Columbia University Trustee, Benefactor and Healthcare Philanthropist, Alfred Lerner, CC’55, Dies at 69

BY JASON HOLLANDER

Columbia University Trustee Alfred Lerner, CC’55, died on the evening of October 23, in Cleveland at 69. The Brooklyn native and son of an immigrant candy shop owner donated $25 million to help Columbia establish a student center that has been an integral part of campus life since opening in 1998. He was remembered throughout the country as a true philanthropist, who always happened to be part of his life’s mission.

A Columbia trustee since 1994, Lerner served as the vice chair of the trustees, the vice chair of the executive committee, and chair of the health sciences committee. He chaired the Columbia College Board of Visitors for five years in the 1980s and received the Alexander Hamilton Medal from Columbia in 1997, the highest honor bestowed by the Columbia College Alumni Association. In 1995, Lerner donated $25 million towards Columbia’s new 225,000 square foot student center that would bear his name.

“I am deeply saddened by the loss of Alfred Lerner, as is the entire Columbia community. Al was so close to Columbia that we feel as though we have lost a member of our family,” said President Lee C. Bollinger. “Al will be remembered for his analytical mind, unpretentious manner, and as someone to whom everyone listened. His ability to comprehend complex, multi-faceted information and distill it into its essence was a gift to us all.”

In July, Lerner gave a $100 million gift to the Cleveland Clinic Foundation to help turn the institution into what he called a “mecca of health care.” Lerner considered his generosity to be part of his life’s mission.

“My heartfelt sympathy goes to his family, the great fans of the Cleveland Browns, and to all who knew Al as a man who dedicated his life to helping others,” said David Helfand, who came to Columbia as a transfer student in 1984 and as a graduate student in 1986.

Lerner was the recipient of the 2002 Great Teacher Award, an honor he was always happiest to play. He was chosen to be one of the Great Teachers of 2002.

Alfred Lerner, CC’55

“I love helping people. It vindicates what I have been working for all these years,” said Lerner recently. “I have always wanted to leave a legacy in the field of medicine, where I can have some contribution in both furthering and developing new research along with helping sick people to get better treatment. This is what I hope my legacy is going to be, not just that I made a bunch of money.”

Lerner earned the bulk of his $4.3 billion fortune as founder and chairman of the MBNA Corporation, the largest independent bank-based credit lender in the United States, which employs more than 20,000 people worldwide and more than 2,000 in the greater Cleveland area. He also served as chairman and CEO of Town Country Trust, a Baltimore-based real estate trust with more than 17,000 residential apartments.

But Lerner was probably best known as the owner of the National Football League’s Cleveland Browns. Although his old friend, Art Modell, had moved the team to Baltimore in 1995, Lerner delighted Cleveland fans when he brought the Browns back to town that year.

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Professors Helfand, Ateshian Chosen as 2002 ‘Great Teachers’

BY JASON HOLLANDER

In 1949, former Columbia and U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was in attendance when the first Great Teacher Awards were presented to Professors Mark Van Doren and Edwin H. Armstrong by the Society of Columbia Graduates. On October 30, at the Society’s 93rd annual dinner, Professors David Helfand and Gerard Ateshian joined an expanding list of distinguished educators in being cited by the Society as Columbia’s “Great Teachers” of 2002.

Helfand, a professor of astro- my, and Ateshian, professor of biomedical engineering and mechanical engineering, were both especially honored by the significance of the honor.

“Since I was a student here for so many years, many of my former students of this award have been my mentors,” says Ateshian. “I am certain that I owe my award to them. I’m humbled to be recognized.”

Helfand, whose goal is to inspire his students to think out- side the concepts of their own experiences, says a distinction for teaching is “preferable” to any recognition he could receive for his research.

“Ateshian, who came to Columbia in 1984 as a transfer student from his native Berat, received his undergraduate degree from the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science in 1986, his MS from the school in ’87, and then an MA and Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1990 and ’91, respectively.

“Columbia is my family. I got all my degrees from here. My wife and I were married in St. Paul’s Chapel,” he says.

Since becoming a professor of engineering, Ateshian has focused on employing a “show” rather than “tell” method of teaching.

“The textbook doesn’t have the same impact as when I actually show students how something was conceived, designed and manufactured in a lab,” he says.

Ateshian, who is an internation- ally recognized leader in research on the biomechanics of joints, has had his work supported by the National Institute of Health and has already obtained two patents: for manufacturing anatomically correct prostheses and for the three dimensional modeling of anatomical joints.

He often assigns beginning stu- dents design projects that explore how the simple things around us—doorknobs, hole punchers, windshield wipers—work and why those elementary models are

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