

# Your UK Home: 50 years under one roof

Opened in 1963, the Helen G. King Alumni House  
was named for a most inspirational UK alumna

By Linda Perry



Helen King watches as Richard Cooper, president of the UK Alumni Association in 1965, hands UK President John Oswald, center, a check from a donor.

Photo: ExploreUK

It's only natural when University of Kentucky alumni hear the name "Helen King" that they associate it with the years of service that this one strong woman dedicated to furthering her alma mater and the UK Alumni Association. Helen G. King '25 CI, director of the UK Alumni Association from 1946 to 1969, tirelessly pursued whatever she thought best for the university and its alumni.

But how many of us also know that this petite go-getter was instrumental in getting the UK Athletics Association incorporated? That's right, King and several others — for example, M. E. Potter, head of the UK Department of Physical Education, and Guy Huguelet, active in the alumni association — joined forces to help make the athletics organization an independent entity in the mid-1940s.

But that's not all. King had a "hand" in the construction of several familiar campus landmarks, starting with McLean Stadium on Stoll Field. Understanding the benefits of philanthropy at an early age, King, while a UK student, helped with fundraising for the stadium, which was completed in 1924.

After graduation, King worked in several advertising jobs before her first position at UK in the Public Relations department. Later she accepted the position as director of the UK Alumni Association, operating out of an office in the UK Student Union. She quickly became aware of the importance of an alumni facility — a lovely gathering place for UK alumni, faculty and friends to enjoy special events.

"I dogged the presidents, first Donovan and then Dickey, about establishing an alumni/faculty club where the alumni and faculty could become better acquainted and develop a rapport," King told Terry Birdwhistell, now dean of UK Libraries, during an interview in 1977 for the UK Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

### Early alumni dwellings

Her efforts paid off and eventually an opportunity presented itself. Coldstream Farm had been acquired by the university for potential use for the UK Medical Center. The property already had a huge home situated on it. King told Birdwhis-

tell that UK President Frank Dickey and Gov. Happy Chandler had decided that the beautiful house on the Coldstream property was too nice a building to turn into offices. "Frank Dickey said to the governor, 'Helen King has been crying for an alumni/faculty club. If she can raise the money to activate it and decorate it, may she have it?' And Happy said, 'That's fine with me,'" related King.

King threw herself into the project and quickly identified a potential benefactor by the name of James W. Carnahan, 1896 AS, a businessman in Chicago, Ill. After three visits to Carnahan, she got a pledge from him for \$65,000 to activate and decorate the house, and the university subsequently named the building the Carnahan House in his honor. It was one of the first buildings that became available for use as a club for UK alumni, faculty and staff, beginning in 1958. A few years later it became clear a larger alumni facility was needed and events shifted to Spindletop Hall, which had been acquired by the university from the Miles Yount family, famous for an oil field called Spindletop in Texas.

It was inevitable that an alumni gathering place on campus would eventually be necessary, one that could also house a growing staff.

Here begins the story of Helen King's fundraising drive for the current 50-year-old facility on Rose Street, for she knew that it was important for alumni to feel

connected to their alma mater. What better way than to have a comfortable place on campus so that alumni can reconnect with their former classmates and professors? Her dream was that an alumni/faculty house would be a place for business and social meetings, recreation and the enjoyment of friendships, and where faculty and staff could have a large and lovely house in which to entertain.

### Fundraising for a campus alumni house

In 1959 King and the UK Alumni Association Executive Committee launched the Century Club drive, with a goal of \$250,000 to meet the acute needs of the university, such as financial recognition for outstanding faculty, assistance to some student organizations, continuation of the scholarship program, and helping to maintain the university's educational standards among the highest in the country.

But most important, the fund would provide for construction of a building to house alumni offices and activities and serve other university functions, such as faculty and student seminars and conferences, solving an on-campus need of the university which had been apparent for many years. The objective was to enroll 500 members who would give \$100 each year for five years to amass \$250,000 by the university's centennial in 1965. That way UK alumni would be making a sub-



UK students patiently waited for their turn for food and to participate in games and prizes during the 2012 Welcome Back Cookout at the King Alumni House.

Photo: Jeff Hounshell



**The King Alumni House has provided accommodations for special occasions, such as during Archbishop Desmond Tutu's visit to campus in 1999 officially marking "50 Years of the UK African-American Legacy." Derrick Ramsey '83 AS, right, now the director of athletics for Coppin State University, was happy to be able to meet with Tutu, a South African social rights activist. "One of the highlights of my professional career was to be a part of the celebration of 50 years of African Americans at the University of Kentucky and to have Desmond Tutu as our keynote speaker," says Ramsey. "To be a small part of that legacy, and understanding the sacrifices that were made to make us a better state, country and world is awesome."**

stantial contribution to the university upon the occasion of its 100th anniversary — a magnificent alumni house. Herman Lee Donovan, UK president-emeritus, made the first \$500 pledge to the Century Club to kick off the worthwhile campaign.

