

Dedication that helps others

ISSUE: The influence of Jim Collier

OUR VIEW: Provided abundant opportunities



James M. Collier Jr. arrived in Elizabethtown with his wife and three preschool-age children in 1955.

The town might have seemed big to a man raised in the Lincoln County community of Crab Orchard, but certainly not impressive to a U.S. Army veteran who had been a university professor in Waco, Texas and Macon, Ga.

With a law degree from the University of Kentucky and a doctorate from Rutgers, he arrived in the town of about 6,000 – not even a fourth of its current population. Hardin County had almost no industrial base and only recently had opened a tiny hospital on the north edge of town. The city's status as the hub of interstate traffic and Kentucky's

network of parkways was nearly a decade away. Radcliff was not yet an incorporated city.

But Collier saw possibilities. Most of all, he saw a need for opportunities.

He believed in education as a way to provide opportunities. His idea was a state-supported, four-year liberal arts college in Elizabethtown. It would serve the state in a different way than its major land-grant university in Lexington or the state teacher colleges that were being transformed into regional universities.

"I conceived of this as being a place where better students throughout the state would come," he once said. "I had a vision of, say, four thousand students; take in a thousand each year."

Many dreams remain just ideas. Collier was not just a dreamer; he was a doer.

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He rallied support. By his estimation, Collier made more than 200 speeches to explain his vision and encourage others to join. Some folks politely laughed at the young lawyer but he pressed on.

The Chamber of Commerce got on board. A few others actively worked alongside him.

The idea was presented to the governor but it attracted little excitement. Collier kept working.

He became an active supporter of the next Democrat to win the governor's seat and with that connection, interest developed. As things do in political circles, the idea took another form. Rather than a single liberal arts school, a network of community colleges was proposed.

Collier helped write the legislation. The bill passed but without financial support. It would take another administration change before the General Assembly actually funded the colleges.

Yet another hurdle remained.

The University of Kentucky provided the initial administrative support for what now is the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. In an interview, Collier described the two-year schools as unwanted appendages. Administrators were willing to build classroom space but the land had to be provided.

So it was time for more work. A community foundation raised the money and purchased the property where Elizabethtown Community and Technical College resides today.

While Collier provided the idea, most of the legwork and much of the energy, he also shared the credit. He attributed the achievement to his entire adopted hometown.

"I feel like Elizabethtown is really the reason why we have a community college system. I think we sparked the thing," he said. "I think to satisfy us politically we were offered it, and I think that it became such a nice political talking point that other communities were offered them, too, and now they have them. And I think that's great."

Al Rider, who now heads the foundation that developed from the community college initiative, said Collier was about providing opportunities for others through education.

Every student who ever passed through Elizabethtown Community College, ECTC or any of the other 15 colleges and 67 campuses has benefited from one man's vision and energy. He was key to providing their opportunities.

Jim Collier died last week at 92. His influence lives.

This editorial represents a consensus of The News-Enterprise's editorial board. James Collier quotes used here come from the Kentuckiana Digital Library's oral history interview of July 7, 2004.

Founding directors of the North Central Education Foundation, which helped give rise to the local community college: O.J. Allen, Sheridan Barnes, John Behen, Bill Burks, James Collier, Jack Gross, Jim Hartlage, J.M.F. Hays, Walter "Dee" Huddleston, Thomas Jeffries, John W. Jones, Jim Kabler, Preston L. Mansfield, Margaret Montgomery, Charles Morgan, Kennard Peden, Mrs. R.T. Routt, Albert Thomason, Marvin Underwood, Mrs. Joseph Wycoff.