Evelyn Semenza English bequest honors Reno pioneer family

Evelyn Semenza English ’36 (history), the youngest child of Reno pioneers John and Louise Semenza, recounted in an article for the Donald W. Reynolds School of Journalism: “We all followed words our father told us: ‘The world is full of mediocrity, but I want you all to achieve.’ ”

The Semenza children heeded their father’s advice. The children—Nevada, Lawrence, Rena, Edwin, Grace and Evelyn—all went on to successful careers after receiving their degrees at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Before her passing last year at age 95, Evelyn established a planned gift to honor the memory of her parents and siblings through seven scholarships in areas of study important to her family: business and social work, music, theatre, education, journalism, accounting and medicine.

As a student at Nevada, Evelyn was a member of Pi Beta Phi, Cap and Scroll, Campus Players and the staff of The Nevada Sagebrush. After graduating, she became a school teacher in rural Nevada before continuing her career in California. She worked for the Air Defense Command, the precursor to today’s modern Air Force, and later returned to teaching. She taught for 30 years in Pasadena, Calif., where she was known as a philanthropist and tireless supporter of the arts.

The family patriarch, John Semenza, was an immigrant from Italy who crossed the Bering Strait to mine the gold fields of the Klondike in Alaska. Later settling in Reno, he married his wife, Louise, and owned a grocery store on Center and Second streets, where Harrah’s Reno is located today.

The eldest child, Nevada Semenza Christian ’24 (journalism), was one of just five female members of the University’s first journalism graduates and the only female in her class to enter the field of journalism. She lived and worked in China and moved 38 times in her life. She remains one of the most distinguished graduates of the Reynolds School of Journalism.

Lawrence Semenza ’25 (business) taught economics at the University before going to work as an accountant for legendary Nevada pioneer and former Nevada Regent George Wingfield. Semenza was often referred to as the “Silver State CPA.”

Rena Semenza Safford ’26 (arts and science) was a respected and beloved kindergarten teacher in Reno and later in Marin County. The musically gifted soprano was featured in her brother Ed’s productions and on CBS Radio.

Edwin “Ed” Semenza ’30 (foreign affairs) was a Reno insurance executive and original founder of the Reno Little Theater in the 1930s. He directed numerous plays and was able to cajole performances from many notable northern Nevadans.

Grace Semenza ’35 (English) had a distinguished career in public service in Nevada, Oregon, California and finally Washington state, where she directed a statewide adoption program for which she received national recognition.

—Roseann Keegan