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Alumna Establishes Endowed Scholarship to Honor Longtime UD Administrator, Historian

“No one is more deserving of a scholarship in her name than Sybil Novinski,” said President Thomas S. Hibbs, Ph.D., BA ’82 MA ’83, at the ceremony celebrating the Sybil Novinski Scholarship Fund endowed by Eileen McPherson Meinert, BA ’83, and her

husband, David Meinert. “This is something that many alumni, faculty and administrators have talked about, and this is a great day because we get to honor someone who’s meant so much to so many.”

Turning to retired University Historian Sybil Novinski, Hibbs told her, “Eileen and I as students recognized your work. You’re a Renaissance woman and philosopher queen, who understands the principles of the good and how to apply them to 18- to 22-year-olds on a college campus. I’ve personally benefited from your wisdom, your wit and your counsel to all of us.”

Provost Jonathan J. Sanford, Ph.D., recalled how when he first came to UD as dean of Constantin College, and Professor of English Scott Crider, Ph.D., was serving as associate dean, the Novinskis would have the two of them over to their home.

“Thinking of the University of Dallas without the Novinskis is like thinking of a PB&J sandwich without the peanut butter or the jelly, or better, like the Core without the Lit Trad sequence. The very shape of our campus, its plans and circuitous paths bear the Novinski stamp,” he said.

Sybil, Sanford continued, is “a living testament to what makes the University of Dallas the good, the true and the beautiful place it is.”

Sybil Novinski, wife of Professor Emeritus of Art Lyle Novinski, has meant so much more to UD than any of the many titles she held in her 55 or so years of working for the university — serving in roles in Information Services and Admissions and as registrar, associate academic dean, associate provost and university historian, among other things.

As Distinguished Professor Emerita of English Eileen Gregory, Ph.D., BA ’68, put it: “Thinking about words of tribute for Sybil Novinski today of course leads me to remember so many images of her over the years — Sybil at her desk or at her dining room table at home always, always at work. The decades of ceaseless labor for this place, unwavering devotion to it and hope for its flourishing.

“But Sybil’s importance to this institution is more than those memories or all of our memories combined. When I think of Sybil in relation to the university, she seems to me to represent the heart of it. In a community like ours, there are many gifts — and we value the intellectual perhaps most of all,” added Gregory. “The heart is less publicly accessible, but without its presence and constant mitigation, all the virtues in the world are sterile. It manifests itself in care for others, in the mystery of human relationships, in the face to face. And Sybil, for me, has been that center, that ground in persons, in incarnated life. ... Sybil has modeled this ministry of the heart.”

At the conclusion of her speech, Gregory invited Sybil herself up to speak.

“My husband and I came here in the fall of 1960,” recalled Sybil. “There was NOTHING! We ran into these crazy people, the Cowans, and these Cistercians who spoke all these different languages we didn’t understand, and had lots of Ph.D.s — and then we realized, wow! There were big aspirations ... and we had the freedom to build something important. What a thing that is, to be able to build something.

“We had that wonderful freedom and a worthy work,” she added. “I can’t wish for anything more wonderful for anyone.”

Sybil spoke of how Lyle is a published poet, often writing of angels; he conceives of an angel as “a being who comes in the space between,” explained Sybil. “It’s a surprise when the angel comes ... to lead you on a path, or to give you something. ... That’s what Eileen and David are. They’re angels, who endowed this scholarship and inspired other people to add to it.”

“Sybil was an angel in my life,” rejoined Eileen Meinert. “Sybil opened the door to the University of Dallas for me. She opened my heart to what real education is. She was the Holy Spirit’s visible instrument.”

Eileen had always planned to make a significant gift to UD. After telling David of her gratitude for Sybil’s role in her coming to the university, David suggested that she name the scholarship after Sybil. Later, Eileen spoke to Sybil herself about it.

“Trying to explain what the university had meant to me, the words that came to mind were ‘reverence for reality’ — reverence for the inner hunger of the mind and the soul — that reverence that leads to the reverence for the one Great Reality,” said Eileen. “That’s what this university gave me: It gave me the foundation for my life.”

Many others have indeed come forth since the initial endowment to contribute to the Sybil Novinski Scholarship Fund — so many, in fact, that a second, this-time-virtual ceremony was held so that they could share their own memories and experiences. Emceed by the Novinskis’ son Associate Professor of Drama Stefan Novinski, M.F.A., BA ’92, the virtual event included reflections by Professor of Philosophy William A. Frank, Ph.D.; Beth (Holland) Blute, BA ’83; Tom Hansell, BA ’81; Joe Hogan, BA ’74; Lydia (Tigges), Ph.D., BA ’83 MTS ’11, and Frank, BA ’83, LoCoco; and John Parker, BA ’83 MBA ’89, in addition to Sanford, Eileen Meinert and Sybil Novinski.

“I’m going to speak about what Sybil Novinski has meant to the faculty at the University of Dallas,” said Bill Frank. “One of Sybil’s great achievements was to keep the hearth of hospitality alive for the university community. How many dinners did we have celebrating new faculty, birthdays, holidays and just-because events, gathering at the Novinskis’ homestead?”

He recalled how Sybil was also often essential in identifying and remedying problems that

students might be having outside of the classroom that were affecting their performance in the classroom.

“Sybil often used her office as the registrar as a bridge: a bridge between the classroom and student life,” said Frank. “That’s an important role in a university’s coherent life, and it’s not always played well, but Sybil played it to perfection.”

He particularly appreciated Sybil’s attitude of “We can fix it; we can sort it out,” which was effective in putting people at ease.

