

BILL CUMMINGS

Finding a new mission in life

BY BRIAN GOSLOW

When Bill and Joyce Cummings go out for a drive from their Winchester home, reminders of Bill's career regularly appear: the corporate headquarters of Cummings Properties and the Cummings Foundation in Woburn, the Cummings Center in Beverly, and its latest addition, Trade Center 128 and its landmark Beacon Grille at the intersection of Route 128 and Interstate 93.

Bill Cummings, 73, is "semi-retired," having stopped taking a salary in 2007 from Cummings Properties, the company he founded in 1970, after he made a deal with his wife to figure out a way for them to get 10 weeks' vacation time a year together — in trade for allowing him to work the rest of the year.

Careful negotiations are something Cummings has specialized in since he talked his way into Tufts Univer-

sity. "By many standards I didn't demonstrate that I deserved to get in, but I did," he said. Cummings graduated from Tufts with an economics degree in 1958.

One of his post-college jobs was selling fruit juices for Old Medford Foods. One day, the position took him to the kitchen of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. "I had to get through the dietician before they would order the product," Bill said.

That dietician, you may have guessed, was Joyce.

"I was really rather irritated with him because I had work to do and he way really in my way," she said. "I was, 'Move mister, I've got things to do.'"

Bill, however, was in no hurry, because, he said, "I had just found my new love." Joyce finally agreed to buy the product, and, he said,

"She bought me."

They've been married 44 years. "And to this day, he still gets in my way in the kitchen," said Joyce, who Cummings still lovingly calls, "my bride."

Cummings founded Cummings Properties in 1970 on land purchased next to the Old Medford Foods property; he eventually bought the 200-year-old company out, acquired adjoining properties, and discovered he liked the real estate building and became a full-time commercial developer.

He's most proud of Cummings Center in Beverly, built on the remains of the United Shoe Machinery Corporation, formerly the world's biggest manufacturers of shoemaking machinery. Its 90-plus acres, originally marketed for \$80 million dollars, sat vacant for 15 years before Cummings Properties purchased it for \$500,000 in 1996.

Staff photo by Orlando Claffey





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“It was a very distressed property with a million and a half square feet of concrete buildings,” Cummings said. “We subsequently spent \$70 million to rebuild it.” The company partnered with the Beverly Historical Society to give the renovated facility a museum-like feel, with many images and artifacts from its heralded past on display; more than 500 different businesses currently occupy the complex.

THE FOUNDATION

Cummings has shared the fruits of

his career through the Cummings Foundation, which was founded in 1986 and of which he and Joyce are the majority source of funding. Two of their most beloved projects are the large not-for-profit New Horizons independent and assisted living facilities in Woburn and Marlborough, which allow area seniors to thrive and enjoy their later years.

When the foundation sought a new entity for its portfolio, Cummings, a member of Tufts University’s Board

of Directors, asked Tufts President Lawrence S. Bacow what the school’s greatest need was. That led to a \$50 million dollar commitment to its veterinary school, whose future, at the time, was in doubt. The Grafton campus, which the foundation owns, was renamed Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in 2005 in Bill and Joyce’s honor.

Their lives are not all work. The Cummingses, who love to travel, went on a memorable trip to New Zealand with youngest daughter

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Patricia, who was studying abroad in Australia (they have three other children — Danielle, Kevin and Marilyn). Somehow, Bill and Patricia ended up bungee jumping, while Joyce held her husband's cell phone, billfold and camera. "It cost us \$100 each," Cummings said. "If I was 65, they said I'd have been able to go for free — or if I went naked."

As Bill moved into semi-retirement, the Cummingses began to spend more time on Singer Island, on Florida's northeast coast. And in 2009, Joyce experienced her lifelong goal of going to Israel, with Bill, through the Tufts Alumni Association's Travel-Learn Program. It turned out to be a life-changing experience.

"We're Christian and I just wanted to go to Jerusalem and the Galilee and the holy places," Joyce Cummings said. None compared to their unanticipated experience at the Holocaust Museum, where after a half-day of looking at its exhibits, they heard a talk by Holocaust survivor Eliezer Ayalon. "We were just overwhelmed with his presentation," Joyce said. "He didn't talk (about his Holocaust experiences) for the first 37 years. His wife knew but his children did not know anything because he couldn't speak about it."

"Very soon after that, we looked at each other and said we have to carry this message forward, how do we do it?"

CREATING A FUNDING SOURCE

The answer is still a work-in-progress, with early results thanks to an unexpected source. At the start of 2010, Cummings Properties opened the Beacon Grille at Trade Center 128. The company didn't plan on getting into the restaurant business, but was forced to do so after the economic downturn discouraged any major chain restaurant from moving into the space for anything other than a discount rate. Not wanting to be bound to a profit-making venture, it was determined all restaurant proceeds would be donated to non-profit causes.

Early proceeds allowed 21 Tufts students to visit the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village in Rwanda, and more recently, funded a presentation by the Holocaust Museum's Ayalon at Tufts University. "It's so important to get this message out because the young people of today, even reading it, and understanding it, have to hear it and experience it in some way from someone who was there to get the full perspective," Joyce Cummings said.

She said it's important to discuss how to respond to people who make racial and homophobic jokes so that the world is able to deal with the bigger issue of genocide. "It's become a life mission for me," Joyce said. "It's the most important thing we've ever done."

The Beacon Grille recently announced it would donate 100 percent of its profits toward the establishment of a Holocaust and

Genocide Education Program at Tufts University as a \$1 million dollar challenge gift by the restaurant, with the intention of creating a \$2 million endowment.

The ongoing story of the Cummingses is one of love — for each other, family, friends, community — and travel. They plan on sailing to St. Martin's with three other couples in early 2011 and hope to return to Africa, where they've visited several times.

"I like interesting places that aren't on the A list," Joyce said. "I don't care about five-star hotels; give me a bed and lantern and an interesting person to talk to."

"Not that we're above that," Bill Cummings added, laughing. "We have enjoyed every place we've went together."

That includes their visits to the New Horizons retirement community in Marlborough, which sits on the site of a former Catholic girls school — and is still home to 30 of the nuns who used to work there. "When we first came there, one of the sisters told us nobody owns anything," Cummings said. "They said, 'We were the caretakers then, you're the caretaker now.'"

Like many other residents of the state who've been touched by their acts over the years, the nuns are hoping the Cummingses are able to live prosperous and healthy lives for years to come. "When we go there, they tell us they're praying for Bill," Joyce said. ■