to people wanting to get started with Hereford genetics. Donna made sure they were well fed and entertained.

“The [American Hereford] Association (AHA) always had someone coming over that wanted to see an American cattle ranch or spend the

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year learning how to be an American cowboy,” Marty says.

Donna and Jack were close friends with the AHA staff and regularly travelled to Kansas City, Mo., to visit and enjoy dinner with them.

Eventually, Jack was elected president of the AHA Board of Directors in 1982, just like his father. John joined the Board during the merger between the polled and horned association.

St. John's blessings

Donna was active in the Episcopal Christ Cathedral Church in Salina. As a boy, Jack went to St. John's Military School in Salina, which is an Episcopal military school. St. John's was one of her first philanthropic endeavors.

In the 1980s, Warner Brothers came to St. John's to film a small movie. Donna was able to look after and assist the company with their requests.

“The president of the school at the time said he needed someone from the community to babysit the film company,” Mary says.

Whenever they needed a specific set for a scene, Donna knew the place to go or person to contact. Her help with Warner Brothers eventually led her to become the school's first development officer. Her pioneering ways continued.

For instance, Donna started a charity auction for St. John's, when these sorts of events were just becoming a new way of fundraising.

“Keith Duckers (president of St. John's at the time) sent her to Chicago to learn from this guy that had a brilliant new fundraising event, and she came back to start the St. John's auction that became very successful,” Mary says.

Donna later became the board chair at St. John's. Throughout the years, the Vaniers assisted with different building projects on the school's campus. This included the Vanier Academic Center and Jack Vanier Hall. The school added Donna to its Wall of Fame in 2009.



Pictured (l to r) are Craig Ludwig, Jack, Donna and Nancy Ludwig at the first World Hereford Conference in 1980 held in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Donna, however, paved her own path in the Hereford world.

In 1967, she and six other breeders' wives founded the Hereford Auxiliary (HA), now the National Hereford Women. The HA hosted different fundraisers during Donna's involvement. She also served as president.

“The beginning of the auxiliary was all about getting women involved with membership and figuring out what their own mission was,” Marty says.

The family's commitment to the breed and education led them to establish the Vanier Family Scholarship in 2008. Each year 10 youths are each awarded \$10,000 scholarships.

“One can't think of the Hereford Youth Foundation of America (HYFA) Scholarship program and not think of Donna Vanier,” says Amy Cowan, AHA director of youth activities. “Her philanthropic spirit started years ago when the Hereford Auxiliary was founded, and her vision lives on today. Donna was a true matriarch, and it is an honor to help carry on the legacy of such a special lady to the Hereford breed and agriculture community.”



Donna Vanier (right) and Mary Vanier working the 2002 Catbacker Auction for K-State Athletics. The 2021 auction sold 140 items to support more than 450 student-athlete scholarships.

After Donna passed, the school placed a plaque outside the chapel in her memory. The chapel was always Donna's favorite place at the school. St. John's Military School closed in May 2019. The school is now the St. John's Military School Historical Museum.

Every Man a Wildcat

The Vanier family is a Kansas State University (K-State) family. Jack went to school there for a few years before returning home. All three children received their degrees from the university.

In 1984, Donna started the Catbacker Auction, which is now the annual Powercat Auction. She took her knowledge and experience with charity auctions to help raise funds for the Ahearn Athletic Scholarship. The auction started as a small silent auction on a few picnic tables to support the football team. As part of the fundraiser, Donna asked the community for donations. This grew into the Kansas State Athletics event it is today.

In 1988, Jack was named to K-State's search committee for a new head football coach. That committee selected Bill Snyder, who became close friends with the Vaniers.

"Donna was a salt of the earth person," Snyder says.

The K-State football complex was renovated in 1992 and renamed the Vanier Football Complex. It was then torn down and rebuilt. The groundbreaking for the new complex happened in 2014. The Vanier Football Complex includes areas for student athletes to focus and grow, not only in their respective sports, but in academics, as well.

Both Donna and Jack were named to the Kansas State Athletics Hall of Fame in 1995. The Vanier family also still sponsors several scholarships at K-State, continuing the Vanier's passion to support education and youth development.

"My friendship would be true, even if they hadn't invested a dollar," Snyder says. "They were so much more important than their investment."

The Vanier Football Complex contains a display honoring the Vanier family, including a history of CK Ranch.

Endless giving

While the AHA, St. John's and Kansas State Athletics were blessed by Donna's efforts, she was involved in other projects in Salina and at K-State.



The Vanier family (back row l to r) Bob Krause, Marty, Kim, John, (front row l to r) Donna, Mary and Jack pictured. The family sponsors scholarships throughout different colleges at K-State, including those for K-State Athletics and at K-State's Polytechnic Campus in Salina, Kan.

In 2012, the Donna L. Vanier Children's Center opened in Salina. This center houses the Child Advocacy and Parenting Services, Salina Child Care Association and Salina Regional Health Center's Infant-Child Development Program. Donna was the driving force behind that project, and she chaired the Salina Regional Health Care Foundation. She was also a founding board member for the Salina Community Foundation.

Donna served as a board member for the Kansas State University Foundation and as the chairman of the board of visitors for the Beach Museum at the university.

Donna, a very devout Episcopalian, spent countless hours volunteering at the local church and served as treasurer for the Episcopal Diocese of Western Kansas.

Despite numerous accolades and titles, Donna's main passion was always being a wife and mother.

"She was always someone who would stop whatever was going on, sit down and just listen," John says. **HW**