

VERNA K. GIBSON

MOXIE

by Keith Spears

In 1985, Verna K. Gibson reached a pinnacle that reflected her drive to succeed in an industry that traditionally had been run predominantly by men. She was the first woman appointed to lead a *Fortune* 500 company when she was named president and CEO of Limited Stores, the largest division of The Limited, Inc. And, she did it without compromising who she is.

“Make no mistake about how Verna made it to the top: She worked her way up... .”

Verna attributes her success in part to Leslie Wexner, the founder of The Limited, who said, “Never make money by hurting the other guy.” And she has adhered to that philosophy throughout her career. “It doesn’t mean you can’t be tough-minded. We’re in business to make money. But, it doesn’t require us to be devious.” In an interview after she was named president, she said, “I’ve always been myself. I approach a deal very openly. I’ve never been forced to fit into the mold of being tough in a ruthless way.”

Wexner had opened his first store in Columbus in 1963, eight years before he hired Verna. He named the business and the store The Limited because the store was “limited” to selling sportswear such as jeans, pants, skirts and tops to the emerging market of Baby Boomers.

So, in the spring of 1985, when Bob Grayson, then president of the Limited Stores, said Les wanted her to come to his house at 10 p.m. for a meeting that evening, she knew something was up. They had had an intense, all-day merchandising meeting that day and she thought Les had been acting a little differently. While Bob didn’t say what the meeting was about, he did say, “You don’t have to do this.”

When Verna arrived at his house, Les told her that the company was buying Lerner Stores, and that Bob was going to be named president of the newly acquired chain of 800 stores. More importantly, Les wanted her to become president of the Limited Store. By 1985, the division had grown to more than 570 stores with more than \$360 million in yearly sales. It was the flagship division in The Limited Inc. stable of retailers that included Limited Express, Lane Bryant, Sizes Unlimited, Lerner Stores, Victoria’s Secret, and two catalog divisions. The Limited Inc., the parent company, had sales of \$1.3 billion and a net income of \$92.5 million that year.

Verna became the new president! The only caveat was that, because of an upcoming board meeting, she could not tell anyone the news for two weeks. She was sworn to secrecy. While that was not a problem when it came to her co-workers because she was leaving the next morning for Hong Kong via Paris, she just had to tell someone. When she got home, she called her brother, Pat, in Elkview, West Virginia, to let him know the good news.

Make no mistake about how Verna made it to the top: She worked her way up with hard work; support from her family, friends and colleagues; and a little luck.

Her achievement is even more impressive considering that she was only 42 years old at the time, and she had made her way through the ranks starting as a merchandising trainee and advancing to associate buyer, then buyer. In 1975, she was promoted to merchandise manager and in 1976 she moved up to divisional manager of general merchandising. In 1979, she was made vice president of general merchandising. In 1982, Verna was promoted to divisional executive vice president and merchandise manager, the top merchant position in the company. That was the job she had set her sights on, after many long hours of training. As a nod to her efficiency, she was able to maintain her position in general merchandising after she was promoted to CEO. At the time she explained, “I don’t intend to do both forever but I thought it would be a mistake to drop merchandising immediately.”

Most of Verna’s previous duties had been related to purchasing. She spent endless hours during her years at the company helping Wexner scan the globe aiming to establish a base of resources. The two of

them strived to deliver the trend-setting fashions the company so adeptly presented with distinctive floor sets and eye-catching display techniques. In 1984, Wexner decided to create his own private brand of merchandise and within months he had unveiled the enormously popular brand of Forenza sportswear.

One of Verna's earliest discoveries was the Shaker-knit sweater, the first item sold under the private label brand to become a runaway success. Verna was in Europe when she noticed many women were wearing slightly oversized knit V-neck sweaters. She thought the sweater was exactly the type of clothing Limited customers would buy. The Limited's version was named "Abitare" which means in Italian "to live in." The Limited sold more than 3 million sweaters for \$29 apiece before other companies started making knock-offs. To this day, you can't go into any store that sells women's clothing without seeing some variation of the Shaker-knit sweater. As The Limited core customers aged, the company added career clothing to the mix.

In addition to the trips to Europe to identify emerging fashion trends, Verna visited places such as Hong Kong to negotiate deals for production, while establishing checks and balances to ensure timely distribution.

