

Donna and Richard Esteves gift \$3 million to Newcomb Institute to support women's health

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Donna and Richard Esteves aim to strengthen women's health and rights and to promote women's philanthropy with a new \$3 million gift to Newcomb Institute.

Teaching has been central to the multifaceted career of Tulane alumna Donna Esteves (G '74).

The lessons she learned during the 1970s as an English teacher on New Orleans' West Bank resonated deeply with her as she achieved incredible success later in life as a saleswoman and entrepreneur. She says that her work as a teacher showed her the role schools and academia could have in supporting girls' capacities to move beyond difficult circumstances to achieve their goals. But, she adds, she also saw that basic education alone was not sufficient to guarantee girls' success in the absence of the necessary health education they needed to protect themselves from harmful relationships and teen pregnancy.

As she moved into a career working in sales with women clients and eventually as an entrepreneur overseeing a women-majority workforce, Esteves says she again found that teaching women clients and workers in ways that recognize their capacities and support their self-determination yielded greater success for both women with whom she worked and her business. She also says she saw that these women were better able to maximize their capacities and achieve their goals when they could take care of their health, especially their reproductive and maternal health.

That's why she and her husband, Richard, have donated \$3 million to Tulane's Newcomb Institute for the Donna and Richard Esteves Fund for Women's Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health, to which they have already given \$1 million since establishing it in 2016. In honor of their generosity — and in recognition of Donna Esteves' past service on the university's President's Council and the Newcomb Institute Director's Advisory Council — Tulane is naming an academic wing, featuring three seminar rooms and the institute's administrative offices in the Malkin Sacks Commons, after the couple.

Although Esteves left the education profession decades ago, she's still a teacher at heart — only now, she says, she teaches about the power of philanthropy and the importance of philanthropy to support academic institutions and health education efforts that strengthen women's health and agency.

"In my opinion, philanthropy needs to be taught," said Donna Esteves, who co-founded the pioneering Free Lighting Corp., which used all-women crews to install comprehensive energy-efficient lighting in homes. The company became the largest energy conservation contractor of its kind before its sale in 2001.

“With this gift I hope to motivate others, especially women, to give to the causes meaningful to them — not just money, but their time, effort and attitude, with a goal of strengthening women’s health and rights,” she says.

Esteves sees her leadership as reflective of a broader, powerful movement of women in philanthropy who are using their resources to shape social change, particularly in areas affecting women’s rights. By championing these causes, she notes that she is part of a growing wave of female philanthropists dedicated to addressing gaps in societal support for women and making a lasting impact on the next generation of leaders and professionals.

Tulane Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Robin Forman expressed the university’s gratitude. “The Newcomb Institute occupies a deeply meaningful role in the story of Tulane University, and this gift from Donna and Richard Esteves will allow us to energetically advance the institute’s mission of cultivating young leaders who are committed to gender equity and public service while preparing them to make critical contributions to our society,” he said. “Tulane is delighted that their names will be featured prominently in several spaces in the institute to commemorate all that they have done for Tulane and to recognize all that they will have made possible in the years to come.”

Newcomb’s goal of developing leaders struck a chord with Esteves as she completed her master’s degree in teaching at Tulane while working in Jefferson Parish public schools in Lafitte and Marrero. Esteves says that for many of the girls she taught, pursuing their education beyond high school was not an option, either because of unplanned pregnancies or the expectation of that era that women should not have professional careers outside the home. Esteves herself was the first person in her family to graduate from college, thanks in part to the guidance of her mother, a clerk in a New Jersey school.

After leaving Louisiana for New York, Esteves became one of the Mary Kay cosmetic company’s top saleswomen nationwide and rose to the position of sales director. She later started the Free Lighting Corp., retrofitting houses for energy-efficient lighting using women-only installation crews. Before selling the firm to concentrate on her philanthropic interests, she grew the company into the country’s largest of its kind.

Esteves credits her business achievements to her teaching skills. “Being a teacher has always stayed with me,” she said. “It’s something I found at Tulane. Through Newcomb I became interested in women’s rights.”

Since its creation in 2016, the Esteves Fund has played a transformative role in spotlighting women’s issues. It has supported paid student internships, sponsored lecture series and the digital newsletter ReproNews.

“The Newcomb Institute could not be more grateful for this amazing gift from Donna and Richard,” said Anita Raj, its executive director. “This donation will build upon and expand what the Esteves Fund, based in and managed by the Newcomb Institute, has accomplished. Donna and Richard’s extraordinary commitment to Tulane students will provide them with even more edifying experiences in the realm of reproductive health and rights as well as maternal health equity. The best is yet to come thanks to them and to the Esteves Fund for Women’s Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health.”