

Robin Wenneker holds a framed note that her father, Ron,... Expand ▶

## 'A Daughter of CAFNR'

CAFNR Foundation president draws motivation, call to service from College family ties

Written by [Stephen Schmidt \(https://cafnr.missouri.edu/?author=6\)](https://cafnr.missouri.edu/?author=6) · November 18, 2016

The Columbia home of Robin Wenneker contains several pieces of memorabilia that help tell the story of both her childhood and her family's deep connection to the University of Missouri. Yet out of all of the scrapbooks, photos and artwork, it is a piece of cardboard that she claims as one of her most prized possessions.

The cardboard piece, encased in a glassed-in frame, contains a short note from her father, Ron Wenneker, when she was in middle school. In a pre-cell phone/texting world, Ron would always leave notes for Robin, her mother, Carolyn; and her brother, Ryan. It was a way of connecting with his family for a man who would get up at 4 a.m. in the morning to feed the cows at their local farms, come back and change into a suit, have breakfast at a local eatery, and then meet with clients all day as an insurance agent.

"He would write on anything, a box top, an envelope," Robin recalls, "and put it somewhere where it would be seen."

The note reads: "If Robin wants to buy a cow, bring her by Sale Barn. -Leave only if I'm there. Love Dad"

Ron financed his agricultural economics degree in 1960 at the College of Agriculture, in part by selling calves. So as part of Robin's path to paying for college, Ron would have her buy and sell calves on her own. When she earned \$1000 in sales, she would follow her father's orders and verify the best interest rates that were published in the Sunday paper. Ron would then drive her to the bank with the best rate, where she would open a certificate of deposit (CD) and monitor her investment and track its maturation date.

"So to me all of that is summed up in that picture," Robin says of her father, who died in 1993. "That sums up to me how my dad was able to go to college, how I was able to go to college and how my dad taught me to manage money."

Robin has served as the president of the [CAFNR Foundation \(http://cafnrfoundation.org/\)](http://cafnrfoundation.org/) since 2013, after having first joined the foundation's board in 2009. Over the years, she has volunteered for or served on close to 25 organizations affiliated with the University of Missouri, after earning a business degree from MU in 1991.

Although she never earned a degree from [College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources \(https://cafnr.missouri.edu/\)](https://cafnr.missouri.edu/), two of her biggest reasons for devoting so much time and service to her alma mater did: Her father, Ron, and her grandfather, Homer Patrick.

"It took a lot for those two people to attend college, so that's why I volunteer," Robin says. "I look at it that the university gave my mom and my dad their lives, which gives me my life."

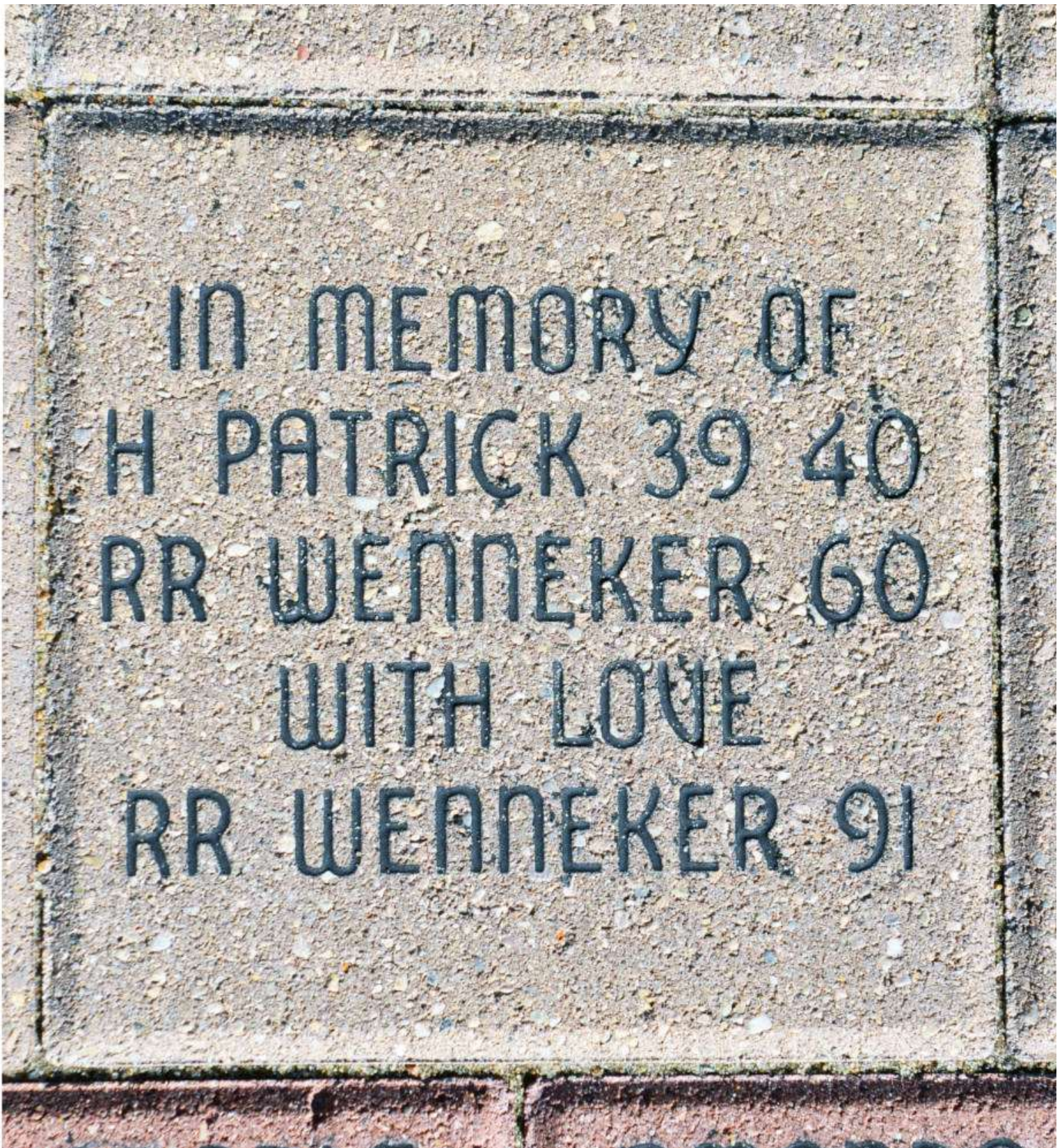
She recites a favorite phrase of her grandmother (Homer's wife and Carolyn's mother) Maxine: "Someone gave for you. You need to give for someone else."

