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UMass Amherst
Isenberg School of Management

Gene Isenberg

University distinction is a complicated thing. It comes from superb faculty, exceptional students, expert staff, and a clear sense of campus identity. The quality of a university is a dynamic and multi generational effort, building over the years an understanding of the institution's competitive drive to participate in the world's academic life at the highest levels of performance. This effort encompasses every facet of the university's activities, but the most successful institutions enjoy the leadership of alumni who nourish the continuing commitment that connects generations of students and spans academic administrations and political cycles.

This university, UMass Amherst, celebrates today one of the stellar examples of alumni commitment in Gene Isenberg.

A son of Massachusetts, Gene's dramatically successful life speaks to all of the qualities we seek in our institutions. Taking advantage of the opportunity this campus provided, Gene leveraged his education into a remarkable career with a record of accomplishment, innovation, and daring that leaves us stunned in admiration. He saw opportunity, he took risks, he identified superb colleagues to deliver results, and he demanded performance.

Among his many virtues, Gene never suffered fools. If you participated in a meeting, and made comments and statements, proposed notions or analyses that demonstrated, in the first few moments, a lack of seriousness, an absence of relevance, or a failure of intelligibility, Gene shut you down with a few sharp, well chosen words, leaving you with the clear realization of your error. Loyal to a fault, supportive of those who worked with him, Gene was a phenomenon.

We who had the privilege of knowing Gene and Ronnie for only a few years thought we'd entered a charmed space. His commitment to this campus and its mission, his recognition of how his education had created so many opportunities, and his generous approach to making the university a better place, kept us on task, working harder than we thought possible, seeking at every moment to live up to some pale reflection of Gene's selfless commitment. We wanted a foundation at UMass Amherst, an organization like those at other major public research universities, capable of mobilizing alumni and friends to invest in the institution's future. We knew that such an innovation,

even supported as it was by the then system president, would not be easy. And, we also knew that such an invention needed inspiration that only one of the university's own could provide.

Gene gave us that leadership. His life and his commitment to the institution, reflected in this school and in so many other ways, commanded respect. When Gene convened a meeting of the many distinguished alumni of this university, you knew, that whatever else you might think, Gene was the real thing. So the many alumni and friends, who like Gene had a commitment to the institution, joined together and invented the UMass Amherst Foundation, and then supported and guided the development of a rapidly growing fund raising enterprise for this campus.

Gene insisted that we do this fund raising thing right, that we focus on meeting the competition presented by the best public research campuses, and that we sustain the effort as an institutional enterprise with a life of its own. Gene gave much to this university, he knew about money, he knew about investment and the importance of putting resources behind quality, and he knew about competition. Gene recognized that the sustaining support that he and other alumni and friends provided could leverage the work of faculty, students, and staff into even more successful academic performance.

Gene wasn't easy, his standards were high, he could be irascible and impatient (although Ronnie's grace, charm, and wisdom leavened that mixture considerably), but he never let you slow down because he didn't slow down.

All of us who had a moment with Gene left changed, inspired, and awestruck. And we were not alone. We once walked with Gene in a crowd at a big-time football game when a man of about 40 years calls out with the enthusiasm reserved for international celebrities and says "That's Gene Isenberg!" He rushes over and shakes his hand amazed that he'd encountered such a legend at this prosaic event. We knew Gene was a superstar, but we didn't know that the world did too.

Only a short time was required to become enamored of Gene and Ronnie, that inseparable pair whose mutual commitment to each other and the good things they could do entranced us all. We come together today to celebrate the opportunity to remain a permanent part of the Gene and Ronnie Isenberg fan club.

Thank you.

John V. Lombardi