

Northwood University Celebrates Life of Former Long-time President



From left, Claudia and Dr. David Fry (standing) are pictured as Dr. Fry receives the Wings of Freedom Award in 2022 in Bay Harbor, Michigan.

With heavy hearts, we announce the passing of a visionary leader, esteemed educator, and beloved patriarch in the Northwood University family. Former Northwood University President David E. Fry, who served as CEO from 1982 to 2006, passed away Tuesday, December 19, 2023.

"Dr. Fry fostered Northwood University's growth and progress as the longest-serving president and left an indelible mark on the institution," reflected Northwood President Kent MacDonald. "Today, Northwood continues to advance the mission personified by Dr. Fry to develop free-enterprise leaders across America and around the world."

Dr. Fry began his distinguished career as an economics professor with research and teaching interests in business, global economics, and free markets. As president, he focused on creating an environment where this passion could be passed on to generations of students through the University's philosophy which values individual freedom and responsibility, earned success, moral law, and the importance of free enterprise. Dr. Fry proudly exemplified these institutional tenets of The Northwood Idea.

"Dr. Fry's legacy includes leading Northwood through significant change, including growing the University academically from an institute to a university and opening the DeVos Graduate School of Management in 1993," stated Kristin Stehouwer, provost, and vice president, academic

affairs. "The more than 23,000 students who proudly graduated from Northwood University while Dr. Fry was leading from the helm — alumni who have gone on to impact private industry — is a testament to his leadership."

The Early Days

At age 22, David Fry was part of an extraordinary faculty class recruited to Northwood in 1965. He became an intellectual descendant of Dr. V. Orval Watts, Northwood's first legendary faculty member who gave shape and form to The Northwood Idea. Beloved in the classroom, he was named "Outstanding Teacher of the Year" by students in 1967 and 1968.

Fry was so talented that the school's founders — Arthur and Johann Turner and Gary and Willa Stauffer — promoted him to an administrator role in 1969. In 1971, the founders gave him a mission to plant seeds of enterprise in Indiana, where he flourished. As much as he enjoyed teaching, he had an inherent gift to lead, inspire optimism, and influence different constituencies to share a common dream.

Along the way, he had taken time to establish solid academic credentials. Just as the school's fortunes started to sour in the mid-1970s, Dr. Fry had fortuitously taken a sabbatical to earn his doctorate in business administration.

In a historic move, the Northwood Board of Trustees appointed Fry president and CEO of the Northwood Institute in 1982, making him one of the youngest college presidents in the United States.

Nancy Barker, a Midland resident who has served multiple roles with Northwood since 1971, including vice president of university relations, reflected on how he started as a young professor and eventually became one of Northwood's greatest leaders.

"David evolved over the years. He was respected and had a wonderful relationship with the professors because he had been a faculty member and fully understood their important role in the classroom and for the success of Northwood. David was a dynamic and challenging leader. He expected and encouraged those around him to do their best and gave them the support and opportunity to do that. His officers were a team who worked pretty much 24/7, as did he. David took the original Turner-Stauffer vision to a whole new level; his impact was international and yet still very personal."

"All our lives were devoted to Northwood, this small growing institution, and Dr. Fry was our leader who paved the way," Barker added.

A significant accomplishment during Dr. Fry's presidency was seeing Arthur Turner's dream of a Florida campus come to fruition in West Palm Beach in 1983.

As involved as Johann Turner and Willa Stauffer were in their respective husbands' work, so was Dr. Fry's wife, Claudia. She is known as half the team that transformed Northwood from the early 1980s until Fry retired as its president in 2006.

"Claudia was always there for David," shared Dr. Timothy G. Nash, Northwood vice president emeritus and director of the McNair Center for Free Enterprise. "She was the Rock of Gibraltar, the anchor in his life who played the more direct role in raising their two wonderful children, Daniel and Julie. Claudia has always had a strong intellect, passion, and interest in The Northwood Idea, global economics, and business."

