UI ‘quiet giant’ dies at 94

Obermann gave about $3 million

By Brian Sharp
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The passing of a “quiet, unassuming giant” left some University of Iowa officials mourning a friend and expressing gratitude for his generosity to their missions.

C. Esco Obermann, 94, died Monday night at University Hospitals after a long battle with prostate cancer. The Iowa distinguished alumnus and former professor, whose lifetime gifts to UI total nearly $3 million, ranks among the university’s 10 most charitable donors.

The Obermann Center for Advanced Studies — which gathers scholars of multiple disciplines to exchange ideas and sometimes work together on topics such as aging or campaign finance — is named in honor of him and his late wife, Avalon.

“Everybody was fascinating and interesting to him. He made you feel that way,” said David Dierks, vice president for principal gifts with the University of Iowa Foundation and a friend of Obermann’s for the past 25 years.

“No matter how bad your day was going,” Dierks said, “if you talked to Esco you would always feel better.”

Dierks called Obermann a “quiet, unassuming giant” who, through his multiple interests, touched the lives of many.

Obermann is described by those who knew him as an avid reader; an intelligent man of great energy, inspiration and vision — being one of the principal writers of the GI bill.

His interests ranged from foreign policy to psychology and music to Hawkeye sports — often walking to home football games since returning to Iowa City about five years ago.

On one such game day about four years ago, he set off walking from his apartment near Finkbine Golf Course, slipped and broke his wrist but continued on and refused a doctor until after the game.

Obermann grew up on a small farm near the southeast Iowa town of Yarmouth. When he arrived at UI in the 1920s “the world just exploded for him,” said friend Jay Semel, director for the Obermann Center.

Obermann began taking a wide range of courses, sang with the chorus and competed with the men’s gymnastics team — both passions that carried him throughout life.

“He really was a good guy,” Semel said. “He just touched a lot of us.”

Obermann routinely welcomed scholars to the Center for Advanced Studies’ summer programs.

He spoke at the UI men’s gymnastics team’s annual banquet, which he sponsored and where the largest award — a crystal hawk honoring a senior gymnast for his scholarship, sportsmanship and performance — bore his name.

He recently sang the national anthem at a men’s gymnastics meet — reliving a dream that took him to Chicago as a young man with dreams of becoming a professional entertainer.

And while that singing career kept him taking voice lessons up until last year, most who know him have a gymnastics story to tell.

Dierks remembers visiting Obermann with a recently hired co-worker at the UI Foundation. After some small talk, Dierks said, Obermann began removing journals and magazines from a large, round coffee table in his living room.

Then, without warning, Obermann — in his 80s at the time — sprang up into a full handstand.

“He never did any gymnastics for me,” said Tom Dunn, head coach for the Iowa men’s gymnastics team. “But he threatened, often.”

In fact, when Obermann returned to Iowa City, pushing 90 and with a pacemaker, he told Dunn he wanted to get back in the gym to work out and start doing gymnastics again.

Much of Obermann’s gifts, divided into about 10 charitable trusts and his estate, were not available to UI gymnastics, cultural events or the Obermann Center until his death.

Oh, and that initial “C,” what did that stand for? It is a question that delighted Obermann, but one he never answered except to say: “C is for secret.”