

Giving—the legacy of Chuck and Belinda Lawrence

BY JEFFREY B. ROTH

Guests at the January 22 Grand Opening of the Lawrence Family Fitness Center will not only be touring a state-of-the-art facility, they will also be walking through a physical manifestation of a philanthropic legacy created by Chuck and Belinda Lawrence.

On October 27, the health and fitness section of the 13,000-square-foot facility officially opened to the public with an informal ribbon-cutting ceremony. The swimming pool opened December 21.

In February 2020, Chuck and Belinda

celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary. In December 2019, they marked the 20th anniversary of the founding of TradeWinds Market Place, which opened December 5, 1999, on the site of the F.T. Largay Inc. IGA store that was destroyed in a December 5, 1998 fire, Belinda said.

Both are Maine natives—Chuck grew up in Augusta and Belinda in Caribou and Houlton. The couple met at work. At the time, Belinda was a customer service manager at the Houlton Shop 'n Save, which was owned by Hannaford. Chuck, she said, had just been promoted

as a store manager at a Hannaford in Caribou.

"He came to my store to train for a few weeks before he went to his store," Belinda said. "His office manager set us up."

In the mid-1990s, the couple talked about starting a grocery store. When they bought the Blue Hill property, Belinda had two small children to care for. Chuck and Belinda, who live in Holden, have three sons—Claustin, Brandon and Dustin, who currently works for them, Belinda said.

"We just wanted to build a grocery

store," Belinda said. "We both were in the grocery business. Hannaford was very supportive of their store managers."

Since that time, the Blue Hill store has expanded four times. A car wash and a pet wash were added adjacent to the market. Later, the Lawrences opened TradeWinds Crossing, which originally featured a Dunkin' Donuts and frozen yogurt store. Eventually, they opened other TradeWinds stores in Ellsworth, Veazie, Orland, Brewer, Hampden, Old Town, Bangor and Eddington, which were later sold to a Lawrence, Massachusetts-based company.

"He loves to build other businesses," Belinda said. "He loves to have projects. He's a project guy. I paid the bills."

Chuck said Belinda is detail-oriented. She takes care of the day-to-day operations and makes sure things run smoothly. Their different skill sets complement each other.

"We very much listen to our customers," Chuck said. "That's how we came up with the fitness center. We created the Lawrence Family Foundation for the purpose of funding the fitness center and also for the work that [is being done] on cancer research."

Both Chuck and Belinda grew up in families "without a lot of extras," Belinda said. Together, they worked hard, and grew their businesses bit-by-bit. "It was just a natural process," she said.

"We've done extremely well over the 20 years since we started TradeWinds," Chuck said. "We wanted to give back to the whole peninsula. I have always been very active in athletics, wrestling, track and cross-country. My sons are very active in fitness."

"This is our way of giving back to them," Belinda said. "I think that the right thing to do is to give back, but I think people are either generous of spirit or not—you can't force somebody to give back."



Belinda and Chuck Lawrence.

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Lawrence Family Foundation ensures the continuation of Chuck and Belinda Lawrence's legacy

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Chuck and Belinda Lawrence founded the Lawrence Family Foundation in 2016 to create a philanthropic legacy "to make sure their charitable giving outlived themselves," said Andrew Laslie, treasurer of the foundation. The new Lawrence Family Fitness Center is a monument to their legacy.

Laslie, a financial adviser and chief tax strategist with Vance Gray Wealth Management, Inc., based in Bangor, said the mission of the foundation "is to improve the quality of life for individuals, with an emphasis on those disadvantaged, in the State of Maine, particularly the Blue Hill Peninsula and Bangor areas."

"The Lawrences understand the importance of fitness, and the role it plays in the overall health of individuals, both mentally and physically," said Laslie, who has worked with and advised the Lawrences for about 15 years. "They know that the winters on the Blue Hill Peninsula are long, and cold, and there are not a lot of opportunities for indoor exercise."

Laslie said that sometime in 2014 or 2015, Chuck and Belinda, founders and owners of TradeWinds Markets, decided

to build an indoor swimming pool and track. It took a couple of years to identify the "right parcel of land—one that was large enough, close enough to town—dry and flat. We spent many hours working with architects, engineers and contractors to plan the fitness center that is there today."

Ultimately, the search for a suitable site for the fitness center went full circle. After considering and rejecting several potential sites, Chuck and Belinda

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decided to build the facility next to the existing Down East Family YMCA Blue Hill branch building—a former supermarket garage, which they had donated for that purpose in 2013.

The only drawback was the fact that

the site contained wetlands. In 2017, when it was announced that the fitness center would be built behind TradeWinds, Chuck said that if they had to pay to fill in the wetlands, "we might as well use property we already own."

To build on their property, the Lawrences had to fulfill Maine Department of Environmental Protection wetlands mitigation requirements. Specifically, the Lawrences purchased and preserved 130 acres of wetlands in Surry.

"They know that this project is more than just a way for people to stay healthy," Laslie said. "It will become an economic driver that will help increase business throughout town. I'm most impressed with their commitment to give back to the community that has supported their businesses for so many years, by committing millions of dollars to help people who have helped them, is quite admirable."



Andrew Laslie, treasurer of the Lawrence Family Foundation.

COURTESY OF ANDREW LASLIE