

Inspiration, Passion, Purpose – Outer Banks Visionaries Paul and Helen Ford



Paul and Helen Ford spent more than three decades together on our Outer Banks, watching it grow from a quiet, sparsely-populated, sandy stretch of villages and beaches to a string of summer vacation hot-spots. They were captivated at once by its ever-changing beauty and solitude, and they were inspired to make the Outer Banks even better. They created Loblolly Pines Shopping Center and Pizzazz Pizza in Duck, and also became quite active in community life. They served our Community Foundation with dedication for many years, applying care, passion, and leadership, and affording it stability and continuity as the organization grew. Last, but not least: Helen and Paul, with generosity and compassion, left gifts in their wills to support future generations of children and families here.

Paul grew up in rural Harlan County, Kentucky. A hard worker from ‘go,’ he was shining shoes on street corners in the post-WWII era at the tender age of five. He was a gifted, natural leader and an astute businessman.

Helen, a single mother, had applied for a job at Merrill Lynch in Ashland, Kentucky. Recently divorced, Helen was in search of a promising position that would help her meet the needs of her four growing children. Paul happened to work there as a financial advisor; the two met, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Helen was attracted to Paul’s steadfastness, his strength in faith and family, his entrepreneurial spirit, and his kindness and caring. “He showered me with love, protection, laughter, and so many happy memories,” she wrote. It was Paul who initiated the decision to change their jobs, location, and lifestyle. In 1985 they found themselves moving their family to Duck, an ever-so-sleepy, tiny seaside village.

Paul was moved by the beauty and the potential of this wild place. He had a vision of how Duck and the Outer Banks would grow. With love and hard work, and with Helen by his side, he made his vision a reality.

“A friend of ours was doing well in the pizza business, and we thought, “why not?” Helen recalled. “We found a corner lot and knew it would be a great spot for shopping. I remember sitting on the beach with Paul at the time, drawing pictures in the sand of a shopping center in downtown Duck, and our future pizza business, while he fished.” With plans in hand, they

went looking for financing to help fuel their dreams. The industrious couple found what they needed; their start-ups were born, and flourished, as Duck and the rest of the Outer Banks grew.

The Fords were involved in church and nonprofit life, too. “I remember when Glen Miller dropped in to visit us in the early 90’s,” Helen said. “He dropped a Community Foundation annual report on our coffee table and said, ‘You’re my friends; please, just read this.’” They did, and were amazed to learn about a young, local Outer Banks Community Foundation that was working to serve urgent needs in Dare County. Glen asked Paul to join the board of directors; he agreed to serve, and by 1998 was Board President. Helen followed in his footsteps, serving from 2002 to 2008, first as Treasurer and then as President.

As Community Foundation leaders, Paul and Helen were heavily involved in its planning and development. The David Stick Legacy Society was formed during Helen’s term on the board. In addition, Helen served as volunteer interim Executive Director for three months in 2008, shouldering a hefty responsibility with grace and skill. She was on the search team that identified Lorelei Costa as the Community Foundation’s next Executive Director.

Helen also started Food For Thought, the all-volunteer nonprofit that believes ‘kids can’t learn if they’re hungry.’ Helen realized that some Dare County kids were going hungry, especially during the long off-season, and received inspiration to act through a scripture verse from the book of John, when Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Do you truly love me more than these? Feed my lambs.”

Paul and Helen established the Ford Family Fund with similar thoughts in mind. Like all of our endowed funds, giving from their fund is paced so it will provide community support for generations to come. The Fords have targeted grants from their donor-advised fund—to help area nonprofits that serve at-risk county residents.

Paul sadly passed away in 2018, but his legacy on the Outer Banks is assured. A bequest in his will supports the Ford Family Fund and its annual grant-making. Helen also is a David Stick Legacy Society member, and has made plans in her will for a similar, final gift to their fund.

“Paul lived, and I continue to live, with ties in our hearts, minds, and actions to the Outer Banks Community Foundation,” said Helen. Their legacy gifts are lasting and significant expressions of that gratitude and compassion. She went on, saying, “The youth on the Outer Banks continue to be my concern and passion, so issues that might help them grow, heal, or be nourished will be my mission.”