One Family’s Generosity and One Bank’s Legacy
Reisher Scholars. Nearly 800 of them live in Colorado communities, some still in school while others have graduated and are building their careers and their lives. Their stories are rarely told outside of their families and their universities. These men and women, often the first in their family to go to college, are selected in their sophomore year or when transferring from a community college. Reisher scholarships give these students enough funding, provided they keep their academics strong, to get through school without taking out new loans. Reisher Scholars are sometimes already parents and often of nontraditional age. Twelve current scholars are more than 40 years old. What do they share in common? A drive to succeed...and gratitude to a family named Reisher.

In the 1930s, Roger Reisher was the fourth of seven children growing up in a sod house in Nebraska with no indoor plumbing. As a young boy, higher education must have seemed an impossible reach. But when he returned home from World War II to find the GI Bill waiting for him, Reisher was able to attend the University of Colorado and begin a career in banking. After working for several years in the Kansas City area, where he met his wife Margaret, the daughter of Swedish immigrants living in rural Kansas, Reisher returned with his young family to Colorado to take the helm of a brand new enterprise called First Westland National Bank. Today, we know it simply as FirstBank.

Reisher and FirstBank grew successful together. His two daughters, Mary and Nancy, both eventually served on the board. As Reisher drew to the end of his career, he was immensely proud of the company he’d helped to build, and he cared deeply about the employees and customers who were part of the FirstBank family. He knew that when he passed away, the bank might be vulnerable to a takeover, and he’d watched too many such mergers with out-of-state companies strip banks of their character and commitment to the community. Besides, FirstBank employees own much of the bank’s stock and he had their interests to think about.

At the same time, he and Margaret had begun talking to Tom Kaesemeyer, an education expert who was then head of the Gates Family Foundation, about how they could use some of their wealth to help the students of today achieve what Roger had been able to with the help of the GI Bill.

Preserving a Legacy, Funding College Dreams
To bring together his interest in preserving the bank and his interest in funding scholarships, Reisher worked with his attorneys to allow him to use his shares of FirstBank to fund a “supporting organization” that would pay dividends into the Reisher Scholarship Fund at The Denver Foundation. Eventually, he received a “private letter ruling” from the Internal Revenue Service that authorized this transfer of assets – accomplishing both of his goals.

At the same time, Reisher and Kaesemeyer were working on the details of the Reisher Scholarship Fund. “We didn’t have a road map at first,” Kaesemeyer recalls. “He knew he wanted it to be merit-based, that he wanted to target in-state colleges and universities.” Kaesemeyer engaged in months of research, including talking with the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. Finally they settled on a population that didn’t have a lot of access to scholarship dollars: sophomores and those transferring after two years at a community college. The scholarships would require students to have academic merit – those selected would need to have and maintain a 3.0 GPA – and to exhibit strength of character and commitment to the community.

“When we set this up with The Denver Foundation, and its staff began creating partnerships with the universities, I realized this was one of the most efficient programs I had seen in terms of getting dollars to the students. We started with Metro State and the University of Northern Colorado, asking each school to find and select these students, and then to help them through,” Kaesemeyer explains. It is a significant commitment on the part of the school, but the result is worth it – dedicated and thoughtful students who don’t have to graduate with a mountain of debt. (See story by Reisher Scholar Kumella Aiu on page 7.) The program now serves students at five Colorado universities: Colorado State University, Metropolitan State University of Denver, University of Colorado - Colorado Springs, University of Colorado Denver, and University of Northern Colorado, and will expand to additional schools in the future.

The Reishers were and always have been quiet about their giving. “This is an exceptional philanthropist,” says Tom Kaesemeyer about meeting Roger Reisher. “He is efficient and very smart, and has no interest in attention or recognition.” Though the family remains deeply involved in the program, and Mary and Nancy serve on the selection committee, Roger and Margaret stopped attending the scholar banquets at the schools in large part because they were worried they were taking attention away from the students themselves.
With 783 Reisher Scholars who have participated in the program and more to come in the years ahead, it’s time to start sharing the story of the Reisher Scholars, if only to inspire other families to consider giving. “As our higher education system faces ever greater challenges, and as both the cost and the value of a college education go up, the generosity of families like the Reishers will make a difference for more and more students,” says The Denver Foundation’s CEO David Miller. “It’s wonderful for Colorado when philanthropy and good business come together for the good of our students.”

For more information on the Reisher Scholarship Fund visit [www.denverfoundation.org](http://www.denverfoundation.org).

### First Bank: Smart Business, Smart Giving

FirstBank is the largest Colorado-owned bank, and thanks to Roger Reisher and his careful estate planning, this is likely to hold true for years to come. In addition to its outstanding growth and success since its founding in 1963, FirstBank has become a prime example of the connection between good business and philanthropy.

According to CEO John Ikard, this started with FirstBank’s founders, including Ira Rothgerber Jr. and Bill Johnson of Rothgerber, Johnson, and Lyons, LLC. “They saw that anything that helps Colorado helps FirstBank. It leverages good will with employees and customers.”

What was true almost 50 years ago is even truer today. The bank has become a leader in corporate philanthropy in the state; last year it gave more than $4 million to charitable causes, making it the most charitable bank in the state in cash donations. Among those gifts was significant support to [Colorado Gives Day](http://www.coloradogivesday.org), a project of Community First Foundation and its Giving First platform. This outstanding effort allows thousands of Coloradans to give millions of dollars to hundreds of charities, up to $8 million in its first year and more than $12 million in its second year. Colorado Gives Day 2012 is on December 4th. “We’re excited that they seem to be raising new dollars from people who haven’t given to certain charities before, in addition to giving people a chance to give to their favorite organizations. We know that young people in particular like to give online, and Colorado Gives Day helps with that,” says Ikard.

FirstBank also gives generously to affordable housing and education initiatives, and conducts an annual United Way campaign. “This started with Roger thirty years ago and our employees still get excited about it.”

FirstBank sees community service going far beyond dollars. Employees volunteer for dozens of agencies, and the bank’s officers are encouraged to serve on nonprofit boards. “This helps them learn about the community. We’re a community bank,” says Ikard. “That means we have to get involved and show that acting honorably isn’t just something we talk about.”

For more information on FirstBank’s commitment to the community, visit [www.efirstbank.com](http://www.efirstbank.com).