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A Legacy of Leadership: After 21 Years at Colby, Bill Cotter Looks Toward New Challenges

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A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

After 21 Years at Colby, Bill Cotter Looks Toward New Challenges

In "The Cotter Years," a videotaped tribute shown this spring at a banquet in honor of Bill and Linda Cotter, Vice President Arnie Yasinski tells a story about President Cotter's "sense of urgency" when it comes to Colby's business. "I think that we finally hit warp speed one day in senior staff when at the beginning of the meeting Bill asked if we couldn't get some new carpets in the entryway of a building, and at the end of the same meeting he asked me if it had been done yet," Yasinski said.

Apocryphal or not, the anecdote illustrates part of the Cotter legacy—one that will undoubtedly grow from legendary to mythic now that the Cotters have departed, bound for new challenges after 21 years on Mayflower Hill.

Anyone around long enough to have heard Bill Cotter's inaugural address, in 1979, is aware that he set that brisk pace right from the beginning. In that speech he noted among his priorities for Colby the need:

- to increase the number of minority students,
- to diversify the make-up of the faculty and
- for increased consciousness of "attitudes that connote second-class citizenship" for women.

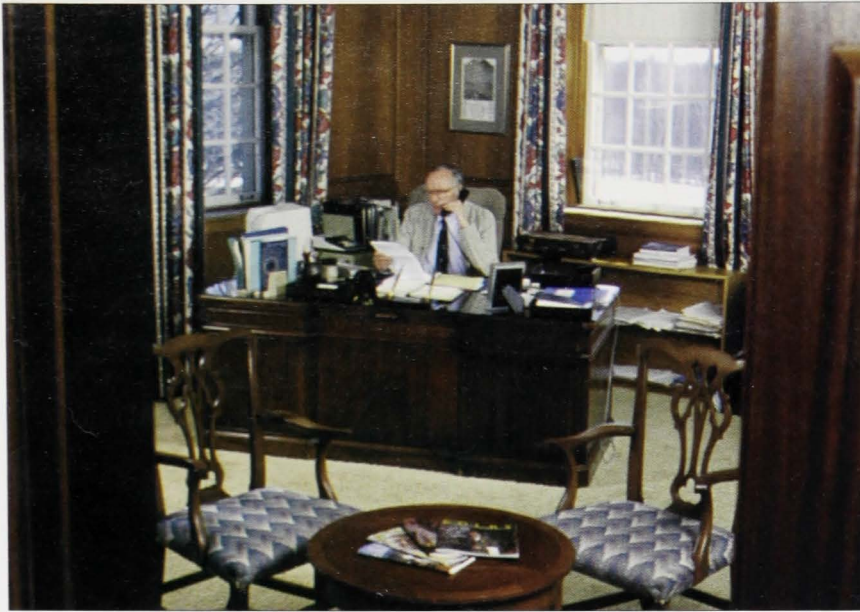
Then, before the inaugural speech ended, he announced:

- creation of the Bunche Scholars program to recruit outstanding students of color,
- addition of an African-American faculty member (an increase from none) for the spring semester and
- a change in Colby's alma mater such that, beginning at that very ceremony and henceforth, students and alumni would sing, "Hail, Colby, Hail. Thy *people* far and near" rather than "Thy *sons* from far and near."

Hold onto your mortarboards; the Cotter era had begun.

By Stephen Collins '74





Bill Cotter pushed Colby to new heights with his prodigious analytical intellect and a work ethic to match it. He had an open-door policy, and this was what the open door usually revealed—the president hard at work. Cotter led by example and earned widespread loyalty from students, faculty and staff.

partner and husband of Mrs. Hurwitz's old college friend Linda. Cotter, in his ninth year as president of the African-American Institute, was intrigued. One thing led to another until, in the fall of 1978, the young lawyer was tapped by Colby's trustees to succeed Strider.

