

## **DON THORNTON REFLECTS ON TREMENDOUS GROWTH IN CY-FAIR ISD AND CY-FAIR EDUCATION FOUNDATION**

When Don Thornton accepted a teaching position in the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in 1963, there were only 3,500 students roaming the halls of the district's schools.

By the time he retired as Cy-Fair ISD's Superintendent in 1992, that number had increased almost 15 times over. During the approximately seven years he served in that position, several new schools opened and the district was used to preparing for – and welcoming – up to 3,000 new students each year.

"It all happened so fast," said Thornton, a former Cy-Fair Educational Foundation board member. "We went through a lot of change and development. Projecting enrollment based on that tremendous growth was a huge challenge."

Thornton said since the Cy-Fair Educational Foundation was founded in 1970, the organization has grown and adapted to the school district's size and needs. He said he is enormously impressed with the amount of scholarship funding raised through CFEF each year to keep pace with the rising education costs and growing need for student scholarship and teacher grants.

"They have carried it further than (CFEF's) founders and I could even envision," Thornton said. "CFEF started out raising money for one scholarship a year, which was great, but now it raises far beyond what we imagined. The Foundation has exceeded our expectations."

Thornton said the two – Cy-Fair ISD and CFEF – have grown hand-in-hand.

CFEF was still seven years from forming when Thornton and his wife, Dixie, became teachers in Cy-Fair ISD in the early 1960s. Thornton had been teaching government/civics classes to Cy-Fair High School students for only two years when he was summoned to Superintendent T. Sial Hancock's office for a meeting.

Hancock said he was creating an administrative assistant's position and he wanted Thornton for the job.

"At that time school districts were eligible for large sums of federal money for the first time, and we were not sure how to apply for it or use it," Thornton said. "I was put in charge of the process of figuring it out."

Two years later in 1967 - Hancock's last year as superintendent - Thornton was named the district's director of personnel.

During succeeding Superintendent Allen Labay's tenure, Thornton was named assistant superintendent and then associate superintendent. Also during that time, the seeds were being sewn for a new foundation that would raise money for student scholarships.

Dr. Karl Bleyl, a Cy-Fair educator and science consultant, launched the movement to create a scholarship fund for Cy-Fair ISD students in the late 1960s. His idea caught on and Labay, Reverend F.J. Aragon, the pastor of Christ United Church, Jim Blackman, shipping manager for Foley's, and attorney Herman Mead met and agreed to establish the Cy-Fair Educational Foundation.

In 1970 the Foundation was born and leaders of the new non-profit entity started raising money to fund a scholarship that would help a Cy-Fair ISD graduating senior on his or her way.

Thornton said he remembered a fledgling organization of hard-working volunteers who operated with the help of the district's administrative staff. Corporate donations were hard to come by in the early days, he said, because there were very few corporate businesses in Cy-Fair to speak of.

CFEF awarded its first scholarship to a 1973 graduate of Cy-Fair High School. The Foundation's members worked tirelessly, Thornton said, to raise funds so that scholarships were available to graduates from Cy-Fair High School, and each new high school that began opening its doors to students in the following years.

By the time Thornton was named Superintendent in the mid-1980s, the district had 32 schools, including Cy-Fair, Cypress Creek, Jersey Village and Langham Creek high schools.

Thornton became a CFEF board member in 1982 (?) and served in that role for 10 years. He retired from the Superintendent's position, and the CFEF board, in 1992.

For the next five years, Thornton taught college-level course at Sam Houston State University, the school he earned his Master's Degree from in 1974.

Thornton formally retired in 1997. He and Dixie live in a golf course community on Lake Livingston near Huntsville. He enjoys golfing and fishing, and a great deal of their time is spent travelling back and forth to Houston and various college campuses visiting their five grandchildren.

Both of the Thorntons' daughters – Kelly Stewart and Kathy Risin – graduated from Cy-Fair ISD schools.

Kelly is now a counselor at The Woodlands High School and has two sons who also graduated from the district's schools. Cameron attends Texas A&M and Camden is a student at Texas State University.

Kathy will soon start teaching Physical Education at Hancock Elementary School. She has three daughters – J.J. is a Texas A&M graduate, Cassidy is a Stephen F. Austin University graduate, and Jessica is a student at Texas A&M.

As CFEF nears its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Thornton said the Foundation has grown and changed, but its core mission has remained the same.

“The goal is to help students pursue their goals by helping them get a college education,” Thornton said.  
“The question has always been, “Where and how are the scholarship dollars best used?”

“The sky is the limit for the Cy-Fair Educational Foundation,” he said.