Chances are today’s college students are familiar with the award-winning children’s software series Math Blaster™ and Reading Blaster™ and the characters Blaster-naut, Galactic Commander and Dr. Dabble. What students may not know is that Incline Village residents Bob and Jan Davidson developed these revolutionary educational computer games and that the Davidsons are now engaged in a pioneering partnership with the University of Nevada, Reno to improve educational opportunities and academic facilities on the northern Nevada campus.

The Davidsons’ ties to the University are born of their lifelong devotion to teaching and learning. The educational entrepreneurs’ commitment to the construction of a new math and science center on campus and to serving our nation’s profoundly gifted students in the Davidson Academy of Nevada grew from their passionate belief that each person has a responsibility to make a positive contribution to society.

In 2005, the Davidsons pledged $11 million for construction of the Davidson Mathematics and Science Center. The $50 million center will be the first new capital project for the natural sciences on the Nevada campus since 1972, and will become the new hub for the College of Science. Groundbreaking for the center, which will be located in the southeast portion of campus, is scheduled to take place this spring and the building will be available for student and faculty use in fall 2010.

Gabriel Matute, biology and nutritional sciences senior, as well as student government senator, is thrilled about the project: “I’m excited that construction of the Davidson Math and Science Center will begin and I can’t wait until it opens! It sends a clear message that I attend a university that makes student enrichment a top priority.”

In addition to the gift toward the new math and science facility, the Davidsons have supplied $5 million to renovate the former Jot Travis Student Union into a new home for an institution they founded in partnership with the University, The Davidson Academy of Nevada. The Academy—one of a handful of free public schools for highly gifted middle and high school students in the nation—has been touted by Time magazine as “a new model for gifted education.” (See story on page 15.)

“Jan and Bob Davidson exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit,” University President Milton Glick says, “They successfully developed a major business in the emerging field of educational software. Their success has inspired them to give back to society. We are delighted they have chosen to invest in The Davidson Math and Science Center and to partner with us in the Davidson Academy of Nevada for the profoundly gifted. Their generosity and commitment to education is extraordinary. We are fortunate to work with the Davidsons

Davidson Mathematics and Science Center
Shaping Nevada’s Future

Story by Ken Kempcke

in creating the next generation of scientists, mathematicians and engineers, who are so important to the continued strength and well-being of our nation.”

**Educational innovators**

Jan Davidson’s interest in educational applications for computers began in the late 1970s when she was working as a teacher in Los Angeles. Her three young children were enthralled by computer games and, early in the era of educational computing technology, Jan realized the computer’s potential as a learning tool for her students. She searched for software that combined learning and games, but found none. Determined to help her students enhance their learning with engaging computer programs, she worked with a programmer to design some simple educational games.

Her students’ responses to these very early computer learning games were so enthusiastic that many parents and teachers wanted to purchase the products. So in 1982, Jan founded the educational software publishing firm, Davidson & Associates, Inc. Thus began Jan’s term as president of the company, providing leadership and vision for hundreds of successful products. By the late 1980s, Davidson & Associates had grown tremendously with revenues of almost $8 million. Needing an experienced CEO to manage the company, Jan concluded that her husband, who was then executive vice president of the world-wide engineering and construction company, Parsons Corporation, was the best candidate. In 1989, Bob Davidson became chairman and CEO of Davidson & Associates.

During the next few years, Davidson & Associates formed partnerships with toy company Fisher-Price and book publisher Simon & Schuster, among others, and made several strategic acquisitions including Blizzard Entertainment, a small entertainment software developer whose products Warcraft™, Starcraft™ and Diablo™ became runaway best sellers.

In 1993, Davidson & Associates went public and grew into a multi-hundred-million dollar corporation, recognized by Business Week, Fortune and Forbes as one of the best small-growth companies in the world. In 1996, the company was purchased by a New York Stock Exchange company.

After selling their company, Bob and Jan decided to focus on philanthropic endeavors in their lifelong passion for helping young people become successful learners. While researching ways to make a positive difference, they realized that our nation’s brightest students are one of the most underserved and neglected student populations in America’s educational system.

In 1999, the couple founded the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, a Reno-
based, national nonprofit foundation whose mission is to recognize, nurture and support profoundly intelligent young people, and to provide opportunities for them to develop their talents.

Education is prevalent in most aspects of the Davidsons’ professional lives, from the book they wrote in 2004, *Genius Denied: How to Stop Wasting Our Brightest Young Minds*, to their own educations. Throughout their lives, Bob and Jan have translated their love of learning into their own pursuits of higher education.

Bob has a juris doctorate degree from George Washington University, a master’s in business administration from the University of California, Los Angeles and a bachelor’s of science in chemical engineering from Purdue University. Jan earned a doctorate in American Studies and a master’s in communication from the University of Maryland, as well as a bachelor’s of art in education and communication from Purdue University. She has received an honorary doctorate of law from Pepperdine University and an honorary doctorate of education from Purdue University.

It was the beauty of Lake Tahoe that brought the couple to Incline Village, after years of living in metropolitan areas. “We both grew up in rural areas,” Bob says. “While we lived in the cities and enjoyed our time there, once we cut our ties with our daily work habits, there was no reason to be there. We wanted to be in a nice, small, beautiful place.”

Some of their favorite activities at Lake Tahoe include snow-shoeing, hiking, golfing and especially boating. But it’s not just Lake Tahoe’s magnificent beauty that appeals to the Davidsons, it’s also what Bob calls Nevada’s “can-do” attitude. “In Nevada you still have people say yes,” Bob says.

