



All in the Family

A new scholarship furthers the Drobish family's long-held commitment to Southern and its students.

By Natalie Missakian

The romance began in a crowded gymnasium on registration day in 1958. Marian (Riggio) Drobish, '62, was a Southern freshman and Robert M. Drobish, '61, had just transferred from Providence College, when the two met while waiting in line to sign up for classes. "She kept inching her way closer to the front because she knew all these people," Drobish recalls. That night, he asked her to dance at a student mixer. Four years later, they were married.

The couple's connection to Southern remained strong following graduation, growing in step with their family, which soon included a son Robert K., named after his father. The elder Robert became the assistant director of admissions at Southern. Marian also began a job on campus — as hall director (then called "house mother") at the newly opened Wilkinson Hall — so the family moved into the all-girls dorm where the younger Robert spent his toddler years.

Not surprisingly, the family's ties to Southern have expanded to include the next generation. Consider the aforementioned toddler who once happily walked the halls of Wilkinson. Today, Robert K. Drobish, '88, M.S. '90, works in the Registrar's Office as a scheduling officer at Southern — which he considers much more than his alma mater and employer. As Drobish sees it, Southern is his home.

"Not even a second home. It's home," says the younger Robert. "I literally grew up on Southern's campus."

Robert remembers visiting his dad at work — in the office where he himself would work decades later — and tagging along at football games when his father was a statistician and announcer for the college marching band.

He also recalls how much he looked up to the Southern students. "As a kid, they seemed so old. So much larger than life," he says.

His siblings' ties to Southern run wide and deep as well. Diana (Dee Dee) Dahlman, graduated from Southern in 1991 with a bachelor's degree in education and now works in the Office of Residence Life. A younger sister, Andrea Kennedy, spent two years at Southern before leaving to pursue a career in musical theater.

Southern is also where the younger Robert met his wife, Director of Student Life Denise Bentley-Drobish, '90, M.S. '92 — whose diverse responsibilities include supervising daily operations of the office, clubs and organizations, and the Programs Council, as well as serving as the primary adviser to the Student Government Association. The couple began dating while working as hall directors — Robert at Chase and Denise at Farnham Hall — and married in 1995. All told, the family holds seven Southern degrees.

It was Denise who first suggested establishing a scholarship at the university to honor the Drobish family legacy. In recognition of

the institution that played a central role in all of their lives, the relatives established the Drobish Family Endowed Scholarship at Southern. The scholarship was presented as a surprise to Marian and Robert M. Drobish, who have

Supporting Southern is a family affair for (from left) Diana (Dee Dee) Dahlman, '91; Robert M. Drobish, '61; Marian (Riggio) Drobish, '62; Robert K. Drobish, '88, M.S. '90; and Denise Bentley-Drobish, '90, M.S. '92.

subsequently contributed to the fund as well. The scholarship will go to an in-state student who is involved in his or her community and holds a leadership position at Southern.

"Southern is a part of us," says the younger Robert. "We thought it was important to do what we could to give back."

Others in the Drobish family share his sentiment. Marian's voice brightens when she talks about the early days of her marriage spent living in Wilkinson Hall, and her relationship with "the girls," who doted on her then 15-month-old son, and often babysat while she counseled students.

"My door used to be open until all hours of the night to see students. It was a very warm and family kind of relationship," she says. Dorm structure was different then, and she was house "mother" in every sense — right down to enforcement of the strict curfews and room inspections.

She left the job with the birth of her second child, but the elder Robert stayed on as registrar until 1976, when he accepted a similar position at what is now Western Connecticut State University. He retired in 1992. Marian would build a career teaching special education at the Foundation School in Milford, Conn. An accomplished singer and performer, she also ran a school for theater arts.

"I've had a few careers in my life, and I really owe it to Southern," she says. "It was a wonderful foundation for everything I did afterwards, and I am forever grateful."

The younger Robert says he and Denise decided to make community involvement and campus leadership a requirement for the scholarship to honor the example set by his parents, who were active in campus life.

As undergrads, his father served as senior class president while his mother was instrumental in bringing the American Association of University Women, an advocacy group, to campus. She was also among the university's first female leaders in student government, serving as president her senior year.

Looking back, Marian and the elder Robert say they always encouraged their children to follow their own paths, but are thrilled they chose to study and work at Southern.

"They always enjoyed our stories about Southern and, of course, Bob spent some of his formative years there. But they really discovered Southern on their own," says Marian. "There's no question that they are happy with their decision."

A career at Southern wasn't initially the plan for the younger Robert, who majored in communications and hoped for a career in television. But after an internship at WTNH-Channel 8, he realized the late hours would be difficult when he had a family. In contrast, the idea of working as a university administrator in support of students seemed a natural fit.

He says he is proud to have landed in the office where his father made a name for himself decades ago, even if it sometimes causes confusion.

"To this day, I'll get people calling and saying, 'Bob? I can't believe you're still there!'" he says with a laugh. "I say, 'Oh no, that's my dad. He's retired.'"