Verna routinely worked 14- to 16-hour days and was perpetually in a state of jet lag, but she loved what she was doing. She was developing a new set of skills because Wexner wanted the company to be the best at "sourcing." She learned how to maintain security so clothing purchased at the Limited Stores was first to market with the newest designs. She quickly increased her ability to communicate with representatives from other countries and she amassed a tremendous amount of knowledge about production and resourcing. Inventory control and distribution became more important as the company grew.

Not only was the company branching out by developing its own brands and taking control of key processes, it also was increasing the number of Limited stores throughout the country. In 1976, five years after Verna started, the Limited had 126 stores. By 1985, that number had climbed to 570 stores in the division. Wexner also was expanding the company through acquisitions. There were numerous milestones to celebrate at the annual meeting that year.

The promotions were announced at the annual meeting in early May at the company's new distribution center. It was the first of the big, annual events at The Limited, Inc. While everyone thought the corporation would be incredibly successful, no one anticipated the scope of its meteoric growth. The theme song chosen to convey the elation over a series of business coups was "I'm so Excited" by The Pointer Sisters. It was quite an elaborate production compared to previous annual meetings, which had been mundane, even quiet. The company went all out for the occasion.

When Wexner announced that Verna was going to become president and CEO of the Limited Store division, he did not know that she was the first woman appointed to be CEO of a *Fortune* 500 company. The announcement created quite a stir throughout the country. The news was carried in 156 newspapers and prompted articles in weekly magazines including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Business Week*.

Verna was President and CEO of the Limited Stores division for six years. It was a great ride. The high point of her leadership was when the division exceeded \$1 billion in sales within three and a half years of the beginning of her tenure. Limited Stores was the first specialty store to reach the \$1 billion mark in sales. Additionally, she started two new divisions that would continue The Limited at the top of the fashion industry. The Limited Too became the nation's leading young woman's place to shop and Cacique was an entrepreneurial division that allowed The Limited to command the lead in lingerie sales.

Verna is proud of her hands-on approach to management. She wanted to be in the fray, not to sit in an office all day. She was pleased with the caliber of the employees who worked with her and she spent a lot of time working to bring out the best in each person. In explaining her success, Verna said, "It's never a one-person show. You have a lot of high quality people who help you enormously in a very keen atmosphere." In another interview, she likened her management style to sports: "The metaphor of a football game is very appropriate in management maneuvering," she said. "A working group wins as a team; everybody's got to be good at what they do. It's shared success."

Verna nurtured and enjoyed the success of others. She received a Coach/Player award that was represented by a baseball in a hand trophy that illustrates the relationship she developed with her colleagues.

She likes to say she “never faced obstacles, only challenges.” In 1985, the executive ranks of women’s retailing were almost exclusively a man’s world. She said she “grew up” by often being the only woman in the room, and the experience helped her be stronger. She never perceived herself as a “victim.” She also says, “It’s not how you started, it’s how you finished.” And she believes that when you get to the table, there is “no free lunch, so speak up.”

Remember, this was a different time. Her appointment occurred during a period of social change that increasingly included women in positions of power in industry. Society in general was changing in the 1980’s. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 55 percent of women were working in 1985, comprising almost half of the work force. And, during that time, more than half of all bachelor’s and master’s degrees went to women.

In 1990, *Savvy Woman* magazine listed Verna third on its list of “America’s 10 Best-Paid Corporate Women” with a salary of \$1 million per year. The article went on to posit that her 19 years with Limited Stores had enabled her to accumulate annual stock options with an estimated worth of two to three times her \$1 million yearly salary. The list excluded women who were founders/owners or immediate family of founders. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only two percent of the nearly 36 million women working full-time had a salary of \$50,000 or more at that time. Verna was in elite company, regardless of gender.

Verna was born and grew up during a period of great change. The United States was immersed in World War II. Hard times eventually would lead to economic might. The Baby Boomer generation was on its way. Verna Kaye LeMasters was born on June 22 in the small, rural community of Elkview, about 10 miles northwest of Charleston, West Virginia. She knew nothing of the sea of change to come during her lifetime.

When she came into the world, she had a brother, Patrick, who was five years older. Their parents, Virginia Ellen and Carl William

LeMasters, owned a restaurant. “They made good burgers and milkshakes,” Pat recalls. The family lived just a short way from her mother’s parents, Verna and Albert Myers, who owned and operated Myers Funeral Home.

The distance between their parents’ house and the funeral home is approximately one-half mile so Verna and Pat grew up roaming between the two houses. The family was close. Pat says she has always taken good care of him even though he is five years older. Since her birthday is in June and his is in July, he always teases her on her birthday about getting old, as if she were the older sibling because her birthday comes earlier in the year than his.

Verna attributes her thirst for learning to her parents and grandparents. “When I was growing up I had a family of strong females,” Verna said. Her mother instilled in her the idea that she could achieve anything that she wanted from a very early age. Verna says that her father had a very high IQ, and he was always challenging her to use her brain. Her family was interested in politics and Verna and her brother were encouraged to participate in all discussions. And, she first learned about business from being around her grandparents’ business.

When her father decided to go into the construction business, the family moved to Ravenswood, West Virginia, and then to Point Pleasant, West Virginia. It was in Point Pleasant that Verna got her first exposure to the retail business by working weekends at Fisher’s Department Store. In Verna’s senior year in high school, her parents were on the move again so she lived with a girlfriend, graduating from Point Pleasant High School in 1960. Verna’s parents eventually moved back to Elkview where her mother worked in real estate and her father worked for the State of West Virginia until they retired.

The day after she graduated from high school, Verna moved to Huntington to attend Marshall University. There she was, a pretty, petite blond dynamo with confidence and poise, with the world before her. The 1960’s were a time of growth and change at the university and for the nation. Hawaii had just been ratified as the 50th state. Dwight D. Eisenhower was president of the United States. A young John F. Kennedy visited Marshall’s campus during his 1960 presidential

campaign. Hubert H. Humphrey also visited campus during the presidential campaign.

Actually, Marshall wasn't a university when Verna arrived on campus. The West Virginia State Legislature awarded university status to Marshall on March 2, 1961. The university was much smaller then, too. Marshall consisted of three colleges with an enrollment of 4,000 students. Marshall College began the 1960's with an operating budget of \$2.3 million and employed 217 full-time teachers. Commencement ceremonies took place in the Keith-Albee Theatre in downtown Huntington because there wasn't an appropriate facility on campus large enough to accommodate the growing number of graduates. The decade of the 1960's also was a time for considerable construction on campus. On the east side of campus, a new men's physical education building, now Gullickson Hall, was completed at a cost of \$1,900,000. An addition to the James E. Morrow Library was completed, and work began on the Smith Hall-Smith Music Hall complex.

When Verna arrived in Huntington, her intention was to study education with a minor in math, science or chemistry. But it didn't work out that way. She was soon offered a job at a retail clothing store, The Smart Shop, owned by Simon Mazo and his sister Selma Mazo Jacobson. She began working part-time at The Smart Shop that summer in a bustling downtown Huntington and the experience changed her mind about what she wanted to study. Simon and Selma nurtured Verna's interest in retailing by allowing her to sit in on sales meetings and experience firsthand the ins and outs of the business. The experience influenced her decision to change her major. That fall, she enrolled in the fashion/marketing retailing program and she continued to work part-time at The Smart Shop during the school year.

The rest of her life was beginning to fall into place. Verna met her best friend, Peggy, and her husband, Jim, at Marshall. "We met when we were freshmen in college," Peggy Tucker Williams said. "We were in the same sorority, Alpha Xi Delta." They became close friends and during their sophomore year they roomed together on the third floor of the sorority house.

Between their freshman and sophomore years, Peggy's father was killed in an accident. When Peggy returned to college, she wasn't

focused on school. "Verna and I had a lot of classes together, so she would get me up and try to get me to class," Peggy said. "She would take me into the bathroom and say, 'Repeat after me, Boy am I enthusiastic. Enthusiasm is my middle name.' That is how she got me to class and that is how she got me to focus on my schoolwork. She helped me through a very difficult time. She was right beside me all the way—pushing me, helping me to get focused again." It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. And, it was a glimpse of the inner strength of a young woman who would exhibit that compassion in every aspect of her life.

During the summer between Verna's freshman and sophomore years, she met her future husband, James E. Gibson. Jim recalls that he and a few of his Sigma Epsilon fraternity brothers went to a local hangout and Verna came in with a group of her sorority sisters. "She knew everybody at the table except me and I knew everyone at the table but her," Jim said. "There was a chemistry, an immediate attraction between us and it never stopped. And, that was it. You hear of people falling in love instantly. That's what happened!"

They were married at the Highlawn Methodist Church in Huntington on April 28, 1962. "We made the arrangements quickly, and we decided we were going to have the ceremony in the chapel, not the main sanctuary. We filled the place," Jim recalled. "We have an unusually close group of friends from our college days." The group has stayed together throughout the years. Peggy was the maid of honor in their wedding. She and Verna are best friends to this day, talking at least once a week on the phone.

