

From Passion to Legacy

Don Hall can actually say he had a stellar career, spending 34 years under the stars – only indoors at planetariums where he’s worked.

His life among the stars also presented the unique opportunity to train astronauts in NASA’s space program. Neil Armstrong, Alan Shepherd, and Gus Grissom were among what Hall called his “most motivated students” who had to be able to recognize 54 specific stars that were guides to keep the spacecraft oriented in case navigation equipment failed.



Don Hall in 2016 in the Community Foundation’s library. Photo by Matt Wittmeyer.

While stars and constellations have been Hall’s first and primary passions, it is his love of historic buildings and preserving them that will be supported by an endowed fund he established at the Community Foundation.

The education director and later director of the Strasenburgh Planetarium at Rochester Museum & Science Center calls the

Donald S. Hall Fund “my chance at immortality.” He explains it has to do with the Mexican belief that a person dies three times:

- When your heart stops and you stop breathing;
- When you’re buried or cremated; and
- When the last person says your name.

This Columbus, Ohio native knows that people and organizations will continue to say his name and publish his name after he’s gone as grants are awarded from his fund. Hall has been seeding this endowed fund since 2006 with regular personal contributions as well as speaker fees from hundreds of talks he’s given locally and across the country.

The 19 talks Hall assembled grew out of his research into quirky topics, which range from stars (of course), glass, pottery, and zinc grave markers, to architecture, organs, and hamburgers. (*See all the topics at DonHallSpeaks.weebly.com*).

Throughout his life, Hall has been learning everything he could about many different kinds of things. Each fascination – maybe bordering on obsession – usually was prompted by a random encounter or situation.

Take Tiffany glass, for example. Hall had taken a group of people interested in architecture to see the Darwin Martin House National Historic Landmark in Buffalo, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. “It would be arguably the best of his prairie-style homes,” Hall says.

While waiting for their scheduled tour, they had lunch in the basement of a church across the street and got a call that the tour would be delayed. The church happened to have gorgeous Tiffany windows and neither Don nor his co-leader of the group were knowledgeable about the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany. “So here we were in a church with Tiffany windows that I could easily, had I known anything, spent an hour discussing.”

This lost opportunity provided the motivation Hall needed to dive into Tiffany's life and the evolution of his decorative art. Hall developed three, one-hour talks with slides on this topic.

Depression glass was the first talk he researched and created. He began collecting this mass-produced glass in all colors and patterns before it was well known. At his collection's peak, Hall figures there were 5,000 pieces stored on 16-foot long shelves in the basement of his then-Fairport home. The plan was to eventually sell it and finance the college education of his daughter Elizabeth, who was 1 year old at the time. In the end, the Depression glass paid about half the cost of her education at a private four-year liberal arts college in California.

The hamburger research? "That started with a trivia question I used to like to ask people: What was the first fast-food chain restaurant to serve a hamburger?" The answer is White Castle in 1921.

Hall's love of historic buildings may have begun when he discovered architecture in his teen years while his family built a house in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

"I was fascinated by the process and the plans that went back and forth, and the building that resulted." But math was his downfall and the reason he never pursued an architecture career. He found himself drawn to the unique designs of planetariums, the first at Stetson University in Deland, Fla., where he attended college, and then the Morehead Planetarium at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he got his first job.

When Hall arrived in Rochester in 1968, he became enamored with the elegant and eclectic mansions along East Avenue that he passed on his way to and from work. At that time, Hall recalls, that stately avenue "was on the way to becoming a

slum.” He shared a story of the Lamberton House at the corner of East and Oxford Street being raided by police. “There were working women who ran an emporium there. They found explosives in the basement. That was the neighborhood I was working in.”

But those mansions intrigued him enough that he began a deep dive into who built them and their connections to Rochester as well as each house’s unique features. During that research he discovered that there were many missing mansions, too. These stories inspired a series of five, one-hour talks that present what Hall has learned along with a bevy of shorter programs, such as “Some of the Missing Mansions” and “Two Prolific Architects Who Designed 25% of the Mansions.”

He and his former wife bought a historic house on Vick Park B near East Avenue, first as rental property and later his home after they divorced. Now he lives in a 1959 building of condominiums on East Avenue, the site of the original Cunningham mansion.

Hall, who turned 80 this year, admits he enjoys being in front of a group sharing information and photos he’s gathered during his research. In addition to his talks, he taught courses through OASIS and, for 12 years, led tours through Mount Hope Cemetery.

“I love when people laugh at something I say,” Hall says. “That way I know they’re not asleep.”

One October, he invited a friend to come along on one of his Torch Light Tours of Mount Hope Cemetery. These tours are the only times when the Victorian cemetery is open at night, resulting in huge crowds. To accommodate the demand, tours leave the gatehouse promptly every 15 minutes.

Hall’s friend missed his tour but was able to join the next one. Later, the friend told Hall that he was able to keep track of the progress of Hall’s tour because “we could hear the laughter from your group and always knew where you were in

spite of the darkness.”

Hall is also critical of his presentation skills when the laughs don't come readily, which happened in late February during a talk at The Summit at Brighton that detailed his career in the planetarium field. “I had two zingers that fell flat and I have been working on it, but that was only the third time I had given that talk. I've rearranged the words just a little bit and it still has not gotten the laughs.”

Hall's walking tours were sidelined by Parkinson's, which has sapped his energy, slowed his gait, and softened his voice. He was giving talks until mid-March when the pandemic shut everything down.

In the meantime, he has enjoyed watching the seasons change from the large windows of his fifth-floor condo on his beloved East Avenue that look toward downtown. A recent road trip to a cemetery in Arcade, Wyoming County, to look at zinc grave markers was a real treat, providing a much-needed change of scenery.

What the future holds for Hall is only uncertainty. He has accepted what he is no longer able to do, but grudgingly and with a self-deprecating humor. What he does know is that proceeds from his estate will be the final gift to his fund, which he's entrusted to the Community Foundation to carry on his legacy and love for historic buildings.

“People have asked me in the past, ‘If you had not had a career in the planetarium field, what would you like to have done?’ I said ‘Be a philanthropist.’ That was a joke at the time, but now I am one.”

Learn more about Don Hall in his 2016 profile in Rochester Magazine.