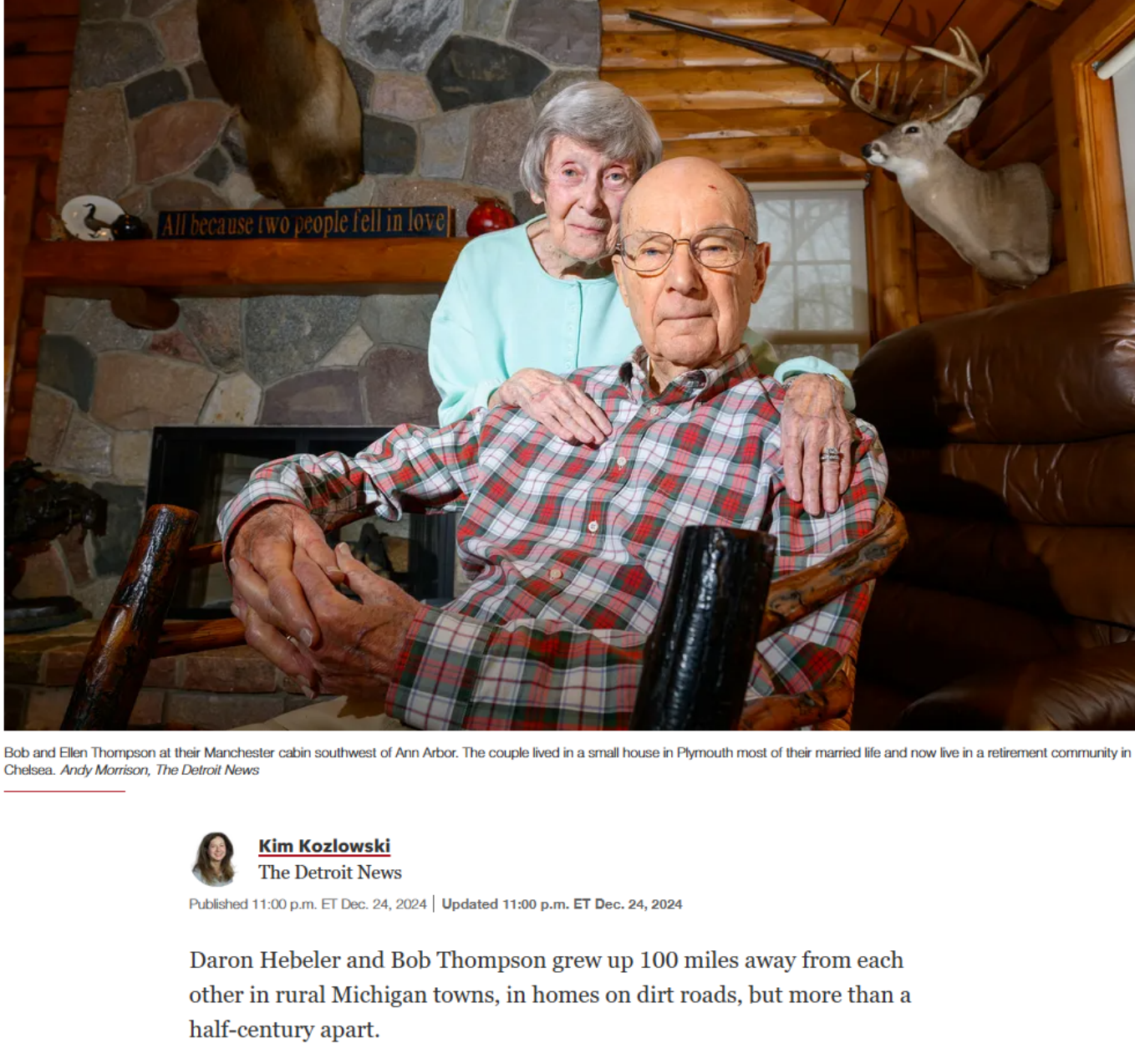


# Changing lives through education inspires Michigan couple's lifetime of giving



Bob and Ellen Thompson at their Manchester cabin southwest of Ann Arbor. The couple lived in a small house in Plymouth most of their married life and now live in a retirement community in Chelsea. *Andy Morrison, The Detroit News*

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The Detroit News

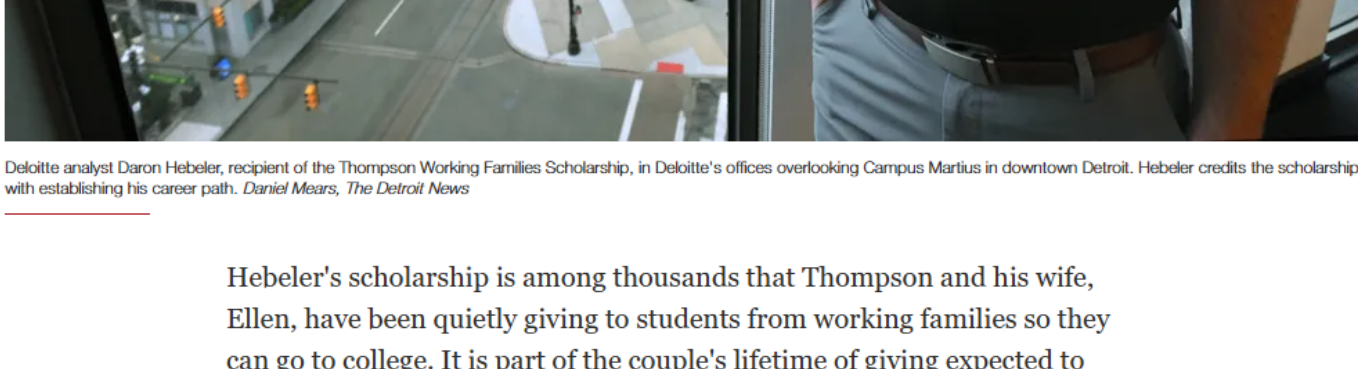
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Daron Hebeler and Bob Thompson grew up 100 miles away from each other in rural Michigan towns, in homes on dirt roads, but more than a half-century apart.

Their lives collided a few years ago when Hebeler, who milked cows as a teenager, received a gift from Thompson, a man who grew up on a farm and then later made a fortune after paving miles of Michigan roads with asphalt.

While a student at Michigan Technological University, Hebeler landed a scholarship from Thompson, whom he had never met. It allowed the young man raised by a single mother after his father died to pay tuition and earn degrees in accounting and management information systems. Hebeler, 23, contemplated not attending college and working in his family's candy-making business. But he has since begun a path he never imagined with a career as an analyst at Deloitte Detroit.

"If the scholarship had not come across my plate, there's no telling where I could have been or where I could have ended up," said Hebeler, who grew up in Ovid, northwest of Lansing, with a population of 1,500. "The scholarship has 100% changed the trajectory of my life."



Deloitte analyst Daron Hebeler, recipient of the Thompson Working Families Scholarship, in Deloitte's offices overlooking Campus Martius in downtown Detroit. Hebeler credits the scholarship with establishing his career path. *Daniel Mears, The Detroit News*

Hebeler's scholarship is among thousands that Thompson and his wife, Ellen, have been quietly giving to students from working families so they can go to college. It is part of the couple's lifetime of giving expected to exceed a half billion dollars, to thousands of people, mostly for educational endeavors spanning K-12 and higher education.

All with the hope of giving others a better life.

It started 25 years ago when Thompson sold what was then the state's largest asphalt paving company, Thompson McCully Co., for \$422 million.

Thompson was celebrated when he gave away \$128 million, a third of the sale's proceeds, to 550 employees who worked for the company, including \$1 million to 80 longtime employees. That same year, in 1999, the couple started the **Thompson Foundation** with \$50 million. Since then, the foundation has funded millions in gifts for the building of a charter school system in Detroit, upgrading technology in several Michigan rural school districts and giving more than 6,000 scholarships to students attending three public universities in Michigan, and Bowling Green State University in Ohio, the Thompsons' alma mater.

