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Nelson Family and Rotary Corporation Support Hall of Fame and Field of Dreams at Paulson Stadium

OCTOBER 16, 2014



The family of the late Bill W. Nelson and Rotary Corporation, the company he built into an internationally-recognized leader in the outdoor power equipment industry, have made a major gift to the Georgia Southern University Athletic Foundation. The announcement was made Thursday by University President Dr. Brooks A. Keel, Ph.D., and Director of Athletics Tom Kleinlein.

"The Nelson Family and Rotary Corporation have 'Joined the Journey' in a major way," stated Keel. "On behalf of the entire Eagle Nation, we express our sincere appreciation for their incredible support of our football program."

The generosity of the Nelson Family will fund the Hall of Fame in the new Ted Smith Family Football Center, which is located inside Allen E. Paulson Stadium. It will be named the Bill W. Nelson Hall of Fame and will serve as a permanent recognition of inductees with highlights including the rich history of Eagle football.

In addition, Rotary Corporation has funded the "Field of Dreams" between the stadium's east end zone and the football center. The field, which provides a game day experience for children 12 and under, was the brainchild of Kleinlein and Frank Hook, director of Donor Relations for Georgia Southern's Athletic Foundation. The field measures 48' wide by 144' long and features artificial turf.

"The Nelson Family as well as Rotary Corporation have made a significant impact on the future of Georgia Southern Athletics through their generous gift," commented Kleinlein. "The Bill W. Nelson Hall of Fame will enable us to showcase Eagle football with a permanent tribute for our distinguished inductees. With the Field of Dreams, future generations of Eagles can play a pick-up game while watching our Eagles and dreaming about one day becoming an Eagle themselves."

Since Paulson Stadium opened in 1984, kids have enjoyed sliding down the hills and playing football in the end zone. With stadium expansion and upgrades earlier this year, athletic department officials were determined to maintain certain traditions like this for future Eagles. "Thus, the 'Field of Dreams' became a reality," said Hook. "It's one of those special traditions in college football that will continue to make a Georgia Southern game like none other in the country."

Head Football Coach Willie Fritz echoed Hook's remarks, "The Hall of Fame and Field of Dreams allow us to carry on the traditions of Georgia Southern football. Both are tremendous assets for our program."

"The synthetic turf field can also be used for our student athletes. It provides great flexibility for our strength and conditioning program and will be utilized in both our in-season and off-season workouts," he continued. "The surface also allows our players and coaches a place for 'walk-through' opportunities and a venue for special recruiting events."

Bill Nelson passed away in 1999 but his philanthropic contributions and deep sense of community continue to be felt by people in Southeast Georgia. He was a longtime supporter of education and built a strong relationship with Georgia Southern University. When Coach Erk Russell landed in Statesboro in 1981, Nelson was one of the first to step forward with a commitment to the Eagle program. On more than one occasion, Erk was known to say, "We need more people like Bill Nelson."

Nelson purchased a small lawn mower repair shop from his uncle in 1957 and built Rotary Corporation, recognized today as the world's largest supplier of outdoor power equipment parts. Based in Glennville, Rotary operates eight distribution centers in the U.S. and serves customers in all 50 states and 68 countries worldwide. Nelson's son, Ed, currently serves as president and CEO of Rotary.

"We are proud to be a part of 'The Journey' for Eagle football," commented Ed Nelson, speaking on behalf of his mother, Helen, and sisters Tara and Traci. "My father understood the value of quality education and how important access to higher education is for the people of Southeast Georgia.

"Over the years, we've built a strong relationship with Georgia Southern. In fact, many of our employees at Rotary are alumni and many have family members who either attended or have children in school at the University today.

"We feel the growth and excitement of Georgia Southern football is worth the investment. We hope our gift will inspire others to support the University through their own gifts. It has made a strong impact in people's lives throughout Georgia and beyond," said Nelson.