



Distinguished Faculty Scholar  
**Distinguished Nevadan**  
Community Activist **Visionary**  
Feminist Mother and Grandmother

# Barbara C. Thornton

*Dr. Barbara C. Thornton '57 (political science), '67M.A. (political science)*

Most of us don't realize the significance of the stories we tell (and often change) about ourselves and others. Through listening and talking about our stories we can share our lives. I have learned how interdependent we are on each other, both in our local communities and throughout the globe.

An important part of my story began after four wonderful years at the University of Nevada, Reno. I went to Washington, D.C. where I studied law for one semester as one woman in a class with 500 men. Later, I worked for Nevada Sen. Howard Cannon and for John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign. Watching politics in action was a learning experience about good and bad decision-making.

After returning to Reno with my husband, teaching and increasing my knowledge about decision-making became a goal, and incorporating women in the decision-making process a high priority. I earned a Ph.D. in health communications at the University of Utah and was hired as one of the few women faculty at Nevada. My first position was as research director of a project on interdisciplinary health care teams at Nevada's then-new medical school.

Ethics became especially important for me. After doing post-doctoral work, I taught ethics and health communication classes for more than 38 years at Nevada, focusing on such issues as death and dying, the process of ethical decision-making and resource allocation. I loved interaction with students and others. Serving as the vice president of the Hastings Center, an international bioethics consortium, I had the opportunity to also learn from people from all over the world.

Later, I became concerned about the structure of our University, where most departments worked independently of each other. With faculty and help from President Joe Crowley,

we established the College of Human and Community Sciences. This college had a unique model of faculty interaction and participation during more than 10 years. We also started the Nevada Center for Ethics and Health Policy, which focused on many health care issues, but particularly on improving health care related to death and dying. It was a loss to the State of Nevada when this center was disbanded due to budget cuts. However, I have learned that things don't have to continue in their original form if they turn into another configuration that encourages the spread of knowledge.

Peace and human rights escalated as issues in the 70s. Students had been demonstrating on campus because of the Vietnam War, and Bill Thornton '58 (criminal justice) and I were concerned that there was little focus on peace and human rights, both locally and worldwide. In addition to war issues, there were some serious racial problems both on campus and in the community, and we decided to offer the Thornton Peace Prize each year.

Another problem that concerned many of us was that women and children's issues were not the focus of foundation or corporate giving. Women were having trouble getting jobs and education when they often had to support their family. With Frankie Sue Del Papa '71 (pre-legal) doing the legal work, Maya Miller, a worldwide activist and I started the Nevada Women's Fund. The fund has encouraged community leaders to put their personal agendas aside to be advocates for women and children. Amazing women continue to lead the organization, which provides scholarships and grants for women and children throughout the state.

One of my concerns was how to enhance ties between the University and the community. My brother, John Cavanaugh '63 (pre-legal), and I established the Cavanaugh Community

Volunteer Award which both honored our mother and father, John and Margery Cavanaugh, and encouraged community volunteerism.

Since becoming professor emeritus, I am a part of a family business where I encourage communication between the University and the business community. I also assist with raising two of my four grandchildren. Family is really important to me. I've enjoyed getting older and love this part of my life. I want to continue to research and write, as I believe education is a lifelong process. The word "retirement" bothers me. I prefer "rewirement." We are always in the process of rewiring ourselves to become the best that we can be!

*From a conversation with Crystal Parrish, director of corporate and foundation relations. Thornton, who holds a bachelor's and master's in political science from Nevada and a Ph.D. in health communications from the University of Utah, taught ethics and communications for nearly 38 years and became faculty emeritus in 2005. She has received both the Distinguished Faculty and Distinguished Nevadan awards. She has been recognized for her service*

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For the full version of the interview visit: [www.unr.edu/silverandblue](http://www.unr.edu/silverandblue)

*(1979) and professional achievement (1992) by the Nevada Alumni Association. As co-founder of the Nevada Women's Fund, her efforts benefit women and families throughout the state. At the University, she, along with her husband Bill '58 (criminal justice), established the Thornton Peace Prize, and with her brother, John Cavanaugh, established the Cavanaugh Community Volunteer Award. She is listed as a Silver Benefactor at Honor Court. She would appreciate hearing from her former students and friends and may be reached at (775) 250-5151 or [thorntonbc1@yahoo.com](mailto:thorntonbc1@yahoo.com).*