

The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History has received a $30,000 endowment and could receive more thanks to the generosity of a Granite City native. Jim Frye, a career-long Phillip Morris executive, died in April and left behind $20 million in an endowment fund earmarked for a handful of agencies dear to his heart.

The $20 million bequest to The Community Foundation Serving Richmond and Central Virginia endows an unrestricted fund that will enhance local grant making, as well as restricted endowments that will provide support to more than 30 eligible organizations in Richmond, Virginia, and Mount Airy. The support will be ongoing as the funding comes from the interest earned on the $20 million deposit.

In addition to that lump sum, his estate provided direct charitable bequests of more than $2

million to a number of Richmond and Mount Airy organizations. The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History is among those to benefit from his estate.“This truly was a tremendous gift for all of us,” said Matt Edwards, executive director for The Museum of Regional History. Upon receiving the $30,000 building gift, Edwards said, “The museum is honored to be one of the charities selected by Mr. Frye to benefit from grants made from his endowment bequest.” Edwards also said that this endowment will hopefully encourage others from and within the community to consider making similar philanthropic gift.

Surry Community College, Mount Valley Hospice and Palliative Care/Woltz Hospice home are among the beneficiaries who are eligible to apply and receive an annual gift from The Community Foundation. “Jim’s connection to the community showed that through his contribution, it really brought me a sense of pride,” said Marion Venable, executive director for the Surry Community College Foundation. Frye worked and retired in Richmond, where Phillip Morris is headquartered, but he came back home last year to accept his recognition in the Mount Airy Sports Hall of Fame.

When talking about his induction at that time, Frye spoke little about his football career at Mount Airy and the University of Richmond. Instead, he spoke of his charity work like the many foundations and boards of directors on which he served. In the early 1970s he became involved with the Richmond Boys and Girls Club and the local Police Benevolent Association. Later he would add posts with the Salvation Army, YMCA, Junior League, the governor’s Youth Crime Task Force and the Virginia Council on Health and Medical Care.

That Frye donated to the Mount Airy museum isn’t surprising considering his thoughts on culture. From last year’s interview, Frye said: “Regardless of the accelerating change in our culture, which is driven by an explosion in technology and information, the human experience down through the centuries has remained essentially the same. “That’s why we read Shakespeare and Thomas Jefferson. … That’s why we have museums and libraries. … While styles and trends may vary, you share with everyone in the world — and with everyone who came before you — the same basic emotions and the same abilities to experience the world and its wonders.”

Frye graduated from Mount Airy in 1948, part of the same class as longtime News editor R.J. Berrier, who died in 2000 with 52 years of service at the newspaper. Frye said his college graduation ceremony was on a Sunday in 1952, and he started work the next morning for Phillip Morris. Frye spent his entire 36-year career with Phillip Morris, the last 19 years as director of government relations. His only time away was for his two-year service in the U.S. Army after being drafted.

After retiring in 1988, Frye continued his charity work while also doing some consulting. In 1997, Frye suffered a near-fatal heart attack, an experience that caused him to contemplate his legacy. According to The Community Foundation, Frye started donating anonymously (and generously) while he was alive, with plans for how his estate could best be put to use after the death of himself and his wife, Virginia Nash Frye. Then he fashioned a plan by which meaningful capital gifts would go to selected charities upon their deaths: St. Stephen's Episcopal Church (his church), Virginia Home for Boys and Girls (where he was a board member for 15 years) and then groups back in his hometown.

The balance of his estate was gifted to The Community Foundation. Of particular importance to Frye was the duty of the Foundation to monitor the organizations selected and to move endowment support to other organizations if they failed to perform effectively or if the need being served dwindled.

When he was inducted into the Hall of Fame last year, Frye told the crowd at the Andy Griffith playhouse, "Mount Airy is one of those towns that you never really leave." Life might take someone away from town, but they find a way to come back. The Andy Griffith Playhouse was the Rockford Auditorium back when Frye was in school, four years behind Griffith himself. He recalled how there was a time when the school didn't have a dedicated gymnasium. School dances were held on the stage of the auditorium. "There wasn't space for a large band — there wasn't even space for a small band — that didn't matter, either, because we didn't have money for *any* band," he said. What the school did have was a 78 rpm Victrola record player playing big band music. Basketball goals were installed on the sides so that games could be played back and forth across the stage. Frye was proud to see how the old school was repurposed to serve the community.