"It's always been ingrained in us that you give back," Robin says.

## 'A big difference'

Homer Patrick's story begins in Holden, Mo., a small town located southwest of Warrensburg. Born in 1912, Homer would attend two years at Central Missouri State Teachers College (now called the University of Central Missouri) before heading to Columbia to work on his bachelor's degree in animal science/poultry in the 1930s.





Robin Wenneker decided to honor her grandfather, Homer Patrick, and her father, Ron Wenneker, with a ... Expand ▶

Homer's education, though, was broken up by a lack of funding, causing him to go to school for a year before heading off to do various jobs — such as clearing acreage, planting crops and teaching in a one-room schoolhouse — to get more tuition money. He would hitch rides back to Columbia by being a stowaway on train cars bound eastward.

“He was living his life compartmentalized,” Robin says of her grandfather. “He was never in the fabric of student life because he didn't have the ability to stay in Columbia consistently.”



Homer Patrick, second from right, stands with academic colleagues. Patrick worked at several universities as an agricultural chemistry professor, specializing in poultry research.

While he was on campus, at one point, Homer lived in a house near the Stephens College campus with a younger agricultural chemistry student named [Boyd O'Dell](http://biochem.missouri.edu/faculty/faculty-members/odellb/index.php) (<http://biochem.missouri.edu/faculty/faculty-members/odellb/index.php>), who would go to become a renowned biochemistry professor at MU and [recently celebrated his 100th birthday on Oct. 14](http://cafnrnews.com/2016/10/the-trace-elements-of-longevity/). (<http://cafnrnews.com/2016/10/the-trace-elements-of-longevity/>).

Toward the end of earning his undergraduate degree in 1939, Homer was hoping to go to school for two consecutive years to work towards his master's degree in animal science/poultry, which he would earn in 1940. The cost of such plans, though, was \$5 more than he had at the time.

Luckily the chair of the Department of Agricultural Chemistry at the time, A.G. Hogan, found him a job that would pay him the \$5 and allow him to carry through with his aspirations. A.G. would later tell him about a scholarship opportunity to get his Ph.D. in agricultural chemistry at Pennsylvania State University, provided that he study poultry science.

Homer would end up going to Penn State before becoming a biochemistry professor and administrator at various large universities such as Clemson University, the University of Tennessee and West Virginia University. His career would also include working for the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and Ralston Purina in St. Louis.

The Dr. Homer and Maxine Patrick Memorial Scholarship in Poultry Science was established in 1999, four years before Homer's death in 2003. Robin says during his decline, her grandfather relived the moment that A.G. told him the good news about finding him the source of the needed \$5.