"David and Claudia, particularly as they grew older, were a solid team — they supported each other," added Nancy Barker.

During their time as the first couple at Northwood, David and Claudia Fry graciously hosted many school events in their Midland home. Mrs. Fry played an integral role in the growth of Northwood's international endeavors. With her husband and senior staff, she helped develop the first transfer program for European students as an international student advisor. She also created adventure tours for Friends of Northwood, guiding over 20 trips abroad to Central and South America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Proceeds from these trips funded scholarships for international students. Over 21 years, several of these students were taken in by the Fry family while attending Northwood. All of this was made possible because of the special relationship between Dr. Fry and Claudia. "David has had a much better and more fulfilled life with Claudia by his side, and Northwood has a larger global footprint because of the two," Tim Nash reminisced.

Guided by The Northwood Idea

Northwood was at a crossroads in the early 1980s since it was time to switch the focus from nurturing a new school to managing a maturing institution. It was time for new leadership, administrative transitions, institutional expansion, and program innovations. It was time to shift emphasis from the free enterprise system building Northwood to Northwood advocating for and building upon free enterprise. A difficult but rewarding new era in the school's history was about to dawn. This was the prologue to Dr. Fry as the longest-serving president in Northwood University history.

Dr. Fry brought an ideal skill set and background to a difficult position during fiscal challenges. His combination of energy, drive, and intellect made him the "most appropriate" choice for the job, commented former board member Macauley Whiting in *ONE NORTHWOOD: The First Fifty Years*, a publication celebrating Northwood's 50th anniversary.

Though Fry fancied himself Northwood's "favored ideologue," he knew The Northwood Idea was not without its critics. In a measure of his intellectual sophistication and personal self-confidence, he readily acknowledged that some belittled Northwood for going "way too far in advocating a specific case for free enterprise." He disagreed with the charge and countered them in two ways. First, as a master communicator, Dr. Fry clearly and openly explained Northwood's principles. Second, he was the first to remind an audience that student enrollment and adherence to The Northwood Idea were entirely voluntary. No one was forced to buy the philosophy against their will. An implied but unstated response was the belief that it was impossible to go too far in

championing the cause of free enterprise, and this manifested itself in increased enrollment and strong financial position for the University under his leadership.

"David was the epitome of the Northwood Idea and everything we do," stated Dr. Robert Serum, a long-time academic leader and innovator of international programs at Northwood, who is credited with navigating significant educational innovations for over two decades, starting in the late 1980s. Under Dr. Fry's leadership Northwood grew in enrollment and in geographical reach.

Business and the Arts

Like Northwood's founders, Dr. Fry advocated that the arts made good business partners. "One needs balance, and the importance of artistic and intellectual creativity, innovation, and the humanizing elements of artistic expression are vital elements of a mature, modern adult," Fry explained in *ONE NORTHWOOD: The First Fifty Years*.

Nancy Barker recognized that leadership people were involved in the arts in their civic lives, and they quickly realized that a 'business' school emphasizing the arts and creativity would be distinctive. She trusted, "Business people need art to set the stage for business, and David understood that."

Expanding Academic Offerings

Under Dr. Fry's leadership, Northwood experienced major academic expansions, including professional development partnerships with businesses and industry, the military, and community colleges. Northwood began recruiting underserved students who needed access to various delivery methods and options to complete their degrees. Now known as Northwood Online, this was the start of Northwood's Adult Degree Program, a delivery of content that enhanced access to higher education for adult learners who couldn't attend college due to time constraints.

The DeVos Graduate School of Management was born in 1993 under Dr. Fry's leadership. Since its beginning, the graduate school has attracted students worldwide. More importantly, its graduates have become entrepreneurs, leaders in industry, mentors, and role models.

Like Dr. Fry, Dr. Catherine Chen came to Northwood at a young age. Dr. Fry hired her as associate dean in 1969, and she retired in 2004 as provost of the Midland campus. During her tenure, she witnessed the Northwood Institute achieve formal accreditation, which was important because Northwood's leaders knew it would bring a final measure of acceptance from parents and potential supporters, who still harbored reservations about the newer school.

