

Overture donation

By TOM ALESIA

On a July morning in 1998, W. Jerome Frautschi dramatically changed Madison's arts-and-entertainment scene.

Frautschi quietly dropped his first \$50 million donation on Downtown and hinted at building a performing arts complex.

Frautschi never demanded anything. He gave the money, then politely asked the arts community to set priorities.

At the time, Frautschi's gift arrived as stunning news. The donation was more than half of what the National Endowment for the Arts awarded that year.

Big money. Lots of zeros.

Of course, Frautschi didn't stop there. In the months that followed, Overture Center developed from a crazy idea to blueprints to construction. Costs mounted and Frautschi added another \$50 million. By the time Overture Hall opened its glass lobby doors in fall 2004, Frautschi had handed over \$205 million, one of the world's largest donations to the arts.

Ever.

Let that sink in as you sip a cup of free-trade coffee while strolling past State Street's marble marvel.

But let's backtrack to July 1998, because that moment best exemplified Frautschi's modesty and his do-good intentions. Poke and prod, you won't find any ulterior motive. He loves the arts, especially opera, though he marvels about the mainstream "Riverdance." He simply had an opportunity to give Downtown a world-class facility.

Inspired by his philanthropist father, Walter Frautschi, who helped create the Madison Civic Center, Frautschi gave away much of his fortune. After selling his portion of his family-run



Greg Schreiner

Jerry Frautschi gets a hug of appreciation from Lisa Thurrell, artistic director of Kanopy Dance, after his announcement of an additional \$50 million donation to the city for the construction of a Downtown arts center.

Madison's art scene received great news
in 1998, to the tune of \$50 million



Jaron Berman

The building was glowing when Overture Center opened in 2005.

Webcrafters and reaping the enormous profits from Mattel's purchase of Pleasant Company, owned by his wife, Pleasant Rowland, he turned to Madison to find a need.

(Frautschi's roots run deep in Madison; his great-grandfather, Christian, opened a Madison furniture business not long after Camp Randall was a Civil War prison.)

Major announcements about donations come with platforms, shovels, politicians, ribbon cuttings, balloons, TV

cameras and oversized checks. Frautschi, low-key but not shy, opted to visit newspaper offices, sit in a boardroom and talk to each paper's reporters and editors separately. No fanfare. He let associates do most of the talking.

Calling his foundation — then, later, the performing arts facility — Overture, he said the name indicates a beginning.

"It's the exciting moment when you get a flavor of what is to come,"

Frautschi said that day. "It's when everything seems fresh and possible."

Frautschi made Overture Center possible — then sat down to join other patrons in watching it come about. He remains uncomfortable about attention on himself, and it's safe to assume he's a guy who would despise a surprise party.

In July 1998, Frautschi, comfortable in retirement, resembled the typical member of the crowd at the Madison Opera or a touring Broadway musical.

In fact, he still does. ■