A Tale of Two Students

It’s a heartwarming, classic American story: pretty co-ed meets handsome football player after a game, and love ensues. Four days after the co-ed's graduation from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, the two get married. With a shared passion for teaching, they begin their first jobs and start a family. They succeed in their careers, and build a wonderful life together. Grateful and generous, they commit to giving back—to their church, their community and their university. And to think, it all happened because of one phone call.

Our story starts in 1964, when Ken Falkinham graduated from Beaver Dam (WI) High School. Ken had high hopes of being the first in his family to attend college and to play football at the university level. After being recruited by the late football coach Duane Counsell, he chose to enroll at UW-Stevens Point.

Ken and three similarly minded high school classmates headed for campus, but when they arrived, they were among many aspiring athletes. “I thought I was just a number and was never going to make this team,” he recalled.
After only a few practices, he and his high school classmates packed up and headed home.

Like young people of legal age at the time, Ken was pondering his future at a local watering hole when his mother tracked him down. Coach Counsell had called to talk him into coming back; he had made the team as a starting cornerback.

“Duane Counsell was instrumental in changing my whole life,” Ken said, describing what that fateful phone call has meant to him.

Ken wound up majoring in chemistry and mathematics. He was honored with one of the first James H. Albertson Memorial Award, which recognizes students who distinguish themselves as leaders, scholars and citizens. Coach Counsell also presented him with the WSUC Scholastic-Athletic award in 1967.

The thread of our story runs next through nearby Marshfield. Sandy Mitten knew from the age of 15 that she wanted to go into education, starting her career early as a Sunday school teacher. Before enrolling, she had come to know a lot about the University. “There were lots of commuter students, so I heard good things about Stevens Point,” she recalled.

This is the spot in the story where fate, and friends, stepped in. On a perfect-for-football Wisconsin autumn day, Sandy Mitten and Ken Falkinham met for the first time. The rest, as they say, is history.
Sandy earned her degree in early childhood education from UW-Stevens Point in 1969. After graduation, the couple spent their first years teaching in Columbus, Wisconsin, where Ken earned his master’s and doctoral degrees at nearby UW-Madison. It was here, inspired by the University of Wisconsin Athletic Badger Fund, that the Falkinhams came to understand the impact and power of philanthropy, especially the lasting value of an endowment.

Endowed scholarships have become the annual cornerstone of their gifts to a UW-Madison football player and a Stevens Point future teacher. “When we’re gone, these scholarship benefits will stay forever in our names,” Ken said.

Sandy recalls meeting the family of one scholarship recipient. “The mother broke down and cried,” she said. "The family just couldn’t afford the college tuition without that scholarship.”

Eventually their careers took the Falkinhams to Illinois. Sandy continued nurturing young minds while earning her master’s degree from National Lewis University in Evanston, while Ken moved into school administration.

Although UW-Stevens Point was further away geographically, the University remained close to their hearts. Through the years the Falkinhams have continued making gifts for teacher scholarships at UWSP, and in 2014, they made a substantial gift to fund the new football office suite in the Health Enhancement Center, which was named after them.
“We like to give directly to the kids or to programs that enhance their experiences,” said Ken.

Both of the Falkinhams have since retired. Ken, the founder and former president of Kensa Utilities, has turned over the reins of the company to the couple's son, Jason. Sandy retired from teaching, although she continued as a school volunteer until their granddaughter, Madison, was born.

In addition to their giving history at UWSP, the couple endow an annual seminary scholarship in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Synod. Ken notes proudly that he and Sandy were invited to a recent scholarship recipient’s wedding, "and we will be there when she is ordained,” he adds.

The Falkinhams also are involved in the Waukegan to College, or W2C, program in Illinois, which mentors, tutors and prepares students who have potential but lack the resources to attend college. The Waukegan school district, where Ken was deputy school superintendent and Sandy taught for more than 21 years, faces many economic and social challenges. The Falkinham Scholarship offers four years of financial assistance. Their most current recipient attends Dominican College as a junior.
Today the greatest joy for the Falkinham family is spending time with their son Jason and his family, which includes wife Rebecca, granddaughter Madison and the family's dog, Axl. They continue to volunteer, travel, garden and enjoy college sports, and participate in many other hobbies.

Expect this truly wonderful story of love, academics, football and giving to continue through the legacy created by Ken and Sandy Falkinham. In turn, their generosity gives others the chance to pursue their dreams and enrich their lives through education—giving rise to generations of new stories marked by success and happiness.