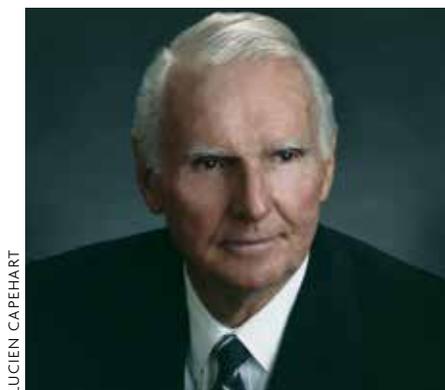


THE NICEST GUY

JACK TAYLOR EMBODIED THE VIRTUES
OF THE “GREATEST GENERATION.”

BY JEANNETTE COOPERMAN



LUCIEN CAPEHART

Jack C. Taylor

In 2000, the St. Louis Symphony was a great orchestra at great risk. Its meager endowment had been substantially depleted. One of the cultural jewels of the city was in danger of existing in a vastly diminished form, with the very real possibility that it would no longer exist at all. Those who remember refer to that time as the Symphony’s near-death experience.

Jack Taylor, founder of Enterprise Rent-A-Car, stepped forward and presented the St. Louis Symphony with a \$40 million challenge grant. At the time, it was the largest donation ever given to an American orchestra. “This gift saved us,” remembers cellist Melissa Brooks, “and nearly 20 years later we have a whole new generation of world-class musicians on stage and on the podium, thanks to Jack Taylor and his family.”

The orchestra found an unlikely savior in Taylor, who cheerfully admitted that he had no deep interest in classical music. His only real connection to the St. Louis Symphony was the remembered pleasure of a few school field trips to kinder konzerts. But Taylor wanted St. Louis to be its best, and as he put it, “A first-class city needs a first-class symphony.”

Jack Crawford Taylor passed away on July 2, 2016, at the age of 94. The Symphony, the city of St. Louis, and thousands more whose lives were profoundly affected by Taylor, will continue to cherish and honor his memory.

Taylor never loved another city more than his own. He grew up in University City and Ladue, graduated from Clayton High despite being “a terrible

student,” and struggled through one semester at Washington University until World War II broke out.

After flying a Hellcat through Luftwaffe flak and negotiating landings in a dark ocean tossed by storms, he came home with two Distinguished Flying Crosses, the Navy Air Medal, an earned confidence, and a fresh resolve: *You are going to be happy every day of your life, because you are here, and many of your buddies are not.*

He had hit early upon a winning business credo. Instead of angling to be the biggest and make the most money, Taylor “just wanted the customer when they walked out the door to say, ‘That’s a nice guy. That’s a nice place to do business.’ I wanted the people to be happy, and I wanted to be happy.”

As a result, people wanted to do business with him.

He started in 1957, with seven cars and a \$25,000 loan to repay. To make it sound as if business was hopping, he’d let the phone ring a few times before picking up. He ended his first year in debt, broke even the second, made a profit the third. Jack was tall, with even, chiseled features. He carried himself with ease and dressed with the kind of self-respect he asked of his employees. Spotless, crisp white shirts were requisite Enterprise attire.

His company grew from seven cars in 1957 to a fleet of more than 1.7 million (twice the size of its closest rival), with 8,500 locations in more than 70 countries and revenue of \$19.4 billion. But he remained exceedingly polite, unfailingly kind.

“He paid attention to everyone,” an employee says. Rudeness troubled him. He was famous for speaking to everyone he encountered. It bothered him when the company grew so big that he couldn’t know everybody by name. Chatting with employees, he’d invariably ask, “Are you enjoying your job? Are you having fun?” Put people first, he said, and profit will follow.

Jack made billions of dollars, and then he and his children gave away a substantial amount of his fortune. Some of those gifts were thank-you’s: He loved Forest Park because his kids used to sled down Art Hill on cookie sheets. He turned down naming rights for the Boathouse renovation but asked for a

“A FIRST-CLASS CITY NEEDS A FIRST-CLASS SYMPHONY.”

—JACK C. TAYLOR

small plaque in memory of his parents, who used to take him there when he was a kid. Many of his gifts met urgent, unglamorous needs, and were never even made public.

But the \$40 million that saved the Symphony was a public call to action.

At the press conference announcing the gift, Concertmaster David Halen moved through the Powell Hall foyer playing Massenet’s *Méditation* from *Thais*, arriving at Taylor’s side just as he bowed the final notes. “That was so beautiful, it makes me understand why I’m making this gift,” Taylor said. “That was worth \$40 million!”

Virginia Weldon called out, “He can play it again, Jack!”

At the time, Weldon was president of the Symphony board. “His gift turned

The Nicest Guy



DILIP VISHWANT

"I let him know that without him there would be no St. Louis Symphony."—David Robertson

everything around," she recalls. "It gave people the belief that we were going to succeed." Even the way the gift was structured was extraordinary: The Symphony would receive interest on the full \$40 million while it campaigned to match it. Taylor chose to make challenge grants because he knew an organization would be stronger if it encouraged broader support.

David Robertson came on board as Music Director in 2005, as the Symphony re-gained its sea legs. Robertson enjoyed Taylor's dry sense of humor and flawless timing. "I always hoped that my gratitude for what he did for the orchestra didn't make him feel awkward," remarks the conductor. "I let him know that without him there would be no St. Louis Symphony. He was always the first to downplay his importance, but at the same time, there was a real understanding of what quality and dedication is, and that was something he felt he could see and hear with our musicians."

Taylor may have graciously brushed aside thanks, but in his own life, he'd made gratitude a habit. Halen remembers him being generous "personally, by telling people he had faith in their abilities. He cared very deeply about people, and about a sense of community. He set a standard of generosity that will carry on long after his passing."

Halen did play the *Méditation* a second time: at Taylor's memorial on July 8. At the private service at Powell, Don Ross, vice chair of Enterprise Holdings, spoke about how Taylor first defended, then helped build, our country. He quoted William Danforth: "The phrase 'the greatest generation' was coined for men like Jack Taylor."

Such men never would have used the phrase for themselves. Asked how he wanted to be remembered, Taylor didn't even pause to think. "I'd like to be remembered as a nice guy. 'Taylor was a nice guy.' Yeah, I'd like that."

Jeannette Cooperman is staff writer for St. Louis Magazine and author of the murder mystery A Circumstance of Blood.