When the Foundation sunsets in 2033, it is projected that more than 21,000 students in K-12 schools and colleges will be impacted by the couple's giving, expected to exceed \$425 million.

But the couple, who lived in the same 1,800-square-foot house in Plymouth for most of their married life, say they don't often think much about what drove them to give so much for the education of others. They now live in a condominium in a retirement community in Chelsea and also spend time at their cabin in Manchester, southwest of Ann Arbor.

"We didn't need the money," said Bob Thompson, 92. "We just thought we needed to help people if we could."

Educational opportunities can change the lives of individuals and their families, added Ellen Thompson, a former teacher who came up with the idea to funnel funds to young people raised in families not earning enough to send them to college.

"Education really grows a person," said Ellen Thompson, 92. "It prepares you for life."

Donors such as those from the Thompsons, whose philanthropic focus is education, have an important and lasting impact, especially with higher education, which often becomes part of a family's lineage, said Kelley Kuhn, president and CEO of the Michigan Nonprofit Association.

"Education is so essential and so fundamental," said Kuhn. "Individuals who are donating at this level do not have to know the people that are impacting, but can have an impact for generations to come."

## Generational inspiration

Giving was a part of Bob Thompson's childhood when he grew up with an older brother during the Great Depression in Jonesville, a village southwest of Jackson, currently populated with 2,200 people. His father was a farmer, the family lived in a home without electricity for a few years, and they didn't have much, he said. But he said he was grateful because what his family had, they shared with others, and others gave to them.

One of Thompson's most vivid memories was when he was 8 years old and went to town with his father. As they were leaving, they saw a young boy selling Collier's magazine, likely bought for a dime, and he was reselling for 20 cents to earn money for his family, Thompson said. His dad asked the young boy how sales were going, and the boy said not well since he had 20 magazines still to sell.

Thompson's father gave the young boy \$2 and bought all 20 of them, said Thompson, adding that the value of a \$1 back then could hire a person for the day. Once home, Thompson's father told his mother how he had spent their income to help a young man who needed it.

"She never said a word; she just said OK," Thompson said. "My mother could have used that \$2, believe me, to buy sugar or salt or a thimble or thread or twine. She made a lot of our clothes. That (gesture) has always affected me. We have never given away money that affected our life. We do whatever we want to do. We eat what we want, travel where we want. But my dad gave away \$2, and that changed their life because they sacrificed."

"That has a lot to do with who I am now," Thompson said. "I can still see the boy standing there in town with the magazines."

Years later, Thompson went to Bowling Green State University on a football scholarship, thanks to his older brother, who worked in the athletic department. But the coach had to cut him from the team during his sophomore year because he wasn't a good player, he said.

"I fell apart," said Thompson, who promised his mother he would attend college. "The coach said, 'It can't be that bad.' I said, 'I can't go to college without a scholarship.' He said, 'We'll let you keep it.'"

Without the scholarship, Thompson said he would have dropped out because he couldn't afford the cost.

"And life would have been different," Thompson said. "We all had people who helped us in life."

## Growing a business

Thompson was in college when he met his wife, then Ellen Bowen, whose father worked for Standard Oil while she grew up in Cleveland. The Thompsons were both studying to be teachers and married in the September after Thompson graduated from Bowling Green in 1955.

But Thompson said he didn't have the skills to be in the classroom so he went into Air Force ROTC. His slot didn't open until the following spring, so he and Ellen Thompson, who was teaching in Ohio, moved to Michigan, and she continued teaching students in Highland Park, then later in Plymouth.

After Thompson was an Air Force fighter pilot for three years, they started the construction business in 1959 with \$3,500 they had saved. Thompson had worked for asphalt contractors during the summer while in college, which gave him the idea to start the company in Plymouth, where they moved to and raised two sons and a daughter. The Thompsons now have six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

The company started with 12 staff members and then grew to 250 employees, along with 500 contract employees.

Thompson was a shrewd businessman who ran the company efficiently but also took risks by buying asphalt companies across the state during the 40 years that it rapidly grew and became profitable, said Jim Lindstrom, who worked for Thompson for 25 years.

