The $1.5 million gift from Michele and Don D’Amour ’64 put the Campaign over its goal and provides an endowment for the Fortin/Gonthier Foundations of Western Civilization Program.
While some College grads are able to say that they had one professor who really had an impact on their life, said Donald D’Amour AP’60, ’64, “in my case there were several! Fr. Denys Gonthier, A.A. ’44 and Fr. Ernest Fortin, A.A. ’46, in particular, were dedicated teachers that had a great deal of influence on me and numerous other students.”

In October, Don and his wife, Michele, pledged $1.5 million to Assumption College to rename and expand the Fortin/Gonthier Foundations of Western Civilization Program (see sidebar article). It allowed the College to surpass its $30 million goal for The Centennial Campaign and it is the largest gift from an individual in College history.

A former member of Assumption’s Board of Trustees, Don is the chairman of the board and CEO of Big Y Foods, Inc., a family-owned and operated grocery chain with 9,000 employees and 54 stores in Massachusetts and Connecticut. In 2004, Don received the Fr. Louis Dion, A.A. ’35 Outstanding Achievement Award from Assumption’s Alumni Association.

Michele, who holds a Master of Education from American International College, is Big Y’s educational partnership administrator. She oversees the Company’s Homework Hotline and works on its Education Express and Scholarship programs (see details below). Together, the D’Amours, along with many members of their family, run one of the largest independent grocery store chains in New England.

GETTING TO ASSUMPTION

Don grew up in western MA and went to school locally at French-Canadian parishes. He earned a small scholarship toward tuition at Assumption Prep through a scholarship exam he took in eighth grade. “I had never been away from home for a weekend, but I ended up at Assumption Prep,” he recalled. “Sputnik came along when I was at the Prep, and the School received funding from the National Science Foundation. I got excited about the new courses in math and science, so I was taking college-level courses at Holy Cross College through the Prep School and I decided to attend Holy Cross.”

Don is grateful for his Assumption Prep and College education and experience. “It was a fun place,” he said. “I was involved in a lot of activities, including the Drama Club, where I did a lot of acting.” Fr. Ernest and Fr. Denys had a lasting impact on him. “Someone joked with me recently that Fr. Denys taught you how to write and Fr. Ernest taught you how to think,” he explained.

“There is probably some truth to that. Fr. Denys taught us French, in French. He had the benefit of having several students there that were bilingual so that we weren’t learning our ABCs, we were studying French literature. He was an extremely challenging professor who would get us thinking to get us to fully appreciate what an author was trying to say.

“Fr. Ernest picked up from there. He was, perhaps, more of a scholar who taught several philosophy courses. Fr. Ernest was a highly respected scholar in the Christian tradition and went on to teach at Boston College (1971–98). He had a stroke and passed away in 2003. Both professors had an intense interest in their students, had a tremendous depth of knowledge and were passionate about what they did. They got us to decide which direction we wanted our lives to take and really guided us along that path very carefully.”

Michele has been involved over the years with the Springfield Diocesan school system to take part in various studies to see how the schools can survive and grow. “We are not only corporately and personally dedicated to education,” said Michele, “but to Catholic education. Assumption students have a wonderful sense of community. They can communicate. They can have a relaxed relationship with the faculty and staff, and our focus on the Foundations Program aligns with our wish for and our work toward getting Catholic colleges to strengthen their core mission of being Catholic colleges. So, to be able to do this in the names of Frs. Fortin and Gonthier is special for both of us, but especially for Don who was greatly affected by both of those men.”

THEIR STORY

When asked how they met Michele explained, “I was in high school and planned to work my way through college. I needed a job to do that, so I bothered a local Big Y manager until he hired me and worked my way through mid-high school and college at Big Y. Don was busy at Notre Dame working on his doctoral thesis and would come in and do a small job here and there around the holidays. He asked me out on a date, we went out once, and we didn’t have another one for three months. Don’s father came into the store where I was working one day and told me how terrific Don is and went on and on … and I guess I listened to him. We were married on my semester break during my senior year in college (1973) and quickly had five children—Michael, Nicole, Mathieu, Philip, and Danielle—and then I went back to school for my master’s degree.”
SPECIAL MOMENT FOR ASSUMPTION

