

Remembering Karen Haight Huntsman and Her Legacy of Character, Generosity and Purpose

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The Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University joins countless individuals across Utah and around the world in mourning the passing of Karen H. Huntsman, whose life of service, generosity and quiet leadership helped shape generations of students and families.

“While many know Karen Huntsman for her extraordinary philanthropy and public service,” Utah State University President Brad Mortensen said, “those connected to Utah State remember her as a steadfast champion of education, opportunity and the values that define great leaders. We extend our deepest condolences to the Huntsman family and express our profound gratitude for Karen’s remarkable life, enduring example, and lasting contributions to Utah State University.”

For thousands of students who have passed through the doors of the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business, Karen Huntsman’s influence may not always have been visible, but it has been unmistakable. The opportunities they found like scholarships, programs, mentors and life-changing experiences grew from a vision she shared with her husband, Jon M. Huntsman.

In 2007, Jon and Karen Huntsman made what was then the largest gift in Utah State University history, contributing nearly \$26 million to support students and strengthen business education. The transformational gift led to the naming of the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business and marked a turning point in the university’s history.

At the time, then-Gov. Gary Herbert reflected on the significance of the couple’s generosity.

“We appreciate the great contributions that have been made in so many ways,” Herbert said. “We cannot overstate the blessing that Utah receives because Jon and Karen Huntsman call Utah home.”

Yet those who knew Karen best understood that her commitment extended far beyond philanthropy. She believed deeply in the responsibility of higher education to develop capable professionals and people of character.

At the opening of Huntsman Hall in 2016, she spoke plainly about the values she hoped students would carry into their careers and communities.

"I hope they teach that honesty, and integrity, and your word is your bond," Huntsman said. "Nothing else is going to be as important as teaching that to these students."

Those ideals continue to define the culture of the Huntsman School today.

"Receiving the Karen Haight Huntsman Endowed Professorship in Leadership was one of the most meaningful moments of my career," said Lianne Wappett, director of the Huntsman Scholar Program and Karen Haight Huntsman Endowed Professor. "To carry Karen's name in my title is both a privilege and a daily reminder of the vision she and Jon established at USU. Their belief in preparing students to lead lives of meaning and contribution gives renewed purpose, energy and hope to my work with the next generation."

Kristyn Allred, associate dean and Karen Haight Huntsman Endowed Professor, said the honor of carrying Karen Huntsman's name has only deepened her appreciation for the example Karen set.

"When I found out that I had received a professorship that would carry the name of Karen Haight Huntsman, I felt honored and humbled," Allred said. "Karen worked tirelessly for her family, her faith and those who needed help."

"She joked with me that she was not very academic and did not hold an impressive title. However, I could not find a better example of what leadership is. Karen was a person who exerted her considerable influence to improve the lives of others."

Karen Huntsman's most recent visit to the Huntsman School came during the opening of the Carolyn and Kem Gardner Learning and Leadership Building on Aug. 29, 2025. During the celebration, she spoke warmly of her late husband's friendship with Kem Gardner, their shared vision for strengthening Utah's future and her admiration for the opportunities the university creates for students.

That day, she also reflected on her family's longstanding ties to Utah State. Her father, David B. Haight, attended the university before later serving as mayor of Palo Alto, California. It was in Palo Alto that Karen met her future husband. Jon Huntsman's family had moved there from rural Idaho while his father pursued graduate studies at Stanford.

Together, Karen and Jon built not only a remarkable family as parents of nine children, but also a shared commitment to improving the lives of others. Karen often recounted discovering that Jon, while serving as a young naval officer, had been donating part of their modest military income to a sailors' fund. Generosity, she realized, was not something that came after success — it was a principle that guided their lives from the beginning.

Former Dean Douglas Anderson saw that commitment firsthand over decades of friendship.

"Karen and Jon never did anything halfway," Anderson said. "They were either all in or not in."

Before becoming dean, Anderson and his wife, Kathy, lived near the Huntsmans in Salt Lake City and remained close friends for nearly 20 years.

"We saw her regularly and were privileged to be in their home frequently," he said. "Both were dear friends, inspirational role models, and a personal source of great encouragement. Through her generosity, leadership, and unwavering commitment to helping others, she and Jon created opportunities that have benefited generations of Utah State University students and will continue to do so for years to come."

The legacy Karen and Jon created at Utah State continues to inspire future generations of their own family. A number of their grandchildren have chosen to attend Utah State University and the Huntsman School of Business, building on a foundation of education, service and leadership established by their grandparents. Among them is Paul Parkin, who is entering his senior year at the Huntsman School.

“Being able to attend the Huntsman School of Business over the last three years has been a true honor,” Parkin said. “Walking out of class and seeing pictures of my grandmother throughout the halls has reminded me of who I am and what I stand for. It has inspired me to excel and push myself whenever I face challenges. I am looking forward to carrying her legacy in all that I do during my senior year.”

Karen Huntsman’s influence will continue to be felt in classrooms and boardrooms, in communities across Utah and beyond, and in the lives of students who may never have met her but who continue to benefit from the institution she helped build.