Lindstrom, who rose through the ranks of the company, helped Thompson expand by living in a motel five days a week to train people in Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Lansing, then commuting home to Jackson to be with his wife and their two sons.

He was among those who received \$1 million from Thompson when the company sold in 1999, using some of it to buy land to keep a farm in their family. He also was among those who sat in a room in a double-wide trailer and informed some of Thompson McCully's employees what Thompson was giving to them. Employees lined up outside in a parking lot, Lindstrom recalled, then exchanged high-fives with others or brushed away a tear after getting a check or an annuity.

"It's as amazing a day I have ever experienced to be able to be part of these people's gift from Mr. Thompson," Lindstrom said. "He was giving back to the people who helped him make it. He always says, 'I'm very lucky. Luck was finding good people and rewarding them and finally giving them the ultimate reward.'"



Bob Thompson in his Plymouth office. His legacy of giving started 25 years ago when he sold what was then the state's largest asphalt paving company, Thompson McCully Co., for \$422 million. *David Garabick, The Detroit News*

## Impact on education

The Thompsons were giving grants from their foundation to organizations promoting self-sufficiency, relieving human suffering and improving health care, but the couple struggled to measure impact. They pivoted to giving to K-12 urban education in 2002 with charter schools in Detroit. They aimed to see 90% of incoming freshmen graduate and 90% of those go a post-secondary institution or the military.

The Thompsons partnered with Doug Ross, a former U.S. assistant secretary of labor and Michigan state senator, to open the University Prep charter schools in the city. More than \$125 million from the Thompson Schools Foundation was invested between 2002 to 2013 to build University Prep Academy, University Prep Science and Math and University Prep Art and Design. All include an elementary, middle and high school; University Prep Academy offers two elementary schools.

Today, more than 4,600 students are enrolled at the schools, where graduation rates are 95%.

The Thompsons had a vision for more charter schools in Detroit but faced political opposition from teachers' unions and others, so they moved on.

Between 2010 to 2023, they invested \$10 million in technology upgrades in rural Michigan schools, including districts in Manchester, Clinton, Jonesville, Ovie-Else, Clare, Hart, Grass Lake, Morley Stanwood and Constantine.

In 2011, the Thompsons quietly began awarding scholarships to students who came from families with incomes not low enough to qualify for full Pell grants but not wealthy enough to pay the cost of a four-year education.

These scholarships could be their greatest legacy, with the Thompsons' giving expected to reach \$300 million when the foundation ends.

Known as the **Thompson Working Families Scholarship**, the program matches funds from partner colleges to pay for most of the tuition of students who meet certain financial thresholds, are pursuing a bachelor's degree, and meet accountability measures. Students must cover any tuition costs not covered, meet a minimum 2.75 GPA, be enrolled in a minimum number of credit hours and complete 20 hours of community service every year. The goal is for 80% of the students to graduate within four years.

"I'm convinced that everybody has to have some skin in the game. We have tried it the other way, where we pay all the student's costs, for some reason, it just does not work," Bob Thompson said. "The university, the parents, and the students all have to participate. In most colleges, 51% of the starting freshmen graduate. Of the Working Families Scholarship students, 86% of those who start the program graduate."

The scholarship program started at Grand Valley State University and now includes Saginaw Valley State University, in addition to Michigan Tech and Bowling Green State universities.

It has awarded \$66.6 million to more than 6,000 students who have attended the four universities where the program is offered. By the time full foundation funding is committed in nine years, just under 14,000 college students are expected to benefit.



Bob and Ellen Thompson at their Manchester cabin. Education is "something we believe in," Bob Thompson said. *Andy Morrison, The Detroit News*

For the Thompsons, giving represents who they are and what they want to do. They appreciate all the letters they get from students who appreciate their gift.

"These children are the ones that probably wouldn't be in college," Ellen Thompson said. "Now they have much better opportunity for jobs, and it's amazing how many of them want to go on and get another degree."

It's important to do what you can to try to impact people, and for them, it's been through education, Bob Thompson said.

"It's something we believe in," he said. "Education is a change factor. It's very simple when you get down to it."

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