

THE SPIRIT OF GIVING: JANE BLAFFER OWEN AND THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

By Aimee L'Heureux

CORRECTION: The article “Recalling Houston’s Early Days and Its Oilmen: A Conversation with Jane Blaffer Owen and Elizabeth Gregory, Joe Pratt, and Melissa Kean,” which appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of *Houston History* featured a picture of a young woman, which was mislabeled as Jane Blaffer Owen. The photo was actually Janie Owens, a former University of Houston student.


Houstonians remember Jane Blaffer Owen as daughter of Robert Lee Blaffer, a founder of Humble Oil & Refining Company; granddaughter of William T. Campbell, who established The Texas Company (later Texaco); and wife of Kenneth Owen, a descendant of New Harmony Utopian Society Founder Robert Owen. But most importantly, Houstonians remember her for her spirit of giving which helped to transform New Harmony, Indiana, and provide affordable and accessible higher education through the University of Houston.

Jane Blaffer Owen was born on April 18, 1915. She grew up in Houston, Texas, and went on to serve the community as the first vice president of the Allied Arts Council, a trustee of the C. G. Jung Education Center, a board member of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, a sustaining trustee of the University of Houston’s Moores School of Music, a board member of the Houston Symphony and the Contemporary Arts Association, as well as holding numerous other positions.¹

Blaffer Owen supported the University of Houston’s Blaffer Gallery and Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture. The Blaffer Gallery, nestled in the Fine Arts Building on the main campus, is a contemporary art museum “dedicated to fostering the careers and understanding of emerging, mid-career, and underrepresented artists and bodies of work through exhibitions, publications, and public programs.” Blaffer’s educational programs include public lectures, artist’s talks, docent tours,

audio guides, and youth programs such as Studio Saturday, Summer Arts, and the Young Artist Apprenticeship Program.² “Mrs. Owen was a lifelong supporter of the museum carrying her maiden name,” recalled museum director Claudia Schmuckli. “She embraced Blaffer Art Museum’s mission and vision and was uniquely invested in the future of the museum. While New Harmony was her first love, her commitment to the University of Houston was exemplary, and we mourn her loss deeply.”³

Former UH dean of Architecture, Joe Mashburn, and Jane Blaffer Owen collaborated with Ben Nicholson from Chicago Art Institute and fifth-year UH architecture students in the digital fabrication class to design and build “The Grotto for Meditation.” Now standing on the University of Houston campus, it reinterprets the project first proposed approximately forty-eight years ago in New Harmony, Indiana.⁴ In 1963, Jane Blaffer Owen commissioned Frederick J. Kiesler, an Austrian American stage designer and architect, to create the grotto as a quiet, meditative spot for the arts community of New Harmony, but it was never built. “Our students reimagined the Grotto for Meditation,” said visiting assistant professor of architecture Andrew Vrana. Applying today’s technology to Kiesler’s concept, “it is very much in keeping with his idea,” recalled Lecturer Joe Meppelink. “Digital fabrication has allowed us to find a very unique solution for our grotto.” The approximately 300-square-foot finished project features a space for visitors to relax and listen to the water.⁵

Although much of her philanthropy went to New Harmony, a rural escape from Houston’s bustling city life, Jane Blaffer Owen did not forget her roots and gave generously to the Houston community. She passed away on June 21, 2010, at the age of ninety-five. Her spirit of giving lives on in the arts and preservation projects she supported in New Harmony, Indiana, and Houston, Texas. 

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Jane Blaffer Owen with family member John Royall and Blaffer director Claudia Schmuckli.
Photo by James Wright, Wright One Photography.