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# REMEMBERING JOHN W. KLUGE

BY JOHN KELLY • PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF UVA

**O**n a recent late summer afternoon, in the shadow of Jefferson's Monticello, some four hundred people gathered on a piece of common land to celebrate the life of a most uncommon man.

The occasion was the funeral of John W. Kluge, and a collection of friends, family members, colleagues, admirers, and beneficiaries had come to mark the last chapter in a classic American success story. Fittingly though, most of the talk on this day would not be of his legendary business prowess, or of how he helped revolutionize the American media landscape, becoming one of the nation's wealthiest men in the process.

Instead, most of the talk this day would be of his lasting legacy as a man who proved that the greatest power in life comes from giving back. Few people in American history lived that ideal like John Kluge did, as people in our region well know. Many are aware of the \$63 million he gave to the University of Virginia, both through monetary donations and through the gifting of his home, Morven Farm.

The 7,400-acre property is revealing itself to be an even more treasured resource than previously known, thanks to archaeological discoveries that expose links to the lives of Contact Era Native Americans and nineteenth century tenant farming communities all but forgotten by history. In addition, as Mr. Kluge envisioned, the property is evolving as a place where students, teachers, writers, thinkers, policy makers, and others can gather and seek out intellectual common ground and practical solutions for a wide range of challenging issues faced by people from around the globe.

Many others have enjoyed the artistic riches shared in the Kluge Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, which features more than 1,600 pieces from Mr. Kluge's own private collection.

Yet for all his success investing in businesses and causes, the proudest investments of John Kluge's career are those he made in people. One of the main reasons for this is that he himself knew what it felt like to have someone believe in him at a young age, and to give him the opportunities to seek out his own dreams.

As is true with so many American success stories of his generation, John Kluge's dreams did not come easy. He was a German immigrant, arriving with his parents at Ellis Island in 1922, at the age of eight. The family settled in a hardscrabble Detroit neighborhood, where he worked a variety of jobs to get by, selling shoes and paper goods, and working on the assembly line at a Ford Motors plant. At some point, like it did for so many, the allure of New York captured his imagination.

Kluge was offered a scholarship from Columbia University. His response was a signal to the world of business of what was to come.

"After I got the scholarship," he told the Library of Congress in a recorded history transcript he gave, "I wrote Columbia and said if they wanted me, they'd have to double the scholarship.

Well, they did...so I have always been grateful to Columbia for it."

So how did he show just how grateful he was? By making a donation of \$400 million to his alma mater—the fourth largest single gift to an institution of higher education in history. The amount is remarkable, but it is the targeting of the funds that captures the true essence of the man.

The money, he stipulated, is to be earmarked for students needing financial aid. It's an act of paying it forward that will change the lives of generations of beneficiaries to come. People like Jonathan Paul Walton. A Kluge scholar at Columbia, Walton is a supremely gifted spoken word poet who had the rare opportunity to thank Mr. Kluge in the best way possible—by sharing his talents with him on several occasions over the past five years. He shared them with him one last time



*John and Tussi Kluge*

# A MAN OF THE WORLD GIVES BACK TO HIS COMMUNITY

## What do you give (back) to the man who had everything?

**I**t should come as no surprise that one of John Kluge's last acts was to provide for the less fortunate right in his own community. In an obituary that was seen throughout the world, John and his beloved wife Tussi requested that gifts in his memory be made to the John W. Kluge Charlottesville Habitat Fund to support the Sunrise Trailer Park transformation.

The fund, which honors John and Tussi's vision of providing full life and compassionate care, supports Sunrise, the first Habitat trailer park transformation without displacing residents in the country. It is designed as a community collaboration for excellence in mindfulness and end-of-life care. The fund will help Sunrise create a template for others to build communities where all stand a chance to age joyfully and gracefully.

At Sunrise, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville is transforming sixteen dilapidated trailers into a beautiful new mixed-use, mixed-income,

multi-generational green neighborhood with thirty affordable homes and an equal number of market rate homes.

Sunrise will create a new paradigm for the future by borrowing from the past: healthy neighborhoods, not segregated by age, race, or income, where people from all walks of life can gather together, get to know their neighbors and the local merchants, and live full lives. The goal of the John W. Kluge Charlottesville Habitat Fund is to establish a model that can be replicated across America, making access to safe, decent, affordable housing in great neighborhoods an imperative in all communities.

Checks can be sent to: Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville; 501 Grove Avenue; Charlottesville, VA 22902 ([www.cvillehabitat.org](http://www.cvillehabitat.org)). Donations may also be wired directly using the following information: Routing # 051400549 and account # 2000055672452. For more information, visit [www.cvillehabitat.org](http://www.cvillehabitat.org).

as one of only two people chosen to eulogize him at the graveside celebration of his life, along with world-renowned mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Walton performed his piece "Change of Plan" for the crowd at the service, and recalled performing it four years earlier at a benefit for Hiromi T'ai Chi at The Paramount Theater. "I came down to talk with Tussi and with John. I called him Mr. Kluge. I was scared to death to call him John. He sat in the third row on the right side in the third seat, and he smiled. I don't know if you saw the pictures in the papers or on the internet but he wasn't smiling. As you look at your program today, you see that he is smiling. And that is who he was to me."

Walton, a Broadnax, Virginia native, explored his audience that day to not only learn from John Kluge's example, but to live it. "What if," he asked, "we lived a little bit of the gospel that he lived out every single day?"

Kabat-Zinn, a longtime friend to John and Tussi Kluge, remembered him as someone who looked at people for who they

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were more than for what they had. "John didn't care what your status in society was. He related to everyone as being of equal importance, whether he was with celebrities, superstars, presidents, tycoons of industry, or regular people; he was always just himself."

Kabat-Zinn also recounted an important lesson his friend had shared with him. "He said through the sands of time there is very, very little that any human being can do to make a difference, but what little difference we can make we need to make that difference. That is the spirit of it. He was an extremely open, generous person

who was also crafty, a real trickster, but who was ultimately most interested in making a difference in this world.

As mourners were filing out of the service, each of them having paid their private respects by tossing small handfuls of dirt onto the simple, hand-made, pine coffin that would provide his final resting place, a former worker who had once tended to Mr. Kluge's property was recounting a story that reflected both his common touch and "trickster" tendencies.

Several times, the man said, he and his colleagues would be out working somewhere on the property when "Mr. K," as he called him, would approach, in a big hat and without his usual security detail. Inevitably, the man remembered, the radios would start buzzing throughout the property as that detail would begin a frantic search for their charge. When they would finally find him out there, chatting up the workers, John Kluge would let out a laugh that would spread across the property. "He got the biggest kick out of that," the man said. *a*