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FRIEND.
BROTHER.

Celebrating the life and legacy of

Jerry Nelson

A MAN OF HIS WORD

Adapted from Michael Koehn's article
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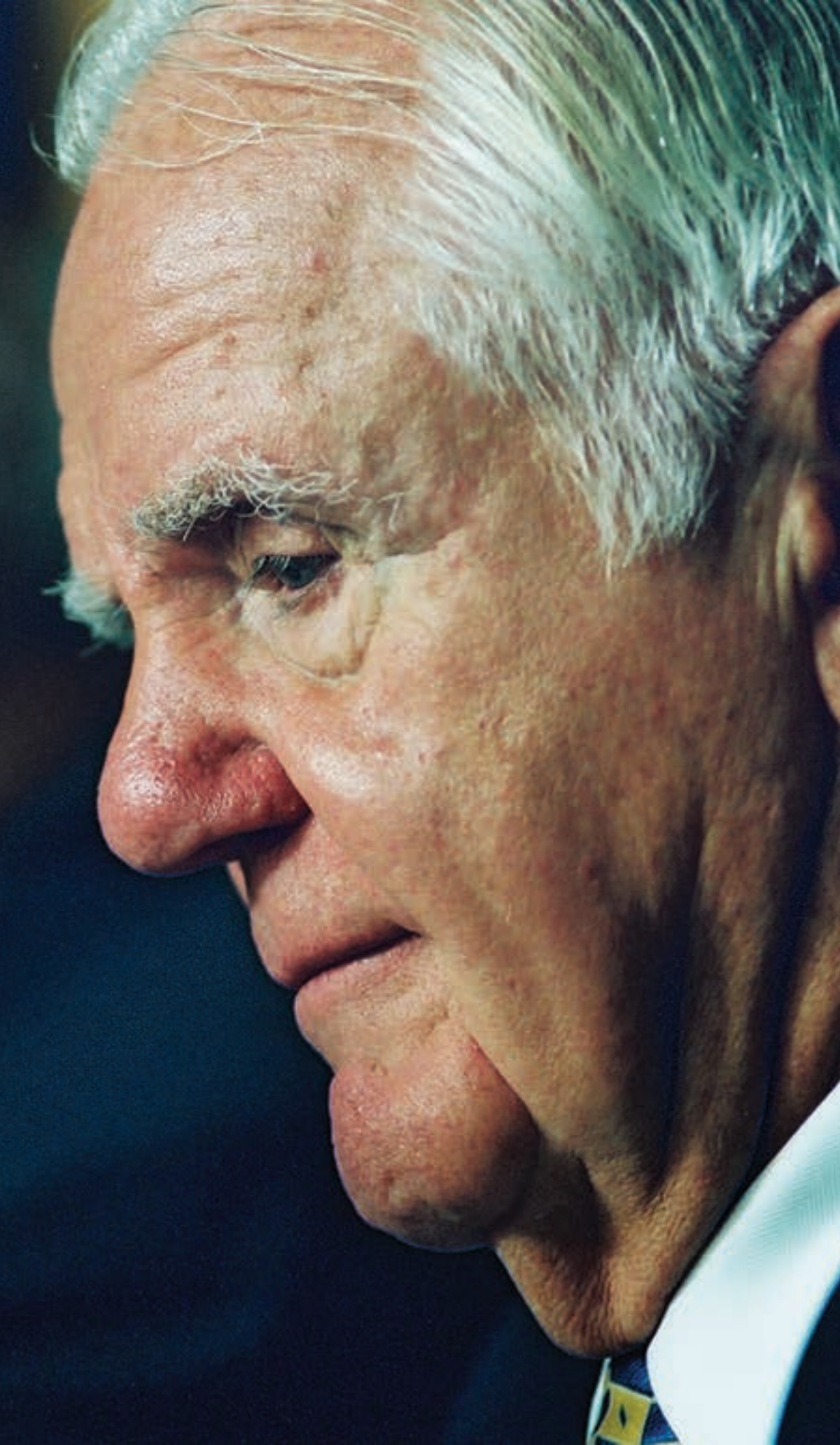
*Jerry Nelson proves that honesty, integrity and charity
in business make for solid ground to stand on.*

Jerry Nelson is a classic American success story. His grandparents emigrated from Norway and settled in Minnesota. His parents met at Duluth Central High School, were married and, tired of the cold and snow, decided to move to Florida. When they got to Kansas City, they saw a newspaper headline proclaiming "Snow in Florida," and, having had enough of that, took a right turn. Fate had played its unpredictable hand, and the Nelsons ended up in Los Angeles.

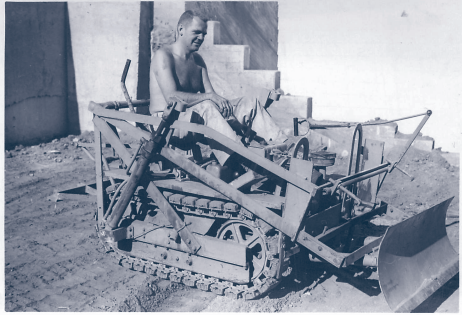
Jerry Nelson was born in Los Angeles in 1929, surviving a difficult birth as something of a miracle baby and an

only child. His family was very poor, earning their living in manual trades like carpentry, day labor and odd jobs to pay the bills during the years of the Depression. Jerry, too, learned the value of hard work at an early age, often skipping school after 6th period to work at the local market, earning 25 cents wherever he could, and eventually getting caught for truancy.

