

UW-Stout: Alumna's focus is on children with \$1 million donation

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Early childhood grad supporting new Child and Family Study Center

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Menomonie, Wis. — Mary Ross Denison knows firsthand that an investment in someone's future can make a difference.

She was a somewhat unsure young student from Milwaukee when University of Wisconsin-Stout took a chance on her in the mid-1960s. That investment changed her life — and by extension other lives through her eventual career in early childhood education.

Ross Denison wants UW-Stout to continue to change lives. It's why she has donated \$1 million to the [Pathways Forward](#) comprehensive campaign for a new [Child and Family Study Center](#), along with a separate estate gift.

The CFSC is a child-care lab on campus — one of only two in the UW System — where UW-Stout students in [early childhood education](#) and other majors help care for and observe children.

The current house-like facility with an outdoor playground is aging and has space issues, both of which are limiting its potential. Ross Denison's donation is a major boost for a proposed facility that could cost \$5.5 million.

"This is a fine university, and we should have a premier early childhood center," Ross Denison said. "The time has come for early childhood alumni to kick it up a notch and confirm that this is a cutting-edge program. As alumni, we have benefited greatly from our Stout experience, and it's time to pay it forward."

Ross Denison, of Milwaukee and Fort Myers, Fla., would love to see a new facility that stands out, one so impressive that people would say, "We have to go up to UW-Stout and see that."

She would like to see UW-Stout raise the bar for child care. "The possibilities are endless. Anything we can do that helps with positive child-rearing benefits us all," she said.

Ross Denison graduated from UW-Stout in 1970 in early childhood education. It's where she came of age as an adult. "It was growing up. I loved learning and growing up. I was not a great student, but Stout gave me this chance," she said. "It was just the best. I just thrived here."

She went on to earn her master's degree from UW-Stout in 1974 in adult education. Her career included 30-plus years as training coordinator with 4C-Community Coordinated Child Care of Milwaukee County.

She and her late husband, Hugh Denison, had one son. She credits Hugh with impressing upon her the importance of giving back. He was chair of a \$65 million capital campaign at his alma mater, Lawrence University in Appleton. "He loved asking people for money. I learned everything about philanthropy from him. He got me thinking about a Stout gift," she said.

She has made other donations to UW-Stout over the years and served on the School of Education advisory board in 2004-05.

Beyond the child center at UW-Stout, Ross Denison believes it's important to support higher education, especially with the UW System facing reduced state funding in recent years. UW-Stout can be a more expensive university to operate because of its polytechnic designation and the need for cutting-edge equipment to support program options.

"What better thing is there than education? I love places that are open to everybody, places like Stout. Education is a way out. We need to start with these

babies, the earlier the better,” she said.

Kindergarten and primary teacher training was the first degree program offered at UW-Stout, starting in 1899 when the university was known as Stout Manual Training School.

UW-Stout is [Wisconsin's Polytechnic University](#), with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes.