

# The Ripple Effect of Helping Students

By Mason Spirit contributor on February 6, 2015

**Elena Prien**, BIS '82, celebrated her 80th birthday by endowing a \$150,000 scholarship fund at George Mason University's Center for the Advancement of Well-Being. The act was the culmination of a long journey.



Mason alumna Elena Prien and Nance Lucas, executive director of the Center for Advancement of Well-Being.

“When I made the decision to start a scholarship, I went looking for a program that provided all the lessons I had learned about living a meaningful life and found it at the center,” she says. The Elena Scholarships, in honor of her children, will award \$1,000 each year to six students.

A personal tragedy more than 25 years ago prompted Prien to begin her search for meaning. At the age of 22, one of Prien's sons took his life. Shortly thereafter, her marriage ended.

Through these painful experiences, Prien blamed herself and couldn't grasp what she had done wrong. She read numerous self-help books, tried various forms of therapy, and went on personal development retreats.

“I eventually realized I was stuck emotionally,” she says. “How could I have taught my children to deal with their emotions when I didn't understand my own?”

She discovered the benefits of mindfulness after her eldest son gave her a book on meditation. The practice, Prien says, helped her learn to recognize and diffuse her negative emotions, as well as to forgive herself and others, all of which led to a happier state of being.

Eventually, Prien returned to college, majoring in gerontology through Mason's Bachelor of Individualized Study program. She went on to earn a licensed practical nurse certificate and work in a long-term care facility. “My education at Mason gave me the opportunity to help seniors, which is what I most wanted to do,” she says.

“Elena's gift will help us deliver on our promise to be a well-being university,” says Mason president Ángel Cabrera. “I am confident that when these scholarship recipients graduate from Mason, they will

inspire others to examine what it means to live a purposeful life.”

Nance Lucas, the center’s executive director, believes Prien exemplifies the goal of Mason’s well-being university initiative: to create a ripple effect of people helping each other to thrive. “Elena is an inspiration to us all,” she says.

—*Penny Gilchrist*