"That didn't stop me," he says. "I ditched school to work. I was just more discreet about it. Besides, 25 cents was a big deal then; a Coke only cost a nickel."



Finally graduating despite a spotty attendance record, Jerry Nelson was surprised that his grades had earned him a scholarship to UCLA. Convinced that a college education would be a waste of time and money, and that he didn't have the resources needed for a four-year degree, Nelson felt he should concentrate on his real interests, carpentry and construction. His mother convinced him otherwise, and Nelson entered UCLA in 1947, not knowing much of anything about college culture.



In his first few weeks as a freshman, Nelson was approached to join a fraternity, an organization that he had never heard of. However, he said yes, and pledged Phi Kappa Psi. It was through his new classmates and fraternity brothers that Jerry Nelson was to learn much about the way of the world, being taken under the wings of mentors who tutored Nelson in study habits, social skills and dating, a proper dress code and the other necessary protocols needed for young men on the path to success.

Pledging Phi Kappa Psi, Nelson began a lifelong relationship with the fraternal organization and the men who became some of his closest friends. Nelson took a job while at UCLA to help pay his expenses, working in the kitchen at a sorority, which improved his chances of getting a date, but Nelson was more impressed with some of the other job benefits. "That job included all the food I could eat for free, breakfast, lunch and dinner, and that was an unbelievable benefit to me," he says.

Eventually his college money did run out and Nelson had to leave in his junior year, spending two and half years in the army, after which he returned to UCLA

to complete his education. He ran short of funding again, and decided to try his hand at the one thing he knew he was good at.

“I always had a passion for building and construction”

A number of new industries were starting to boom then, including remodeling kitchens and bathrooms. "People were putting in new things like showers and double sinks, transforming houses that had been built in the 20's and 30's," Nelson says. "So this looked like a growing business to get into. You could also get a deposit up front to help finance the job."

Working his way up the ladder in the remodeling business in Michigan, Jerry Nelson became successful the old-fashioned way, working hard, over-delivering and saving his money as he moved on to bigger and bigger projects. He eventually got a job as a general superintendent, but really wanted to get started on something of his own. One day he noticed a small piece of property for sale, bought the lot and built a five-home row-house on the property. With this modest start, Jerry Nelson's real estate development career had begun.

In October of 1969 Jerry and his wife Florence decided to take a recreational trip to Arizona, staying at the Camelback Inn near Scottsdale, AZ. They immediately took a liking to the area and Jerry began looking for property with the potential for development, eventually making an offer on a parcel of 160 acres north of Scottsdale, at the intersection of Pinnacle Peak Road and Pima, in December of 1969. It was one of the signature decisions of his life, the beginning of some very large things to come.



“One thing I learned at UCLA was how to negotiate”

Nelson says, "I was able to get a deal on the property for much less than they were asking, and the terms were very favorable. You have to understand that back then this was out in the middle of nowhere, and there were no amenities or services at all, no water, no electrical, nothing but wide open desert and sagebrush. The area was thought of as a place to hunt quail or eat at the Pinnacle Peak Patio. It had a cowboy image."

With Nelson now the proud owner of 160 acres of native desert, his wife Florence and infant first son went to live with her sister in Los Angeles, and he bought a sleeping bag and went to sleep out on the property to protect his investment in water well drilling equipment and stake his claim on this little regarded part of the American West.

Nelson decided that a quick way to returns on his investment was to

subdivide the property, and was quickly able to sell off 60 lots to other builders. The dream he had for the area, the vision of this part of Arizona as an upscale residential community, was starting to become a reality.

When Nelson met a Japanese businessman at a wedding who was interested in the area, he partnered with a Japanese trading company and together they began developing a series of golf courses and country clubs in north Scottsdale.

Thanks to the drive and imagination of Jerry Nelson, much of the area in north Scottsdale has been transformed into spacious residential, recreational and commercial centers, while retaining its characteristic desert feel. Like many successful entrepreneurs, Nelson has been adroit about sensing the potential in new opportunities, looking for something that might take off. "I was always open to new ideas," he says. "Where most people thought that part of the Arizona area was still like the Wild West, we decided to bring in a high quality French restaurant, and it worked. We also decided from the beginning that we were going to work with the native landscape, not just scrape it away with bulldozers and put in something foreign to the area. We had a natural backdrop of Pinnacle Peak there, and I never wanted my kids to look at my work and say 'Dad, you ruined the desert.'"

