Education in the First Degree

By Elizabeth Walker
David Kennedy ’75
Director of Philanthropic Programs, The Atlantic Philanthropies

David Kennedy ’75 applied to Assumption because his mother told him to. Mrs. Kennedy had heard from other mothers in her parish that the College offered scholarships to talented boys like her son, David, the fifth of her 12 children. David received a scholarship, a loan and a work-study job, and lost most of it in his first year. With the help of professors, Assumptionists and friends, the economics major eventually developed the habits of success that enabled him to graduate on time, magna cum laude, and go on to an international career.

Kennedy eventually earned four graduate degrees, enjoyed a distinguished university teaching career on three continents, and now directs the Australian office of a multi-billion-dollar foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies. He is deeply grateful for the “many second chances” Assumption gave him, and is an exceptionally strong supporter of his alma mater.

When Kennedy arrived on campus in fall 1971, he was quickly overwhelmed by his lack of good study habits and time management skills, and the inherent distractions of college life.

“I was a very immature 17-year-old from a large working-class family from Haverhill,” he said. “It was my first time away from home. I didn’t know how to study or even how to be by myself. I was used to having a bunch of Kennedys around all the time. When I lost my scholarship at the end of my freshman year, I came close to dropping out. But the Assumption community ‘picked me up and dusted me off.’ Great professors like James ‘Doc’ McCarthy and Pat Powers could see that I was struggling and made themselves accessible to me. ‘Doc’ McCarthy just about picked me up by the scruff of my neck and insisted that I find a way to finish. Looking back, I was very lucky to go to Assumption because it’s a small college with a close-knit, caring community. I wouldn’t be where I am today without my Assumption undergraduate degree. It’s that simple.”

The job opportunities were tight for economics majors when Kennedy graduated, so he and a brother started a painting company. The following year he decided that he wanted to work in the hotel industry, so he enrolled at UMass-Amherst, where he earned two degrees in 1979, a master of science in hotel administration and a master of business administration. He went to work for the Hyatt Hotels Corporation for several years before joining an executive search firm that specialized in recruiting executives for the hotel and resort industries. In 1988 he formed his own executive search firm that specialized in recruiting executives for the hotel and luxury goods retailer. Atlantic has made grants totaling more than $5.5 billion in support of their philanthropic programs around the world. Kennedy and Atlantic’s founder, Charles “Chuck” Feeney, were friends from before Kennedy went to work for the foundation. Feeney co-founded Duty Free Shoppers, which became the world’s largest luxury goods retailer. Atlantic has made grants totaling more than $5.5 billion in support of their philanthropic programs around the world.

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“I was looking to do something different after 10 years in head hunting,” he said. “I had always wanted to teach. So I began teaching part-time at Boston University. Before long I realized I wanted to teach full-time but I needed a Ph.D. to have the kind of academic career I wanted.”

Kennedy was accepted into Cornell University’s highly selective doctoral program in hotel management and was awarded a fellowship. To increase his career options, he eventually transferred to Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He graduated in 1996 with a master’s degree in hotel administration and in 1999 with a Ph.D. in human resource studies and organizational behavior.

“I came away from Cornell with two graduate degrees and a wife,” he said. “She was Australian and working on a master’s when we met. I relocated to Australia for love and took a position at Griffith University in its school of tourism and hotel management.”

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Kennedy spends weekends enjoying Sydney’s “beach culture” with his wife and young son. He may return to teaching or pursue his research on aging issues at some future point. He has all the degrees he needs to do exactly what he wants.

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