Senator Richard H. Bryan ’59 (pre-legal)

To the University, I owe so much—I gained a wonderful wife, an education and career opportunities I could never have gotten anywhere else.

I came to the University as a graduate of Las Vegas High School, which was then roughly the same size as the University. At Las Vegas High School I was the senior class president. At the University, I was on the bottom rung of the student ladder. I had much to learn. My initial goal was to become ASUN president. My father, Oscar Bryan ’32, had emphasized the importance of meeting students from all over the state. He had been a fraternity man and I was frequently regaled by him of his undergraduate experiences. The Alpha Tau Omega fraternity seemed to me to be the right choice because it had attracted students from all over the state.

Joining ATO, I met many brothers from rural Nevada. I became aware of the differences in our backgrounds. In rural Nevada, agriculture, ranching and mining play a major role. Getting to know them and appreciating their point of view was one of the greatest lessons I learned at the University, as was understanding the “North South Divide.” There were more pledge brothers from Eureka than from Las Vegas. They had a very different perception than those of us from Las Vegas. Navigating those differences and gaining their respect was another learning experience.

The University was not an exploratory experience for me, unlike so many students that arrive at college unsure of their major. I knew from the time I was in grade school I wanted to be a lawyer like my father. Some of his professors were now mine. They and others enabled him to attain his dream of becoming a lawyer. His dream was mine. I participated in a broad range of extra-curricular activities, from Blue Key to the Student Union Board; from sports editor of the Artemisia to chairman of the Homecoming Committee. From these experiences I was able to observe effective leadership strategies. My father said that every citizen has an obligation to pay his or her civic rent. At the University I learned how to redeem that commitment.

I knew I wanted a career in public service that I hoped someday might enable me to be governor. The University’s pre-legal major was tailor-made for me because of the wide variety of pre-law courses. Among the courses I took and enjoyed were geology, philosophy, debate and English literature. My field of concentration was history, and no student was ever more fortunate than I to have professors like Elliott, Driggs, Roberts and Shepperson. The diversity of my classes and my professors helped broaden my scope of interest and perspective on life. I wasn’t a scholar in any of these areas, but my experiences helped me to be able to carry on a conversation with people of all different backgrounds and interests.

Because the University is a land-grant institution, every able-bodied male under the age of 26 without prior military service was required to take two years of ROTC. At the end of my sophomore year, I applied for advanced ROTC. On graduation I was commissioned as a second lieutenant. I enjoyed my tenure in the military, limited as it was. Being exposed to the military was an important influence on my life and something missing from our society today. The University provided me with that opportunity.

In 1958 when I was running for ASUN president, the late Jim Joyce ’59 suggested I date a sorority member at the Theta house. I got a date with a Theta pledge, Bonnie Fairchild, and invited her to the spring costume dance. I won the election and four years later we were married. Bonnie is the greatest gift I received from the University, and she has had a profound impact on my life. She is a marvelous mother and grandmother and the greatest helpmate to me. During my years in public service and campaigning, she was the glue that kept our family together. She recognized the unique qualities in each of our children, Richard, Jr., Leslie and Blair, and brought out the best in them. It meant a great deal to us when our children established the Richard and Bonnie Bryan Scholarship Endowment at the University on our anniversary in 2013.

The University has been such a big part of my life. I hope that my own experience may serve as an inspiration for others who would like to make a career for themselves in public service.

From a conversation with Senator Richard Bryan ’59 in June 2016 with Director of Donor Relations Keiko Weil ’87. Bryan is a 1959 pre-legal graduate with a distinguished 60-year career in public service. He attended the University of California, Hastings College of the Law. In 1955 he was honored as the University’s Alumnus of the Year; in 2001 he received the University’s Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters; and in 2011 he was recognized by the Nevada System of Higher Education as a Distinguished Nevadan. He currently serves as director of the Fennemore Craig law firm in Las Vegas. He is married to Bonnie ’61 (psychology), and they have three children, Richard Bryan, Jr. ’90 M.D., Reno attorney Leslie Bryan Hart, and Blair Bryan ’90 (elementary education), ’92 M.Ed.
At Nevada, Richard Bryan ’59 was elected as ASUN senator and then ASUN president. His public service includes being elected to two terms in the Nevada State Assembly, two terms in the Nevada State Senate, Nevada attorney general, two terms as governor of Nevada and two terms as U.S. senator from Nevada.

The Senator Richard H. Bryan Plaza:
The Senator Richard H. Bryan Plaza, located on campus near the William N. Pennington Student Achievement Center, was dedicated April 29, 2016. The bronze statue by sculptor Benjamin Victor features Senator Bryan sitting on a bench enjoying The Nevada Sagebrush student newspaper.