Nelson's concept for his new developments was visionary for its time. He insisted on underground power lines for all phone and electrical services, splitting the costs with the utility companies, and strictly regulated the size of the residential lawns, a trade-off that gave him the water needed to keep the golf courses green. Non-indigenous plants were not allowed for landscaping, and when an Indian burial ground was discovered during construction, Nelson decided to leave it intact on the property, sealing off the area and honoring the Salt River tribe who had previously inhabited the area. "That paid surprising dividends down the road," he says. "Ten years later we got a call to build on tribe property, The Talking Stick Golf Course, because they trusted us."

Over the years, Jerry Nelson has leant his Midas touch to many other promising projects. He was an early partner in TicketMaster, providing funding for a group of students at Arizona State University who had the technology and concept together for what was to become a major ticketing franchise in the U.S. He also inspired a woman who worked at his real estate company and whose cookies he couldn't stop eating to market them so that everyone could enjoy her recipe. Nelson's encouragement helped Debbie Fields start a namesake cookie company that became a huge success story.

With northern Scottsdale now developing into an upscale, low impact residential area, the die had been cast for a series of environmental-friendly projects within the shadow of Pinnacle Peak, including Troon Village, a 2,655-acre community anchored by the Troon Golf and Country Club with its Weiskopf-Morrish golf course. It was while he was developing a hotel at Troon North that he met one of his most influential friends, and the contact that brought him to Los Cabos.

"I had a person who was interested in the hotel project, a man called Prince Alfonso from Spain, and he flew in on a private 727 to look at what we were doing," Nelson says. "He had created the

Marbella Club in Marbella, Spain, a very high-class property for discriminating European travelers."

Jerry Nelson, the Prince and their wives quickly became close friends, traveling, going on skiing vacations and often spending holidays together. "Prince Alfonso was the one who told me about Cabo," Nelson says. "I didn't even know what that was. He told me he had property on the beach there."

In January of 1990, Jerry Nelson and Prince Alfonso flew down to Cabo and stayed at the Hacienda. They drove out to the beach where the Prince had his lot, and one look at the sea told them that this was a place they had to be a part of. Jerry bought a lot next to the Prince, with a plan for side-by-side homes and named the compound "Hacienda de los Amigos."

Jerry Nelson then began the hotel project named after the Prince's club in Marbella, Spain, Marbella Suites. "We took over an old property called Maria Gaviota, which had been gutted," Nelson says. "It had been abandoned for a long time, and had been stripped of everything of value. We turned it into a beautiful property of 40 luxury suites, put in AC and propane gas and all the necessary amenities."



For many years, Marbella Suites was one of the finest boutique hotels in Los Cabos. In 1994, Nelson's son and some of his fraternity friends were staying with him, and the young college students were curious about how Jerry got started in business. What he thought he could answer with a short anecdote turned out to be a session that lasted several hours. The next year a new group of students

came down and wanted to know the same thing, asking to hear Jerry's story. "We had 20 bedrooms and casitas we had built to accommodate business associates and friends, so we always had plenty of room. And with these college students asking about my background, I realized that there was a hunger for this kind of information."

"They weren't learning about taking risks and teamwork and honesty and trust in college."

"I also had a passion to repair what I saw as an erosion of standards and morality in the country, what I saw as a failure of leadership in America. Lying and cheating were so commonplace everywhere and readily accepted by so many. And I began talking about this with the friends and students who came down. And the next year there was a bigger group, and it began growing in size because it seemed like there was a hunger for this."

Initially what began as a casual conversation, developed into a full-fledged leadership program known as the American Leadership Academy, an endorsed Phi Psi program, hosted at Marbella Suites en La Playa. The program continued for many years under Jerry's direction.

The span of Jerry's influence on Phi Kappa Psi is vast. From his gifts of time, knowledge, energy and earnings to his Cal Epsilon Chapter, to his role as the chief contributor to the growth of the Phi Kappa Psi Foundation, including the

expansion of the Foundation Board of Trustees, he has counseled and guided hundreds of brothers, alumni and undergraduates alike, who are better for it.

His vision for what is possible has led to the establishment of many Phi Psi programs and initiatives including the Chapter Scholarship Fund program and the Foundation's involvement in supporting House Corporation's purchase and renovation of chapter facilities. Jerry has been the impetus behind the volunteerism of many of Phi Kappa Psi's most influential alumni as well as the driving force behind numerous Phi Kappa Psi chapter-based mentoring programs.



In 2016, the Phi Kappa Psi Foundation Board of Trustees established the Nelson Leadership Institute, an organization dedicated to carrying on Jerry's legacy of empowering, developing and affirming undergraduate members of the Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity as they become ethical mission-driven leaders of influence. Jerry continues to shape the Institute's inaugural program, PIVOT, and serves as one of the many program leads.

With his own youthful passion, Jerry Nelson has accomplished more than most people could in half a dozen lifetimes. He's an example of what traditional values, as expressed in Phi Psi's Creed, like honesty, trust and being a man of your word, can achieve. Sharing the wealth not only in the monetary sense, but also fostering a level of personal standards and business ethics that would well serve an individual, a businessperson and even help improve a country, Jerry Nelson is proof that philanthropy is alive and well.

*“If it is to be,
it is up to me.”*

-Jerry Nelson
UCLA '48



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