Jim had started a career in sales after graduating from Marshall in 1961, and the newlyweds moved to various cities as his career progressed. They moved to Dayton, Ohio for Jim's job with Proctor & Gamble before he was transferred to Cincinnati, Ohio. Next up was St. Louis, with Johnson & Johnson. Then, the company transferred the couple back to Huntington. Verna also continued to work and they started a family.

The friends stayed in touch. Peggy still has the Western Union telegram that Verna, Jim and their first daughter, Kelly, sent her from St. Louis when Peggy was chosen Marshall's Homecoming Queen in

1963. Peggy had decided to change her major to education after her sophomore year and she graduated in 1965. She became a teacher and moved with her family to Pickerington, Ohio, near the state capital of Columbus, an action that would eventually bring Peggy and Verna back together within a few years. Peggy says that Verna has always made her feel that being a teacher was very important. She describes her friend as “loyal, enthusiastic, and compassionate.”

In 1965, the young Gibson family began a six-year stay in Huntington when Jim was transferred back to his hometown. The birth of another daughter, Beth, completed their family.

Verna had stayed in touch with Simon Mazo and Selma Jacobson while she was moving around. So when she returned to Huntington, she began working at The Smart Shop as a buyer and merchandise manager.

Verna started traveling to New York with Selma to buy lingerie and sportswear, according to Steve Jacobson, Selma’s son. Verna helped select styles and assisted in the opening of the “Jr. World” section of The Smart Shop. At the time, Steve had opened and was managing The Princess Shop in Huntington and Verna also was buying lingerie for his shop, so he got to know her pretty well.

“Verna was a dynamo. Nobody pulled the wool over her eyes,” Steve said. “She was articulate, she knew how to make deals, and what she wanted when she was buying. She has what they call a natural talent.” Steve notes that she hasn’t changed much over the years.

Steve recalls that Verna had an aunt who lived in Huntington. She was a very tiny woman and her nickname was “Totsy.” She was a client at both stores and Steve thinks that’s how Verna initially was introduced to the shop. “Believe me, it was to our benefit,” he said.

There was mutual admiration between Verna and her former employers. Selma Jacobson said of Verna after she was promoted to president of the Limited Stores, “Verna was creative and enthusiastic, a real ‘workaholic.’ She had goals and she knew what it took to get what she wanted. I knew she would go far.”

In an interview in 1991, almost 20 years after she had left Huntington, Verna said that Simon Mazo was one of the most important people in her life. She also referred to Simon and Selma as “excellent

merchants” and credited them with establishing national trends in fashion merchandising and with providing the foundation for her phenomenal success. “The combination of creative skills and great business skills is hard to find.” When the Schick Razor Company promoted Jim in 1971, he and Verna moved to Columbus, Ohio. Verna was ready to move up in her career, too. When Steve Jacobson’s family found out that Verna and Jim were moving to Columbus, they wrote a letter of reference to a friend in the fashion industry about Verna, but she already had a job lined up at another women’s clothing store in Columbus. Steve kept talking about this friend with whom he had attended college at The Ohio State University. Steve said that his friend had opened a great store in the Eastland Mall in Columbus and he encouraged Verna to talk with his friend. The friend turned out to be Leslie Wexner, the founder of The Limited, Inc.

Verna was walking in the Eastland Mall when she saw a Limited store. She was impressed with the stylish concept of the store, with a focus on affordable fashion and an attentive sales staff. “The spirit of the entire organization came across very quickly,” she said. Verna walked to a phone booth and she got through to Wexner and informed him how much his store impressed her. Wexner asked Verna to come to his office immediately, and share with him her ideas about the merchandising of The Limited stores.

Her Smart Shop experience had allowed Verna to play in the big leagues and she was not afraid to try new things. “You are going to take this business to great heights,” she said. She felt that he had what it takes: great intuition, the right vision and opportunity. She also said that Mazo gave her some good advice, “If you want to go somewhere, find a boss you can learn from.” That is what she saw in Wexner. Wexner said of the meeting, “No one had ever called me to talk about my business. She became my assistant with no title and little pay.”

When Verna joined The Limited in 1971, the company had eight stores and was doing \$4 million in sales. She was 29 years old and her confidence and forthright moxie had earned her the opportunity to work directly with Wexner. In the early days, she did everything from mopping floors to delivering merchandise in her station wagon. She did what needed to be done.

