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## LONG ISLAND

# Million-dollar

Former Stony Brook dean  
pledges gift for custodial  
staff, in honor of a friend

BY JOIE TYRRELL

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When Frances Brisbane arrived for a job interview at Stony Brook University nearly 50 years ago, she was met by a custodian who took her aside and next to a slop sink told her all the ins and outs of the School of Social Welfare.

That encounter led to a lifelong friendship and recently a \$1 million pledge from Brisbane to the university — designated to benefit the custodial staff. Brisbane, who later became dean of the School of Social Welfare, wanted to honor her friend, Elsie Owens, a longtime custodial employee and prominent Coram activist who died at age 77 in 2005.

Brisbane, who retired as dean in 2016 after 24 years, now serves as the university's vice president for Health Sciences Workforce Diversity.

"The journey . . . started with Elsie coaching me through the process and I will never forget that, and that is why I am so dedicated to the cleaning staff because she was dedicated to them," said Brisbane, a 2007 recipient of the U.S. president's highest honor for service and civic participation. She also has received the SUNY President's Award for excellence in diversity and affirmative action, as well as many other honors.

As part of the planned financial gift, Brisbane, of Medford, is establishing a fund for the education of the cleaning and housekeeping staff within the university's Health Sciences Center. She said the gift, which likely will share both women's names, also will help staffers who experience hardship.

Brisbane arrived at Stony Brook 46 years ago from Dallas to interview for a professor position. Owens, who met her at the door, said, "I want you to come to my office," which turned out to be the slop sink, Brisbane recalled.

"She told me who to watch out for, what to say and what not to say and so forth," Brisbane said. "I was so impressed with this woman. And I got the job."

Owens, a 20-year president of the Brookhaven NAACP, had been advocating for diversity at the school and was thrilled when she met Brisbane, her daughter recalled.

"I remember when I was younger and my mom saying, 'I think we found her' and my mom being so happy about it," said Owens' daughter, Gwen Eleazer, of Middle Island.

The two women became fast friends as their lives intertwined over the decades. Owens was a longtime Gordon Heights civic activist who successfully lobbied for



Frances Brisbane's latest donation to Stony



Elsie Owens, left, was the first person Brisbane, right, met at Stony Brook.

a health care clinic in Coram, which later was named after her. They attended civic functions together, and Brisbane helped Owens attain her master's degree in social work. The women were attending a conference in Jacksonville, Florida, and worked on Owens' master's project for nearly the entire 40-hour round-trip train trip.

"After her master's, she continued cleaning the building," Brisbane recalled. "I said, 'Why don't you just get another job?'"

# friendship



Brook University is a \$1 million pledge for the benefit of the university's custodial staff.

She said, 'No.' She saw going to get her master's degree as something that her children could see that if she achieved it at her age, that they can do it."

Brisbane, who raised two kids, has continued her generosity toward the custodial staff. She makes Easter and Halloween baskets filled with treats for their children. She wants to designate some of her million-dollar gift to help with hardships for the cleaning and housekeeping staff — as many of them are from other countries and have trouble returning home during emergencies. More than half the gift will go toward educational opportunities for the staff.

Jerry Edwards, director of housekeeping in the Health Science Center Basic Science Tower, called her a "champion of the common people."

"In our department, we have people from all walks of life and sometimes they have to travel and sometimes they are not able to travel," he said. "Frances, through her generosity, has tried to make it possible."

Barbara Smith, a janitor, said "some of us will need help at some time, and her

doing that makes it easier on us."

Stony Brook President Samuel Stanley Jr. said the gift is characteristic of Brisbane's generosity.

"This is an important legacy gift and a way to give back to someone who meant so much to her," he said.

Brisbane long has been a donor to the university, and her prior donations have totaled nearly \$500,000, with recipients ranging from Stony Brook athletics to the School of Dental Medicine's Community Outreach Fund to the Staller Center for the Arts. She decided to "pool" her giving, except contributions to church and religious activities, to one place — Stony Brook — "so it would be large enough, hopefully, to make a difference in the areas where it was most needed on campus," she said.

The \$1 million is the planned gift from her estate.

"I never forgot that I have had a good ride here," she said. "And I remember I how I got here. It wasn't a whole lot of professors — it was the cleaning person."

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