**Reversing a Trend**

Today in the United States, there is a pressing need to focus on math and science. American students have been losing ground to other countries in these subjects, which are the foundation for technological innovation and economic leadership. The Davidsons recognize that reversing this trend is vital to America’s future prosperity and security.

In addition, the Davidsons understand that increasing enrollment in science courses, the changing way faculty and students engage in the study of science and the evolution of scientific understanding necessitate critical and far-reaching expansion of the University’s current science facilities.
Of the University’s 16,000 students, three-fourths of them are engaged in mathematics and science classes currently housed in different areas on campus. Under one roof, these disciplines will thrive.

Jeff Thompson, interim dean of the College of Science, says: “The center will address many of the space constraints currently facing the College of Science. In addition, the center will create a powerful and integrated identity for the college, allowing for improved cross-disciplinary science and math education, as well as student-focused learning. The Davidson Center will help attract the best science and mathematics students locally, nationally and globally, in addition to prominent researchers and scholars.”

One of the challenges associated with a large and complex academic unit such as the College of Science is physical proximity, as well as providing adequate teaching, classroom and research space. “It’s an age-old dilemma,” says Thompson, who is not only interim dean, but also a long-time Department of Physics faculty member. “We have so many students, so many faculty, and they are scattered across the campus. That is why our new Davidson Mathematics and Science Center is so critical to our future. It will definitely put the College of Science at an entirely new level.”

The 100,000-square-foot building promises to become a hub for student learning, provide a significant enhancement of the University’s undergraduate research capabilities, as well as become a centralized location for the College of Science. The center will include 27 modern laboratories, each with the capacity for 20 to 24 students, and four large classrooms, each with the capacity for 75 students.

In addition, there will be wireless Internet access throughout the entire facility, enhanced environmental controls and space for culture preparation in eight biological science laboratories, as well as a 50-seat computational classroom—the largest on campus—to teach students the use of software for data analysis and visualization.

The Davidson Mathematics and Science Center will be built on the site formerly occupied by the Fleischmann Greenhouses, just east of the Paul Laxalt Mineral Research Building. The greenhouses have been replaced by new, state-of-the-art University greenhouses east of campus on Valley Road.

Hershenow & Klippenstein Architects of Reno have been charged with bringing the new building to life. The importance of the new center to the College of Science goes beyond the practical needs of more classroom

**Facts at a glance**

The Davidson Mathematics and Science Center will provide an integrated and centralized 21st century environment for learning and research. Specifically, it will have the following features:

- 100,000-square-foot state-of-the-art teaching and research facility with mathematics and science wings;
- 27 modern laboratories, each with the capacity for 20 to 24 students, and four large classrooms, each with the capacity for 75 students;
- Wireless Internet access throughout the entire facility;
- Enhanced environment controls and space for culture preparation in eight biological science laboratories;
- Increased glass hood space for improved observation and greater control over experiments in the seven general chemistry laboratories;
- Student meeting areas with whiteboards for students and teaching assistants to meet and interact with each other outside classrooms and laboratories;
- Electronic interfaces, information technology platforms, projectors, modern audio visual and presentation equipment, whiteboards and pull-down screens in every laboratory and classroom;
- A 50-seat computational classroom—the largest on campus—to teach students the use of software for data analysis and visualization;
- Space for the dean of the College of Science suite and the Department of Mathematics in the administrative wing of the facility.
and laboratory space for students and office space for faculty. As the flagship facility, it will provide immediate identity to the college and will act as a magnet and marketing tool for recruiting and fund-raising efforts.

Expanding knowledge in Nevada

The Davidsons’ interest in supporting math and science education in Nevada is manifested most impressively in their commitment to the construction of the new academic center. The University of Nevada, Reno Foundation was also instrumental in providing funding. The foundation’s Board of Trustees helped to raise more than $3.5 million in challenge gifts for the construction project.

“The foundation was pleased to be able to assist the University in its fund raising to complete the new Davidson Mathematics and Science Center,” says Paul Bible ’62 (economics), chair of the foundation. “We are deeply grateful to the Davidsons and all of the donors who contributed to the successful campaign to build the new home for the College of Science, which will benefit faculty and students for generations to come.”

The Davidson Mathematics and Science Center enjoyed significant donor support from numerous community partners who believe in the mission of the College of Science. Completion of the new facility would not be possible without the generous contributions of these private donors.

The Reno-based Bretzlaff Foundation is one such community partner that has pledged a major gift to assist with the center’s construction. “The Bretzlaff Foundation is excited to be a small part of the Davidson Math and Science Center” says foundation president Mike Melarkey ’72 (political science). “Because of the Davidsons’ vision, this new facility will address a critical need for classrooms and laboratories for the students of this great University.”

Jennifer ‘80M.Ed. and Phil Satre also gave substantially to the center. Jennifer says of their donation: “Phil and I were pleased to be able to contribute to the Davidson Mathematics and Science Center because we are convinced that a strong and thriving University of Nevada, Reno is vital to the quality of life we all cherish. It seemed a ‘natural’ to support this project, which will allow the University not only to attract outstanding students, but also to attract and maintain top notch faculty in the fields of math and science. This is all part of the University’s mission of providing an excellent education, finding solutions to our society’s problems, and meeting the changing needs of our state and nation. These are exciting times on campus and we are honored to be able to help.”

“The new Davidson Mathematics and Science Center, by consolidating all math and science learning into a state-of-the art facility, will enhance learning, encourage collaboration, stimulate research, and add a new level of prestige and competitive advantage for the University of Nevada, Reno. I am proud to have played a part in making this happen.”

– Sara Lafrance ’73 (English), who with her husband, Leonard, is a major donor to the Davidson Mathematics and Science Center