Verna Gibson became nationally known for her outstanding career and leadership in the retail clothing industry. During her tenure, Verna steered the company through an unprecedented expansion from 8 to more than 770 stores.

However, in 1990, she saw that the 80- to 90-hour work weeks and the 300-plus travel days per year were taking their toll on her. She wanted more balance in her life. She had been successful at growing the company. New acquisitions and divisions were taking place. The Limited was an exciting place to be, but Verna knew it was time for her to leave. She did so on her terms with relationships intact.

Family has always been very important to Verna and Jim. When their daughters were in high school, they discussed the fact that both of them were traveling a great deal and they decided that Verna's future with The Limited had the greater potential. "We took an in-depth look at who had the best chance of making it and we bet on Vern and that's probably the best bet I've ever made," Jim said. He became one of the first "Mr. Moms."

"I wouldn't trade that opportunity for anything," Jim said. As a result, my daughters and I have a very special relationship."

By the time their mother was promoted to president, Jim had founded J. Duffy's, a company that specialized in high-tech, designer home accessories with stores in Columbus and Dayton, Ohio. So, when their daughters heard about the promotion, they were hesitant about the continually increasing level of commitment required. "So, Mom, how long are you going to do this job?" Beth asked. As it turned out, Verna was president and CEO of the Limited Stores division for six years. In retrospect, Beth said, "We had a very balanced life, my parents made good choices. We didn't think of her as the first woman president of a major company," Beth said. "She was our mom, cooking dinner, taking care of us when we were sick. And, our dad was there and we are closer because of that time."

Maybe life was a little different. Kelly recalled times when their mother would come back from her overseas trips. "She would wake up at 4 a.m. because of the time change and she would cook these huge breakfasts. We'd have pancakes and waffles and eggs and bacon and she would have it ready for us when we got up. There are a lot of

things Mom did. I don't know how she did it. I don't know where she got the energy. She was pretty amazing," Kelly says.

Time management was key to survival. The trip to Hong Kong took about a day and a half. Verna would start putting together these clothing ensembles for her trip three or four days before her departure, then have them cleaned before she packed. By the time she got to Hong Kong, her clothes would be all wrinkled, so she would have to have them pressed again. "One day I said, 'Why don't you just pack your things dirty, and when you get there, have them cleaned as soon as you get to the hotel,'" Jim said. "And that is what she started to do."

"Vern had a knack for balancing family and work," Jim notes. "When she came home to her family or friends, she could 'turn it off' and everyone felt they had her undivided attention."

For almost 20 years now, Verna, Beth, and Kelly have taken an annual "girls week" trip with Verna's best friend, Peggy, and her daughter, Wendy. "It's to kick back, read, and refuel so we usually go someplace warm and relaxing," Beth said. "It was one of those things that was on the calendar and would not be changed, no matter what."

Verna now considers herself semi-retired, although she jokes she is on call 24 hours a day. She and Jim recently built a new home on Siesta Key outside of Sarasota, Florida has become their primary place of residence. They also are remodeling their house in Westerville, Ohio.

The Gibsons have always made the most of their leisure time. Over the years, they have owned a vacation home at Buckeye Lake in Ohio, a condominium in South Carolina, and an apartment in New York. They also owned a 50-foot Chris Craft yacht that they kept in Palm Beach, Florida. They continue to be on the road a good deal of the time, but now, much of their travel is for pleasure. Beth and Kelly both live in the Columbus area with their families. Beth and her husband, Dewey, are expecting their first child. Kelly and her husband, Doug, have three children. Kelly majored in interpersonal communications at Ohio University and Beth studied finance at Boston University. Verna's basic career advice to her daughters was to "find something that makes you happy."

As it turned out, both daughters followed their parents into retailing. They own Amish Originals Furniture Company with two

locations in Westerville, Ohio. “Naturally, we both swore we would never get into retail,” Beth said, laughing. “But because of being exposed to it all our lives, we were kind of naturals at it. Kelly does all the buying for the store and our gift accessories,” Beth said. “Kelly used to travel a lot with Mom and she definitely got that from Mom.”

After leaving The Limited Stores in January 1991, Verna, at first, consulted exclusively outside of the U.S. Eventually she started her own consulting company, Outlook Consulting, which focuses on strategic planning, on corporate growth, developing and implementing company vision and establishing connections. She assists clients in launching new businesses and expanding businesses. When deciding which ventures have potential her test boils down to “where are we going; how are we getting there; who is driving and what is the fuel or energy.”