Beth Blute reinforced Frank’s vision of Sybil with her “we-can-work-this-out” attitude. She shared that because her high school in rural Oklahoma left much to be desired, when Blute visited UD at age 17 as a junior, Sybil advised her to simply drop out and apply to UD, saying, “We’ll teach you everything you need to know.” Then the registrar, Sybil accepted Blute as a technical high school dropout.

“Pete and I are so happy to be part of honoring Sybil and paying forward the scholarships that we both received,” said Blute. “Neither of us could have gone to UD without massive scholarship and financial help, and we hope that many more alumni will join us so that this scholarship grows and becomes even more helpful to future UD students.”

Tom Hansell concurred with Blute’s assessment, recalling Sybil Novinski in Lynch Auditorium with her red pen, giving the “yay” or “nay” on proposed schedules before students were permitted to register; everyone had to get the “OK” from Sybil. She approved Hansell’s freshman schedule even while realizing it might be too ambitious.

“With wisdom and grace, Sybil issued me a license, perhaps to fail, but most definitely to try,” said Hansell. “And so I did — try, and often fail. With her encouragement, I learned so much more about education, life, people, myself, and the wisdom needed to embrace the human condition, more than would ever have been possible if Sybil were not such a wonderful and experienced guide, a teacher, a lifelong learner.”

Joe Hogan addressed the Novinski children directly. It was really their father, with whom he had studied during his Rome semester, whom he knew best, but he then came to know their mother through Lyle.

“The one view that I always had of your mom through [Lyle’s] eyes was that of just pure love,” said Hogan. “Love is a very interesting thing because it’s something that you give away — and that love, in many respects, translated to the university community.”

Last year, Hogan was battling cancer. He recalled running into the Novinskis at an alumni event and mentioning his illness to Sybil.

“You’re going to beat this,” she told him matter-of-factly. “This is not a problem, so what are you worried about?”

“I’m privileged to be able to pay some of this back, and to say from the bottom of my heart, and the bottom of my wife’s heart, and all of us in the Class of ’74, God bless you, Sybil, and thank you,” said Hogan.

Like Hogan, Frank LoCoco benefited from the model of family life provided by the Novinskis: “What we saw from Sybil and Lyle was true role models for how to live a Catholic married life: to have children, to raise children, to have extended families like the family at UD and to take care of them and raise them in the faith. I truly believe that college matters. Five of our children went to UD; our youngest is there now. The other three were in Catholic studies programs modeled after the UD Core. Through these programs, they’ve learned to really know how to love the Church — to live in the world, but to know when to not be of the world. We learned that from Sybil and from Lyle.”

“Sybil, you’re a woman of letters; you hobnob with some of the greatest philosophers, men of letters — but your children are your resume, and we are your children,” said Lydia LoCoco. “I hope that I pass a little bit of Sybil on to my children.”

John Parker shared that he, like Blute, had technically been a high school “dropout” whom Sybil brought to UD minus his diploma: “That must have been a good year for dropouts,” he joked. Then, more seriously, “Sybil was my angel of intervention. No rational person would have admitted me. I had nothing to offer the university in exchange for my admission except for my promise to Sybil that I would never forget her faith in me, and I have not.”

Stefan Novinski, before handing the program over to his mother, told everyone: “The secret to our family was dinner. Every night, the seven of us sat down to dinner together.”

To all of the donors who had shared their stories and words of gratitude, Sybil said, “You remind me of so many other stories besides your stories, and how lovely and generous you are.

“I remember years ago realizing that the university had come to be through the generosity of people who never went to school there,” she added. “Then I realized that we had to grow our alumni to understand that it would then be their school to support, and to love and encourage, and that’s what you all have done.”

Stefan thanked the donors for celebrating his mother’s legacy, remarking on her unique vision of the world.

“There’s a wonderful play called *The Time of Your Life* by William Saroyan, and it has a preface that sums up how Mom views the world,” he said. “Many of us have encountered how we wanted to view the world one way, and then Mom said, ‘Hmm, you should probably view the world this way.’ This is the advice Saroyan gives in the preface about his play: ‘In the time of your life, live, so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death, for yourself, or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding place and let it be free and unashamed. ... In the time of your life, live, so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it.’

“Mom, you have taught us all to smile at the infinite delight and mystery of the world, and to seek goodness in everyone and to bring it out into the open. You find the goodness in all of us, and we are all grateful.”

In Meinert’s closing remarks, she said, “Just as Sybil opened my heart to what real education is, we alumni have not only the privilege of that transformative education but the opportunity to make it available to future generations of students.”

Donors to this scholarship to date include:

- John Ahne, BA ’83
- Peter, BA ’82, and Beth, BA ’83, Blute
- Dr. Mary Therese Ahne Breger, BS ’80
- Andrew and Carrie-Leigh Cloutier, both BA ’84
- Daniel Davis, BA ’76
- Tom Hansell, BA ’81
- Joe Hogan, BA ’74
- Karen Kaczmariski
- Dr. Lydia, BA ’83 MTS ’11, and Frank, BA ’83, LoCoco
- Dr. Melanie Wells, BA ’76, and Bob Loftus, BA ’76
- Neil McCaffrey, BA ’75
- Eileen (McPherson), BA ’83, and David Meinert
- Mark Mrozek, BA ’83

- Dr. Mark, BA '80, and Karen, BA '82, Papania
- John, BA '83 MBA '89, and Jeanne, BA '83, Parker
- Jeff, BA '82 MA '83, and Annette Patterson
- Steve and Patricia Pierret, both BA '82
- Michael Reilly, BA '75
- Phillip Shore
- William Young, BA '75

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