

# Mary Otteson Blake '59 Gives from the Heart

BY SUZY FRISCH

As a young girl, Mary Otteson Blake was stricken with polio, leaving her unable to swallow, cough, speak or sing. It took a year for her to recover and return to school with her classmates. This life-changing experience served to shape the direction of her career and vocation.

In addition to playing cello in the St. Olaf Orchestra and singing in the Chapel Choir, Mary pursued majors in biology and psychology with the intention of earning an advanced degree in the emerging field of neuroscience. Her goal was to research ways to help brain-damaged children heal faster, and her postgraduate work included a master's degree and Ph.D. in neuroscience from Ohio State University.

"I could not have done what I did — and continue to do — without the communication skills, the spiritual depth and the capacity for commitment and visioning new possibilities that I developed at St. Olaf," says Mary.

Her early career included work as a researcher at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, where she studied the effects of fatigue on a person's ability to focus and perform. During that time she also met and married Don Blake, a Lutheran pastor. Mary set aside her work in neuroscience to raise their two boys, Doug '90 and Harvey, and actively engage in church work. She credits St. Olaf with preparing her well for the work she did in her congregations and also for synod and national leadership within the ELCA, especially in its formative years. She says it was a fulfilling life, but she never forgot her dream to make a difference through neuroscience.

**"Our church, our nation and our world needs the kind of leaders that St. Olaf produces. This is my principal motivation for regular support of Partners in Annual Giving and other giving opportunities that St. Olaf provides." — MARY OTTESON BLAKE '59**

It was her son Doug who suggested a way for his mother to give back to the field of neuroscience. He challenged her to share part of a recent inheritance with St. Olaf to fund the college's new neuroscience lab in Regents



Married for 45 years, Don and Mary Blake met during a Lutheran Student Association seminar in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, when he was a young pastor and she was a graduate student. These days they live in Florida, except for four months spent each summer at Chautauqua Lake in New York.

Hall of Natural and Mathematical Sciences. Leading by example, he told his mother that he was giving a portion of his inheritance to St. Olaf. Doug Blake, a mechanical engineer, wanted to fund the office of his favorite physics professor, Robert Jacobel.

Mary thought it was an excellent suggestion. "I think I was always frustrated and maybe a little guilty that I didn't finish what I started to do in neuroscience," she says. "But it felt just right to enable others to complete what I had begun years earlier."

A difficult personal family situation deepened her commitment to giving to St. Olaf. A young grandniece needed brain surgery to halt severe seizures, the result of strokes she had before birth that also caused partial paralysis. "That reinforced the importance of neuroscience research to me all over again," says Mary.

For Mary, attending St. Olaf and giving

back to the college has been a strong family tradition that dates back to her parents, Paul '31 and Luella Skarshaug Otteson '32, as well as her brothers, David Otteson '55 and Jim Otteson '65. As a child growing up after

the hardships of World War II, Mary remembers sending food and clothing to a German family through Lutheran World Relief. Today, she says her family enjoys giving holiday donations to ELCA Good Gifts instead of traditional presents.

Though recently having given a gift for the neuroscience lab in Regents Hall, Mary also wanted to make an additional gift to St. Olaf in honor of her 50th class reunion. Mary and Don's financial adviser suggested a charitable gift annuity using appreciated stock as a means for giving, because of its tax benefits and its ability to provide a stream of income to them for the rest of their lives. The annuity funds would be directed to Partners in Annual Giving after they passed away.

With her gift to Regents Hall, Mary hopes St. Olaf students will engage in the study of a broad array of topics, not just their majors. She says that is one of the most important gifts she received as an Ole.

"There was a strong push to do something useful with our lives, not for the honor it would bring but because there are significant things that need to be done," says Mary. "Our church, our nation and our world needs the kind of leaders that St. Olaf produces. This is my principal motivation for regular support of Partners in Annual Giving and other giving opportunities that St. Olaf provides." 🦋

SUZY FRISCH is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer.