



Jim & Doris Robak

Each month, The Daily Courier will profile local philanthropists working to keep higher education at Yavapai College accessible in our community. Today, we meet YC donors and Legacy League members Jim and Doris Robak.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to help guide 350 middle and high school students through Yavapai College's CTEC campus," Jim Robak says. "These are students from outlying areas, like Bagdad and Seligman. They'll tour the robotics program. Down the hall, there's the automotive program. They'll watch and learn about that. Then around the corner, people are working on drones and aviation. We do these tours and you can see the kids thinking, 'This is cool.' We get them to see the opportunities." Ask Jim and Doris Robak about themselves, and these former Minnesotans will talk obligingly about their interests. But if you want to get them excited, ask them about other people. The Robaks light up when they talk about helping others, and their efforts to close the gap between deserving students and a meaningful education.

"That's why we're such advocates for CTEC," Doris explains. The Robaks believe Yavapai College's Career and Technical Education Center (CTEC) offers the community plenty to get excited about: 27 different vocational programs that provide high-quality technical education in expanding career fields like aviation, robotics, electronics, automotive and welding. Located out by the Prescott airport, CTEC teaches everyone from dual enrollment high school students to middle-aged workers re-training for a new career. Its facilities are state-of-the-art, its curriculum is geared toward today's job market, and its job placement rate for graduates is 85 to 90%.

"And yet, I still run into people who say, 'I never knew CTEC was here,'" Jim says.

The Robaks are determined to change that. Beyond their support of Yavapai College and participation in its Legacy League program, the Robaks have also been instrumental in creating the CTEC speakers bureau. Each month, Jim books speaking engagements at local organizations to spread the word about CTEC's career-savvy technical programs. And he's actively exploring partnerships with county employers in order to make CTEC programs more accessible to the local workforce.

"I guess we're ambassadors," he chuckles.

The Robaks' advocacy springs from a desire to give back to their community, a reverence for education and an awareness that no two paths are the same.

"I went to college for six years," Jim says. At St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, he earned a degree in Russian History. "I never used it," he says. "I found my career by meeting a business owner in a sauna."

Jim's second start on a career led to remarkable success. He began selling electronics and technical support for a 20 person start-up called Marco. His knack for organization and sales meshed well with the organization, and Marco became a major player in managed services, cloud services and other business IT technologies. "I got lucky," Jim says, "I met a man who furthered my career. We were very blessed."

But as their fortunes improved, the Robaks never forgot the lesson: conventional college is not a career path for everyone.

"There are different kinds of education," Doris says, and modern learning must be applied in ways that fit each student and the times they live in. "A lot of kids go to college, and they don't know what they want yet."

"And they can rack up a lot of student debt figuring it out," Jim adds.

"The reality of education today is that you have to be practical," Doris says. "Where are the jobs?"

The Robaks found themselves drawn toward philanthropy while still in Minnesota. They participated in the local United Way, and in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. Doris worked for a local community foundation and saw, firsthand, the good it can do. "The foundation model is a wonderful model for giving, because your gift goes on afterwards," she says.

"Instead of buying a tree, you buy an endowment – it keeps paying out. It continues helping people."

At Marco, Jim began participating – and then leading – the company's charitable endeavors. "Marco set a good example for me," he says. "They were deeply involved in their community and my sense of commitment to the places where you live and work grew out of their example."

After eighteen years at Marco, Jim found himself eligible for early retirement at 46. "It was an easy decision," he says. "We had 3-4 feet of snow on the roof at the time, and we just looked at each other."

Doris nods. "First thing we sold was the snow blower."

They arrived in Prescott in 1998, and hit the ground running: Jim served as Director of the local United Way, helping grow that program while Doris worked with the local Red

Cross. Both have helped numerous local non-profits. In addition to their Yavapai College and CTEC support, Doris volunteers with the library, and Jim works with the Prescott Evening Lions Club.

"Volunteer and stay healthy," Jim says, "that's our philosophy."

For the Robaks, it's a formula that works. "You have to ask yourself: 'what do you want more of?' More money and toys? There's more to life than that. There's the knowledge that what you do can actually help others."

-- Michael Grady