Since 1993, Verna has been on the board of directors of Chico’s FAS. Chico’s began in 1983 as one small store on Sanibel Island, Florida, founded by Marvin and Helen Gralnick. Their merchandise mix consisted of Mexican folk art and cotton sweaters. Now the company is headquartered in Fort Myers, Florida. Chico’s sells exclusively designed, private-label women’s casual clothing and related accessories, and the company has grown to more than 319 stores in 40 states.

Sharon Harp, who is Director of Planning at Chico’s, worked with Verna for 20 years at The Limited. She and Verna started at The Limited around the same time in 1971. Sharon left the company after 15 years, then returned in 1990 when Verna was president. When she started at The Limited, they both were associate buyers and Verna became president. Sharon became vice president of planning and distribution. Sharon described Verna’s management style as tough but fair, and described her as a dynamic person and a great visionary and leader. “She was always very hungry to learn more, know more,” Sharon said. “She has a great appetite for knowledge and that is one of her strengths. There are people who think they have arrived and they don’t need to learn anymore, and then there are people who know there is something to learn every day, like Verna.”

In an article titled “Few women found on Bay Area boards” in *The Business Journal of Tampa Bay*, published on September 29, 1997, Charlie Kleman, CFO of Chico’s, explained why Verna was on their board. He said, “It’s not so much that Verna’s a woman, it’s that she has significant experience that’s important. “Whether your name is Joe Smith or Verna Davis, the fact that she was president of the Limited during its heyday—that’s what’s important to us.”

This year, *Forbes* rated Chico’s FAS No. 1 on the 200 Best Small Companies: 2001. There are many attributes of the company that appeal to Verna as success indicators. They have a strong commitment to the people in the company, they cater to women instead of youth, they are positioned for growth, and their target audience is the most underserved in retailing.

After serving ten years on the board for Mothers Work, Verna now consults with the company. It is a leading designer, manufacturer and retailer of maternity fashions, with more than 900 stores nationwide, including Mimi Maternity, A Pea in the Pod and Motherhood.

She also serves on the board of Today’s Man, Inc., which specializes in tailored clothing, shoes, sportswear and accessories. The firm operates 30 stores in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.

Throughout her career, Verna has served varying terms on the board of directors of various companies and institutions. During the early 1990’s, Verna was a six-year member of the U.S. Reserve Board. Throughout her career in retailing, Gibson has received numerous awards and accolades. She was the recipient of the Marshall University Distinguished Alumnus Award from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) in 1986. She also received the Retailer of the Year Award, the AMA Marketer of the Year Award in 1990, and the HUG (Help Us Give) Award from the Intimate Apparel Square Club, Inc. (IASC) in 1996, to name just a few.

The Gibsons, Jim and Verna, established themselves as a team from Day One. Each understood the career goals of the other. Early on, Verna was willing to make the sacrifices to move as Jim’s career advanced, taking them to various cities and opportunities. Later, Jim would put his own career on hold as Verna began to make her mark.

Some may have thought the glue that held them together was that both were in the business of sales. But, Verna and Jim will testify that it was their commitment to each other. Few marriages come close to the perfection that is found in storybooks. Jim and Verna will admit to the rocky times, but the nurturing and commitment factors have held strong over the five decades they have been together.

Verna's and Jim's generosity to Marshall University seems endless. They serve as vice chairs of the university's Campaign for National Prominence. They are members of the John Marshall Society and have shared seats on the Society of Yeager Scholars. They have provided significant financial support by establishing the Verna K. and James E. Gibson endowment for Yeager Scholars and provided major financial support for the Lewis College of Business and the Higher Education for Learning Problems (H.E.L.P.) program building funds. They also faithfully attend Marshall athletic events and they support the Big Green Foundation and are major contributors to Marshall athletics.

In recognition of her generous support for the university and the prestige that she has brought to the institution, Marshall bestowed Verna with an Honorary Doctorate degree at the graduation ceremonies for the Class of 2002. With hundreds of family, friends and associates looking on, thousands of graduates and their relations cheered the girl from Elkview who cut the pattern for the future of fashion in America.

On that same day, in an advertisement in the Huntington *Herald-Dispatch*, Jim Gibson surprised his wife by announcing the Verna K. LeMasters Gibson Scholarship Program. It is a full scholarship to Marshall University for deserving graduates from Verna's school, Point Pleasant High. Just one more way the legacy of Verna Gibson continues into the next generation!

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