"He was saying 'Thank you, thank you, thank you, Dr. Hogan,' Robin says. "It was such a big deal. He was able to stay and it made a big difference."

## **‘There’s no strangers’**

Ron Wenneker came to Mizzou in 1956 as a 16-year-old freshman after graduating early from high school. He hailed from La Belle, Mo., as the son of tenant farmers in the northeast corner of the state. Recognizing Ron’s high academic potential, he had an elementary teacher who drove him down to Columbia at the start of every semester and picked him up at its conclusion. To help the next talented student from Marion County, the Ronald R. Wenneker Memorial Fund was established in 1993.

On his way to earning his degree in 1960, Ron balanced a high level of on-campus involvement with noteworthy academic achievement. His list of accomplishments at MU included serving as treasurer of the Missouri Students Association (MSA) and being tapped into the Mystical 7 honor society during his senior year.

Ron, too, though had his financial challenges. Robin tells of times when her father would act like he was going to MU football games only to sneak over to Columbia College and work at a dining hall as a source for his meals. With an initial plan of earning his doctorate degree in agricultural economics, Ron decided to start selling insurance for Kansas City Life Insurance Company on the side to help pay his bills.

He realized, though, that he found his true calling in the insurance industry, a profession that was well suited for his work ethic and ability to relate and talk to people. He would later switch his affiliation to the Central Life Assurance Company (now known as the Athene Annuity and Life Company).

The same description that Carolyn gives to Robin was largely inherited from her father: “She can go into a room and there’s no strangers. She tries to make sure everybody knows someone else in the room.”

In the early stages of his career in 1964, Ron used the same brazen confidence that would pave the way for his success in his career to charm a senior finishing a dual major in retail and design at Stephens College named Carolyn Patrick. Carolyn had decided to attend school in Columbia after having many fond memories as a child when her father, Homer, would visit MU colleagues.

“They were in convertibles. My dad was driving the wrong way on a one-way street and met a car full of girls. My mom was in the car,” Robin says of the meeting that took place near the Stephens campus.

As Ron would visit with clients throughout Missouri, he would come across farm properties for sale that he would buy when he could afford them. On the weekends, all of the Wennekers would help on the farms.

“I think that desire to own something for himself was very strong in him,” Robin says of her father. “It was deeply rooted. I think he wanted his own legacy, is the best way to say it.”

As a child, Robin would get up at 4 a.m. to catch her father before he left to feed the cows. As opposed to a traditional story time at night, Ron would read to her in the morning.

“If he didn’t read to her with the right voice inflection, she would tell him,” Carolyn says of the many characters that her husband would portray during his readings, including Robin’s favorite, Billy Goat Gruff.

Robin’s earliest memories growing up in Columbia all center around timeless MU traditions. She remembers being involved in homecoming by helping pomp house decorations at either her father’s fraternity, Alpha Gamma Rho, or her mother’s sorority, Kappa Delta (Carolyn helped start a chapter of Kappa Delta at MU by becoming an alumna initiate in 1976). Robin also rode in the homecoming parade for political candidates who did not have children (or whose children were too old to be in the parade).

“I was just always part of the hustle and bustle of it,” Robin says.

## **‘Jump in and keep going’**

When Robin Wenneker looks at the path that lead her back to Columbia to help manage her family’s properties in 2007, she sees how each step helped prepare for her the leadership positions that she has maintained through several MU-affiliated organizations.

While working a sales representative in Denver for Proctor & Gamble in 1992 after graduation, she learned how to “understand a big organization” and “how to maneuver and how to be respectful of the organization, but also be effective.”

From 1993-96, Robin served as director of guest and food services for the Atlanta Paralympic Organizing Committee, leading up to the 1996 Summer Paralympic Games. As part of a start-up organization, she found the job to be very rewarding and also a valuable lesson in how to delegate responsibilities.

“Your fingerprints do not have to be on everything for eternity. You take it to where it needs to go and then you trust the next group to keep going,” Robin says. During that time, she helped to restart the [Mizzou Alumni Association](http://www.mizzou.com/s/1002/alumni/start.aspx?gid=1001&pgid=61) (<http://www.mizzou.com/s/1002/alumni/start.aspx?gid=1001&pgid=61>) chapter in Atlanta.

In 1995, she first sat down with Todd McCubbin, the executive director of the University of Missouri Alumni Association and associate vice chancellor of alumni relations for MU. At the time, he served as an alumni relations coordinator and was two weeks into his new job.



The two had lunch to talk about bringing the alumni chapter out of its dormancy. As someone assigned to working with chapters in the Southeast, Todd would later make several trips there to work with Robin and other MU alumni. [Expand](#)

"In no time at all we were having some really cool activities and events down there that I think was our first opportunity to really do it well in Atlanta. That was a growing area for us and she was instrumental in getting it off the ground with some others," Todd says.

