

# And I Think to Myself: What a Wonderful World

By Kaaren Morgner

The Stewarts' love for Merced runs deep. It's a love woven with family ties, friendships, and the joy of building and investing in community over time.

Betty Santi Stewart's connection to Mercy Hospital spans nine decades. "I was one of the first babies born at Mercy Hospital," she recalled. That was in 1925. Mercy Hospital, a \$50,000, twenty-three bed facility had just opened in November of 1923. By 1937, Mercy Hospital expanded to a fifty-four bed facility.

The Santi family who owned Merced Dairy and Ice, added a beer and wine distribution business in 1933 and opened Modern Maid Drive-In, a first in Merced, right next to the Dairy plant on 16th and O streets. Betty loved the country and everything about growing up in Merced. By age thirteen she was learning accounting skills in the office with her parents during summer vacations. Returning to Merced to work in the family business after college was Betty's plan early on.

Betty's first experience with hospital service occurred while attending Stanford University. Those were the war years. Everyone did their part. Betty folded bandages for the Red Cross until she discovered she could become a Red Cross nurse's aide through a training program offered on campus. Volunteering on weekends at a Palo Alto hospital was the perfect fit for her desire to serve.

In the fall of 1945, at a campus party after a Stanford vs. CAL football game, Don and Betty met. Don had just returned from a two-year tour of duty with the military which included Iwo Jima and North Korea. They graduated together in 1947 from Stanford with majors in economics and were married the following spring at the Stanford University Chapel.

Don, a native of San Francisco, found the smiles and hellos when walking down a Merced street a welcome change from the bustle of city life. "He loved everything about Merced," Betty smiled. Don joined the Santi family beverage distribution business in 1948. Under his leadership after a series of expansions it became the Delta-Sierra Beverage Company of today serving over 2,600 retail accounts in all or part of eight counties.



*Don and Betty Stewart, Heritage Club charter members. Betty served on the Foundation Board for 11 years.*



*The happy couple on their wedding day, April 16, 1948. Don and Betty recently celebrated their 69th anniversary along with their 5 children, 13 grandchildren, great-grandson and their second great-grandchild due to arrive in June.*

As Betty puts it, “We were a city boy and a country girl.” Three daughters: Melinda, Jana, Andrea and two sons: Don Jr. and Robert were born at Mercy Hospital. It was a busy life raising a family and building a regional business.

In 1984, Mercy Hospital Advisory Board formed a Foundation Board to support the hospital in the community. Bert Crane, then on the board of directors, wondered if Betty might consider being a board member. “Bert, How long do you want me?” she chuckled. “Well let’s say two years,” he replied. “Ok. I’ll do that! Eleven years later, I told Bert that was the longest two years of my life!” her eyes twinkled.

“We were a loveable bunch of ten or twelve as I remember. Reaching out to the community was first; and along the way we put on over-the-top fundraisers bringing many people together to highlight Mercy Hospital to add to its ability to heal by purchasing the latest in hospital equipment.”

The first fundraiser (Charriada, 1985) held in the Cranes’ barn was the sendoff to many more exciting events. “When the party wound

down and the last guest left, Bert, Nancy, Catherine and Peter Fluetsch, and Betty and Don stood at the make shift sink in the barn washing up all the pots, pans, and dishes into the early morning hours. Those eleven years on the Mercy Foundation Board will always be dear to my heart,” she reflected.

The family has spent time at Mercy Hospital since Don suffered a stroke last year. “In our time of need, the hospital has been wonderful!” Betty smiled through misty eyes. The Stewart Family Foundation established scholarships for students in nursing programs at Merced College and Cal State Stanislaus. During one of Don’s recent hospital stays, a nurse stopped by the room to introduce himself as a recipient of one of their scholarships and to thank them in person.

The Stewarts’ gifts spanning over more than three decades of time and service to the Foundation Board, generous financial support of Mercy Medical Center and Mercy Cancer Center, and their investment in the education of future nurses embody the spirit of philanthropy. Their enthusiasm for the future of medical care in Merced remains steadfast. Betty’s eyes dance and she leans in with excitement, “Look what we have! The hospital, the Cancer Center, Merced College, UC Merced... Can you believe it? It’s too good to be true!” And I think to myself, what a wonderful world!