"As president, Dr. Fry empowered his administrative team to set goals and do what they needed to accomplish them," Chen said. "He did not micromanage his employees, and they were very close. We truly felt like family," she added.

A University Well-Led, A Life Well-Lived

After facing many transitional and financial challenges, Dr. Fry, and his team elevated Northwood to new heights. Campuses expanded, programs improved and grew, and university status was achieved. Once back on solid footing, leaders focused on creative opportunities and innovations that lay ahead, distinguishing the Fry legacy. That legacy included what *ONE NORTHWOOD: The First Fifty Years* describes as Straight A's. *Academics* matured and improved, and various *awards* were established to honor *achievement* and create *affinity* groups. *Advancement* funded campus expansions and built a substantial endowment, and the *Athletics* department also grew. Those "Straight A's" would not have been possible during that period without Fry's leadership.

"He was very smart, very quick at grasping the essence of things, and that's very impressive," Chen said. "Also, he was a good teacher. Before becoming dean, he was an economics professor who positively influenced his students."

"David's great contribution was leadership," Robert Serum added. "There are a lot of good managers out there, but there aren't a lot of good leaders. David could walk into a room full of CEOs, all of whom had big egos, and before you knew it, they all wanted him as a friend. He was very popular wherever he went with faculty and staff, with other administrators and teachers, and especially with businesspeople. He epitomized what they believed in, free enterprise and every dimension of The Northwood Idea."

Those who worked with Dr. Fry noted he had a brilliant mind and was a spell-binding speaker. "His eloquence was so outstanding," stated Dr. Marjorie Hohman, former board of trustee member, Distinguished Women honoree, and honorary doctoral degree recipient. "He was a people person, first. He was very good at connecting with people and holding their attention because he was such an eloquent speaker. He could stand in front of a crowd and captivate them because his command of the English language was superb."

Hohman admired Dr. Fry's influence on those he worked with. "The most outstanding thing about him was his leadership abilities and how he was able to get the best out of people," she said. "He was such a mentor to so many."

In honor of the tremendous progress made under Dr. Fry's watch, the Northwood community came together to fund the David E. Fry Endowed Professorship to celebrate his retirement.

Recognizing his outstanding contributions to Northwood, in 2009, the University vested upon Dr. Fry its highest honor, Doctor of Laws, *Honoris Causa*.

Most recently, in 2022, Dr. Fry received the Wings of Freedom Award, created in honor of Northwood University's own Dr. Dale Haywood. Northwood bestows this honor upon individuals whose lives have contributed to human progress, individual liberty, and economic and social prosperity.

"Dr. Fry's legacy lives on at Northwood University, and we are forever thankful for his transformative role in our history," stated President MacDonald. He continued, "Over my career,

I have had the opportunity to research academic leaders around the globe and it is clear to me that Dr. Fry was one of the most transformational leaders in American higher education.”

Donors who would like to support Dr. Fry's legacy can do so through a donation to the David E. Fry Endowed Professorship. [Donations can be made online](#) or by calling Northwood University Advancement at (989) 837-4356.

A Promise Kept

Dr. Fry had an undeniable – and unrivaled – impact on Northwood, spanning over 40 years as an instructor, mentor, dean, and president.

Years into his successful tenure, he expressed staunch support for Northwood's founders in *NORTHWOOD: The First Fifty Years*. "Our co-founders dreamed an unlikely vision of a private university that could reshape enterprise to help the world achieve its potential," Fry wrote. "Few thought our country needed a new school in 1959. However, Arthur Turner and Gary Stauffer forged an engine of progress that made a positive difference in how society brought freedom to all and the skill to use it effectively."

Dr. Fry then promised even more intensive, focused efforts to help future students become successful creators of wealth and freedom and great Northwood partners. Nearly two decades later, we can look back and say without hesitation that Dr. Fry kept his promise.

Note: Dr. David Fry's official obituary is forthcoming.