

Love Is the First Gift after Life

A lady in a faded gingham dress and her husband, dressed in a homespun threadbare suit, stepped off the train in Boston, and walked timidly without an appointment into the Harvard University president's outer office. The secretary could tell in a moment that such backwoods, country hicks had no business at Harvard and probably didn't even deserve to be in Cambridge. She frowned. "We want to see the president," the man said softly. "He'll be busy all day," the secretary snapped. "We'll wait," the lady replied.

For hours, the secretary ignored them, hoping that the couple would finally become discouraged and go away. They didn't. And the secretary grew frustrated and finally decided to disturb the president, even though it was a chore she always regretted to do. "Maybe if they just see you for a few minutes, they'll leave," she told him. And he sighed in exasperation and nodded. Someone of his importance obviously didn't have the time to spend with them, but he detested gingham dresses and homespun suits cluttering up his outer office.

The president, stern-faced with dignity, strutted toward the couple. The lady told him, "We had a son that attended Harvard for one year. He loved Harvard. He was happy here. But about a year ago, he was accidentally killed. And my husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him, somewhere on campus." The president wasn't touched; he was shocked. "Madam," he said gruffly, "We can't put up a statue for every person who attended Harvard and died. If we did, this place would look like a cemetery."

"Oh, no," the lady explained quickly, "We don't want to erect a statue. We thought we would like to give a building to Harvard. The president rolled his eyes. He glanced at the gingham dress and homespun suit, then exclaimed, "A building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a building costs? We have over seven and a half million dollars in the physical plant at Harvard." For a moment the lady was silent.

The president was pleased. He could get rid of them now. And the lady turned to her husband and said quietly, "Is that all it costs to start a University? Why don't we just start our own?" Her husband nodded. The president's face wilted in confusion and bewilderment. And Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford walked away, traveling to Palo Alto, California; where they established the University that bears their name, a memorial to a son that Harvard no longer cared about.

"Life is the first gift, love is the second, and understanding the third."

The Birth of the University

On October 1, 1891, Stanford University opened its doors after six years of planning and building. In the early morning hours, construction workers were still preparing the Inner Quadrangle for the opening ceremonies. The great arch at the western end had been backed with panels of red and white cloth to form an alcove where the dignitaries would sit. Behind the stage was a life-size portrait of Leland Stanford, Jr., in whose memory the university was founded.

<http://www.stanford.edu/home/stanford/history/begin.html#Pro>