"She is very involved and she cares deeply about Mizzou. She is a tireless supporter of our institution in a lot of ways. Really the thing about her is that she is just so connected to so many different people in various different areas and is always trying to connect them for the betterment of



A 2-year-old Robin with a pig and a calf. Robin spent her childhood helping take care of animals on ... [Expand](#) ▶



“One of the men said to me ‘Well, we’ve always had a king. I guess it’s OK if we have a queen,’” Robin says.

Robin first became involved with the CAFNR Foundation in 2009 after being sought out by Heidi Griswold, a former development officer and director of development for CAFNR who currently works at Oklahoma State University. When she joined the board, she again was the first female to do so.

“She’s a ball of fire. She came on the board and immediately made an impression with all of the guys,” says Lowell Mohler, the chairman of the Missouri State Fair and former director of the Missouri Department of Agriculture who was classmates, friends and fraternity brothers with Ron Wenneker at MU and has served on the CAFNR Foundation since 1990. “She has done a great job of helping us organize projects and she has just done a lot of active work with the foundation.”

Having been involved with the establishment of the scholarships to honor her father and grandparents, Robin had always experienced a level of comfort with the College, but always felt as a bit of outsider, given the fact that she herself did not have a CAFNR degree. Quickly after she joined the board as a trustee, then-foundation president Dudley Alexander invited her to go tour some of the Research Centers to look at possible projects.

Not long after that, Robin found herself at lunch with Dudley, CAFNR Vice Chancellor and Dean [Tom Payne](https://cafnr.missouri.edu/about/dean.php) (<https://cafnr.missouri.edu/about/dean.php>) and CAFNR Senior Associate Dean [Marc Linit](https://cafnr.missouri.edu/about/info-next.php?department=cafnr&name=Marc-Linit) (<https://cafnr.missouri.edu/about/info-next.php?department=cafnr&name=Marc-Linit>).

“I remember thinking, ‘Wow, I can really be useful here. I feel like I can contribute and I feel valued.’ It just called to me to jump in and keep going,” Robin recalls.

## ‘Looking for the right opportunities’

As president, Robin has maintained a philosophy of “appreciating where we’ve been, but also updating us to where we are now and where we can go.” Those updates include modernizing the foundation’s bylaws, articles of incorporation and tax codes — and purchasing additional land for the Research Centers, namely at [Fisher Delta Research Center](http://delta.cafnr.org/) (<http://delta.cafnr.org/>) and [Bradford Research Center](http://bradford.cafnr.org/) (<http://bradford.cafnr.org/>).

“It’s just looking for the right opportunities and not letting any of them slide by us. We can move quickly to make those things happen,” Robin says of the purchasing strategy that would surely receive her father’s approval. “We have a nimbleness that allows us to be able to react fast and that is probably a little harder for the university as a whole. We don’t want the College to miss out on anything.”

Although Robin is stepping down as president in December (to be replaced by board member and former CEO of MFA, Inc., Bill Streeter), she will still maintain her presence on the CAFNR Foundation’s Executive Committee and CAFNR’s Capital Campaign Committee.

“Dean Payne told me that I was a daughter of CAFNR, so I’m going to take that to heart and not let them forget about me or me forget about them. I intend to stay involved,” Robin says.

She encourages MU graduates (both from CAFNR and other schools and colleges), that no matter where they may live, to get involved in some small way, such as being a committee member, stopping by the CAFNR tailgate at a football game, or attending a [happy hour or watch party at Mizzou Alumni Association chapter event](http://www.mizzou.com/s/1002/alumni/interior.aspx?sid=1002&gid=1001&pgid=397) (<http://www.mizzou.com/s/1002/alumni/interior.aspx?sid=1002&gid=1001&pgid=397>).

She met one of her best friends, Kristi Baer Cooper, in Atlanta after a mutual friend of theirs said that they should get together for lunch. They ended up being part of the group that restarted the Atlanta alumni chapter.

“In every city that I have lived, I was generally starting from scratch and one of things I counted on was Mizzou, not only as a place to help me feel grounded, but also as a way to get started meeting people,” Robin says.

“When you’re here the experience is a four-year experience, but when you become an alum, you’re going to have friends who are 23 to 90, and I think that’s a pretty amazing thing. You get to have this breadth of connections and people and it’s not limiting, so I have found that very rewarding personally. It’s a powerful thing to know that you’re connected to that many people no matter where you go.”





Robin Wenneker on her graduation day in 1991 in front of the Columns and Jesse Hall. Photo courtesy of Robin Wenneker.

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