The D’Amours believe that this is an important time in Assumption’s history. Don explained, “Dr. Plough came to us and explained that the College needs to provide distinctive offerings, such as the Foundations Program. He has also done a wonderful job in bringing Assumption to a solid footing, both financially and in terms of infrastructure.” According to Don, with the College’s solid footing, its commitment to re-emphasize the Foundations Program and its search for a new president who can articulate the Catholic, liberal arts way of thinking, it creates a unique opportunity. “In addition,” he said, “the new president will also be challenged to hire a provost, which Assumption has not had for some time. It’s a very exciting time for the College.” Don is proud to be a member of the search committee for Assumption’s next president.

“The new president and provost have to be strong leaders and will need to work with the entire faculty to work toward that intellectual tradition that has been their history and have the intestinal fortitude to buck secular trends that are surrounding them which tend to draw a certain number of students. But they need to stay the course,” said Michele. Don added, “There’s this moment where Assumption is poised to resist that separation, that the most recent popes have talked about, between faith and reason, that has been the bane of several institutions including the mission drift of a lot of Catholic institutions. I believe the tensions between faith and reason—faith supporting reason and reason defending faith—are really opportunities for Assumption. The enthusiasm of the student body and the faculty has been incredible, as they are looking to expand and improve the level of academic programs and leadership. With that said, our advice is ‘seize the moment.’” With their generous assistance and support, Assumption College is poised to do so.

BIG Y FOODS, INC.

It all started in 1936. At 30 years old, Paul D’Amour (Don’s father) was a bread route salesman for the Wonder Bread Baking Company. Full of entrepreneurial spirit, Paul pooled family resources and purchased the small Y Cash Market in Chicopee, MA, at the intersection where two roads converge to form a “Y.” Believing in personal service, the business and its reputation expanded. Paul’s brother, Gerald, joined the business, assisted by their two sisters.

Don earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame, which has helped him along the way. “There’s a mental training and a discipline that is involved in that exposure, especially an awareness of human nature and the frailty,” Don said. “I think those are the two most important areas that help on the business end, and many business grads don’t benefit from that kind of liberal arts background. When you are dealing with some of the weighty issues in philosophy—such as ‘who we are’ and ‘why we’re here’—the smaller, business challenges that arise don’t seem so difficult in comparison.”

In 1947, the business was incorporated, and Big Y Foods, Inc. was born. Also in 1947, the brothers opened a second and larger Y Cash Market. In 1952, they opened the first supermarket and sold off the two corner stores. In 1959, they opened the second supermarket—the oldest one that still exists in Northampton today. Don joined the business in 1969, one year after Michele. Don’s cousins joined the business in the ’70s, including Charles D’Amour AP’70, Big Y’s COO/executive vice president and secretary.

In 1981, the Big Y Scholarship program was introduced; six scholarships were awarded. Today, more than 200 merit-based scholarships are awarded each year. The Education Express program began in 1993. An electronic point-based program, it allows area schools to earn much needed educational equipment. As of May 2002, $7 million worth of equipment had been awarded to the more than 1,800 participating schools.

Big Y’s Homework Helpline also began in 1993. It is a toll-free, one-on-one tutoring service for students in kindergarten through grade 12. Staffed by a highly qualified team of 25 certified teachers, the Helpline guides nearly 10,000 students through homework problems each year. The Helpline is launching an online component this month. These programs are financed by the generous donations of numerous corporate sponsors.

“This sort of goes full circle,” Michele explained, “from both a corporate and personal philosophy that our focus is on education because without well-educated future customers or future employees the economy won’t thrive as it should, so it’s important for us to make sure those constituencies are well-educated.” Don reasoned, “Part of the key to our success is encouraging every employee to develop, in their skills.” Both in-house opportunities are available as well as tuition assistance. “We basically have a career plan for each employee,” Don continued. “During the employee’s review, we discuss which opportunities they wish to pursue. We support a lot of families.” Michele said, “One of the things were most proud of is that people like working here. It’s a family feel.” Don added, “They legitimately care for each other in good times and in bad.”