

# MAKING LIFE COUNT

*For William and Ann Burton, lifelong relationships and lives of service began at International House*



WILLIAM AND ANN BURTON

When William Burton, MBA'50, got out of the U.S. Navy after World War II, he was determined to live “a purposeful life.” A graduate of Case Western Reserve, he enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1948 to live at International House and to study business—in that order. Mr. Burton felt that I-House, with its mission of promoting cross-cultural understanding through residential and cultural programs, was exactly what he needed. “I had to have the experience of meeting and getting to know people from different nations, to remove any prejudice I might have had, to make friends, and to open my mind as much as possible,” he recalls. He did not know then that at Chicago he also would meet his wife Ann, AB'51, with whom he would embark on a lifetime of volunteerism, and a friend whose experiences in Maoist China would have a profound impact on both the Burtons.

Campus housing was tight in the postwar years, so two students were assigned to each room at I-House—one American and one foreign. Mr. Burton assumed he would share a room with a European student, but instead spent three years living with Ningkun Wu, a Chinese scholar pursuing a PhD in English literature. Through student government and other extracurricular activities, he got to know Ann Wright, who was then an undergraduate and national trampoline champion. Mr. Burton proposed to her in the lobby of I-House and when they married in 1951, Wu was their best man.

Three weeks after the wedding, Wu left Chicago for a teaching post in Beijing. The civil war in China had just come to an end and there was real hope for change. When the Maoist government called on Chinese intellectuals to return to their native country and contribute to the new society, Wu felt it was his duty to go. Mrs. Burton remembers seeing

him off in San Francisco: “We helped him pack a lot of things that he needed to take with him, and we waved to him from the Golden Gate Bridge.”

Among the items they packed were Wu's beloved books of English literature. To prevent the books from being confiscated by the Chinese government, the Burtons helped Wu hide them under communist books they had purchased as camouflage. “We bought a trunk and as many



different communist books that we could find on any of the San Francisco shelves,” Mr. Burton recalls. “We filled the trunk with all these communist books, and with the other books slid in between so that he would be able to get some of them back to China.” Because the relationship between China and the U.S. was so tense, Wu and the Burtons agreed not to communicate for fear of persecution.

Two years after Wu returned to China, he was accused of being a counterrevolutionary and his

family endured many years of suffering, recounted in his memoir *A Single Tear* and in his daughter Emily Wu's book *Feather in the Storm*. When China finally began to open to foreigners in the late 1970s, Mrs. Burton's mother visited and unsuccessfully tried locating Wu. Before she left, she sent a letter to his last known address. After she returned to America, Wu got the letter and replied. “Ningkun said it had been sent from Beijing out to the countryside and up the Yangtze River to a town where he was,” Mrs. Burton says. “So many people were persecuted in China, and all at once after Mao died, it was permissible to talk about the old terrible times,” Mr. Burton notes. “Then here comes a letter from the United States and everybody wanted to be sure it got through.” By the time the letter reached Wu, it was tattered from all the hands through which it had passed. Mr. Burton calls the successful delivery of the letter “a statement of the power of people.”

During Wu's ordeal, the Burtons had been raising four children in California and dedicating their time to worthy causes. Mrs. Burton says, “Our whole family was into conservation and the environment very early on, and we were interested in solar energy.” Mr. Burton spent time as director of a solar energy company and worked at several engineering jobs before retiring at age 46 so he and Mrs. Burton could volunteer full-time. From 1970 to 1978, they helped build the Sequoia Retreat Center in Santa Cruz Valley. In 1982, they were among the founders of the antiwar group Beyond War. They also helped establish and run its successor, the Foundation for Global Community, dedicated to spiritual growth, social action, grassroots education, and mediating international conflicts. Through their renewed connection with Wu, the Burtons spent 1980–81 teaching in China. They helped put Wu's two children, who became friends with their own children, through college in the U.S. The Burtons' subsequent activities have included building a school in Mexico and roads in India and Nepal.

To carry on this tradition of meaningful work, the Burtons will bequeath funds to International House, where their friendship with Wu and many of their acts of service have their roots, and to the College. “It's a lot of work to save up and establish any kind of fund. That money needs to work as hard for society as we have worked ourselves in our life,” Mr. Burton says. The Burtons hope the bequest to I-House will help sustain its mission and they want to support the College, as Mr. Burton puts it, “because that's where they teach people to think as real young people and get them turned on to asking questions and to trying to use their lives well.” For their part, the Burtons seem to have done just that. “You either go for it or you waste your life,” Mr. Burton advises. “One or the other, you have a choice. Make your life count.”

**For more information on making a gift in support of International House, please contact Denise Jorgens, Director of Programs and External Relations, International House, at (773) 753-2281 or [d-jorgens@uchicago.edu](mailto:d-jorgens@uchicago.edu).**