King's foresight in her approach to securing a campus alumni center for the university and its graduates was ahead of its time and would help to make UK stand out among other universities. "...it was her leadership and her inspiration which coupled a really small staff with a cadre of volunteers in producing a highly respected alumni program, a faculty/alumni club, and which brought about the financing and building of an alumni center a decade or so before many of our neighboring institutions in

Kentucky and in the region dreamed of such," wrote Jay Brumfield, UK Alumni Association president (1969-90) upon King's death in 1985.

The campaign was ultimately successful, although it had its fair share of struggles. King was a tenacious Wildcat and repeatedly pressed the point to the approximately 30,000 living UK alumni about the value and honor of having a special alumni center on campus. "What I am saying to you is this. If you will be satisfied with the mediocre for your university and for your alumni program then we will continue on in an earnest but inadequate way to do the best we can with the materials you supply," King told members of the UK Alumni Association during its May 1960 meeting. "Your institu-

tion can be no better than your ambition *for* it and your pride *in* it. You set great store by the achievements of our athletic teams but sometimes lose the total perspective."

While closing her remarks during the same meeting, she made a valid point for all UK alumni. "This report constitutes a personal appeal to each of you to invest in the future. Not to give, in the ordinary sense of the term, but to invest — support — underwrite — yes, to insure and safeguard your own future and the future of your children."

In the end, Century Club contributions totaled \$335,000 from approximately 525 alumni to begin construction of the long-awaited alumni home on campus. David H. Pritchett '32 EN, an electrical engineer from Madisonville,

was probably typical of those sending in checks for \$500. "It is a pretty good chunk of cash for an average family to put out and I probably can't afford it, but I want to say this — after what the university has done for me and what it is currently doing for my children, I want to assist to my utmost, whether I can afford it or not," he wrote in 1960.

When additional funds were needed to decorate and furnish the building, a committee of alumni headed by UK Athletic Director Bernie A. Shively, who was also the alumni association treasurer, worked diligently to try and raise \$36,000 to cover the cost of the effort.

### King Alumni House — Fit for a queen

A poll had been taken at the annual meeting in May 1963 of all members of the Executive Committee, and it was unanimously passed to name the building the Helen G. King Alumni House. It would be a fitting tribute to a woman who had often been called "Miss University of Kentucky" because of her love and dedication to UK.

Dedication of the new alumni facility took place on the weekend of Oct. 25 – 26, 1963. On Friday afternoon, members of the Century Club were entertained at a special reception in the building. On Saturday morning the cornerstone was set, and the annual alumni brunch was held. In the afternoon following the Homecoming football game against Georgia, there was an open house for all alumni and friends.

Thus began 50 years of memories of alumni and university gatherings at the King Alumni House. The facility has been host to many alumni, students and friends each year, whether due to a specific alumni event in relation to Homecoming, Reunions, Alumni Weekend, International Thanksgiving, K Week and Senior Salute — the list goes on. The King Alumni House has provided accommodations for other special occasions, such as during Archbishop Desmond Tutu's visit to campus in 1999 officially marking "50 Years of the UK African-American Legacy." Dignitaries, including statesman Robert Sargent Shriver Jr., have also stayed overnight in the house's suites.

Jo Hern Curris '63 AS, '75 LAW, now a member of the UK Alumni Association Board of Directors and the UK Board of Trustees, had the privilege of working in the King Alumni House shortly after it opened while she was taking graduate classes. Throughout the years, she has attended her fair share of events in the building.

"My greatest delight as a newly-minted alum in our sparkling new building was watching Helen King 'work the room,'" says Curris. "With her silver white hair, welcoming smile and commanding presence, she made us all glad to be there."

Sandy Bugie Patterson '68 AS, past president of the UK Alumni Association in 2001-02 and a member of the UK Board of Trustees from 2006-12, has fond memories of King that started with their first meeting, back when Patterson was Homecoming chairwoman in 1966 and again in 1967. "I had a wonderful, wonderful meeting with her, and we just hit it off. From then on, every time I could, whether it was for Homecoming or one of the concerts that I was involved with, I'd do everything that I could to have the meetings at the King Alumni House. Helen King had a lot to do with my interest in the alumni association. I thought she was smart, and I was fascinated by her," says Patterson. "And to do what she did

when she did it — to get that house built — was just amazing."

When the King Alumni House opened in 1963, the university graduated about 1,600 students and had addresses for about 34,000 alumni, including about 3,000 graduates affiliated with the UK alumni association. In May 2013 the university saw about 4,300 students graduate, and had about 211,000 addressable alumni and 38,085 alumni association members. Everyone is now invited back to campus for the 2013 UK Homecoming and Reunion festivities scheduled for the Nov. 1-3 weekend — particularly the 50th Anniversary King Alumni House Celebration on Friday, Nov. 1, from 3 – 5 p.m. at the King Alumni House. Alumni and members of the university community will reminisce about the wonderful times held at the house, a building that was made possible by the generosity of UK alumni. Return to campus, enjoy refreshments, learn more about the history of the house and make your own memories at the King Alumni House! ■



Listen to a recording at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History of Helen King talking about her life.  
[www.ukalumni.net/helenkinginterview](http://www.ukalumni.net/helenkinginterview)



The ballroom in the King Alumni House is the backdrop for UK Alumni Association Board of Directors meetings several times a year.