



MARY & BOB SIERRA FAMILY FOUNDATION

To Recipients of a Charitable Gift from the Mary and Bob Sierra Family Foundation:

We are proud to share with you a brief background about Mary and Bob Sierra, so you gain a sense of who they are and why they believe in your charitable cause.

Mary and Bob (John) Sierra are native Tampans. Both born in 1932, Mary spent her youth in the Davis Islands. She graduated as valedictorian of her class at the Academy of the Holy Names. Bob was raised in Ybor City and attended Jesuit. His father was a newspaper reader in a cigar factory in the early years then eventually owned and operated a dry cleaning / laundry business.

From the time she was a youngster, Mary lived near the Tampa Yacht Club. She started spending time at the horse stables there, where her love of everything equine was born. Mary helped care for the horses and learned to not only ride horses, but to also jump. She gained quite a reputation as a capable horsewoman and was a champion horse-jumper in the state of Florida during this time. Her first horse was a sick animal gifted to her. Of course, Mary being Mary, nursed it back to good health. Her common sense, gentle approach, and the occasional sugar cube won her the affection of many horses. As a teenager she was a counselor at a summer camp in the mountains of North Carolina, teaching campers how to ride and care for horses. This was Mary's first exposure to the mountain climate, and she loved it, always hoping to return in the future.

Bob's youth was full of activity. He worked hard at learning to play the piano in addition to singing. Bob's musical accomplishments saw him performing and singing for the troops during WWII. Out of necessity his sister took him along to the tennis courts next to Tampa General Hospital, since she looked after him while their parents worked. One day, her friend asked Bob if he'd like to come on the court and hit the balls. From that moment Bob was hooked on tennis. He met his doubles partner, Betty Washington, not long after. Both became nationally ranked competitors, complete with corporate sponsors. Around this time Betty's sister, Mary, started coming to the courts to ostensibly watch her sister play, but in reality Mary was there admiring Bob. This was the beginning of the relationship that has celebrated more than 70 years of marriage, three sons, Hi (John Jr.), Stuart, and Michael, six grandchildren, and at last count eight great-grandchildren.

Bob's competitive spirit earned him the privilege of playing tennis all across the U.S.A. During his Army years he played tennis representing his unit. Upon discharge from the Army he and Mary returned to Tampa where they worked at his family's dry cleaning business. Shortly thereafter he started working in



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the insurance business. Bob's business acumen and sheer gumption took him to London to petition Lloyd's of London to allow Bob's agency to represent them in Tampa insuring shrimp boats. A memorable story from that event from which Bob still draws motivation is when the British gentleman from Lloyd's was unsure about underwriting Bob's agency and quipped "*Young man, our company is older than your country*", but in the end Bob succeeded in becoming an agent for Lloyd's and most importantly learned perseverance is a key ingredient by which to live. After a few years the insurance agency moved into banking / mortgage lending and Bob guided this company to be the largest mortgage banking firm in Florida. It was not long after that Bob's interest moved to the development of land, where Bob's company enjoyed immense success meeting the need for housing in the burgeoning Tampa area by developing residential neighborhoods and commercial properties.

Bob's sporting nature and the beautiful Florida weather led Bob to play golf. Bob's always constant theme of working hard and doing things right applied to his golf game as well. He began to buy land "out in the country" north of Tampa, with the idea of building his own golf course community. 1980 saw the opening of Avila, Tampa's premiere luxurious country club community. Through his love of golf Bob became acquainted with golfing legend Jack Nicklaus. The two became business partners, building beautiful sought-after golf course communities across the United States. Indeed, they earned international acclaim and were courted to build communities worldwide.

Mary's interest in horses never waned. In the 1970's they bought a rural Brooksville, Florida property so Mary could raise horses. Her interest in jumping led her to import Hanoverian jumping horses. She was a capable and astute horsewoman, managing all aspects of the purchase and care of her animals. Mary even taught Bob to ride in his later years. Their successes have allowed Mary and Bob the opportunity to spend extensive amounts of time in North Carolina, New Zealand, and Montana enjoying the mountain climate she'd experienced all those years ago, while riding horses, hiking, and taking in the natural beauty this world has to offer, yet always returning to their beloved Tampa and their growing family full of the younger generations.

Bob's strong work ethic to succeed in business and life has contributed to his emphatic belief that it is his and Mary's obligation to give back to those in the community who are less fortunate and in need. Their guiding principle to "give not a hand out, but rather a hand up" has guided the Mary and Bob Sierra Family Foundation mission focusing on helping underprivileged children and youth get an education and helping feed families in need through effective charitable organizations for the Tampa area.



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Today Bob and Mary are in their 90's maintaining an active lifestyle and spending time enjoying nature at their residence in rural Brooksville and meeting up with friends and family in the Avila community.



Bob & Mary Sierra - 2024