"I think he came to Colby with a vision," Hurwitz said, "and he set in motion a process—a set of procedures and policies—that would help Colby realize that vision. He came unencumbered by a lot of academic baggage—or, I should say, without a lot of institutional baggage. I think that helped him maintain the clarity of vision."

In March 1979 on a ceremonial visit to the campus as president-elect, Cotter gave students and faculty a glimpse of the visionary and energetic dynamo that would arrive full-force the following fall. The energy was evident after a whirlwind of interviews, meetings, speeches and tours. The Cotters' flight out of Waterville was cancelled by fog, but before they headed north for an alternate departure from Bangor, Cotter spent an hour as guest lecturer in Roger Bowen's class on political development in the Third World. There he outlined his plan for pressuring the South African government to end apartheid—a plan that would soon make Colby a leader in a national movement to disinvest in companies that did business with the minority-ruled nation.

Bill Cotter has been credited widely for leading Colby to new levels of excellence; for bringing the highest standards to all facets of the institution; and for fulfilling the enormous potential of the small college in Maine that he had taken over from a string of predecessors he refers to as "giants," including Robert E.L. Strider II, J. Seelye Bixler, Franklin W. Johnson and Arthur J. Roberts. He earned a national reputation for his work at Colby and has been a leader in higher education associations worldwide.

Yet Cotter came to Colby's presidency almost by accident, bearing a résumé that, at first glance, might not have proclaimed him a potential superstar of academe. In 1978 Sol Hurwitz, now a Colby overseer, had a daughter (Linda '82) at Colby when Strider announced his impending retirement and the College launched a search for its new president. Hurwitz changed the course of Colby history when he mentioned the presidential search to Cotter, who happened to be Hurwitz's squash

Bill Cotter, Before Colby

Before arriving at Colby, Bill Cotter had set courtroom precedents in the U.S., had helped write an African country's first constitution, had been asked by a U.S. secretary of state if he was a communist and had aided liberation movements in Africa as old colonial empires fell.

"I was six years out of law school and I'd had five different jobs, and each one was a real growth experience," he said.

Cotter was the second son of a stay-at-home mother and a director-of-industrial-relations father who worked at a Chevrolet plant. Neither had attended college but both were determined that he would. He graduated from Washington Irving High School in Tarrytown, N.Y., and went off to Harvard to study government. He graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1958 and cum laude from Harvard Law School in 1961. His education didn't stop there.

1961-62 As a law clerk for U.S. District Judge Lloyd McMahon in New York, Cotter worked on a trial involving Mafia members accused of narcotics trafficking. After the jury found glass in their corn flakes and received threats against their children, and after one defendant threw a chair at a prosecutor and another leapt into the jury box, the judge and his clerk resorted to chains, gags and FBI men standing behind each defendant to prevent a mistrial. "We were making it all up as we went along," Cotter recalled. "We made law in the



Linda and Bill Cotter pose outside the gates of Harvard Yard on graduation day.

case, [establishing] what a trial judge can do to keep order." All the defendants were convicted.

1962-63 As an assistant attorney general in Northern Nigeria (and "crown counsel," since Nigeria was part of the British empire), he was in the vanguard of Americans working in Africa. Nigeria was preparing for independence and wanted lawyers and M.B.A.'s to help with

the transition. "The leadership was there and it was quite impressive, but it was thin; there were only 11 lawyers among an estimated 41 million

Throughout his Colby years Cotter taught a Government Department course titled Law and Social Change: Women and Minorities. He said teaching was one of the highlights of his work, and in evaluations students often ranked his course as one of their favorites. Linda Cotter said, "About the third week of every year he would say to me, 'This is the best group of students I've ever had.' I would remind him that he said the same thing the year before."

His broader vision for Colby was evident in an interview that ran in *The Colby Echo*. Still four months from moving into the president's office, he said Colby needed:

- more international study opportunities,
- more diversity and attention to affirmative action,
- library improvements,
- endowment increases,
- more women on the faculty, and
- higher national and international aspirations.

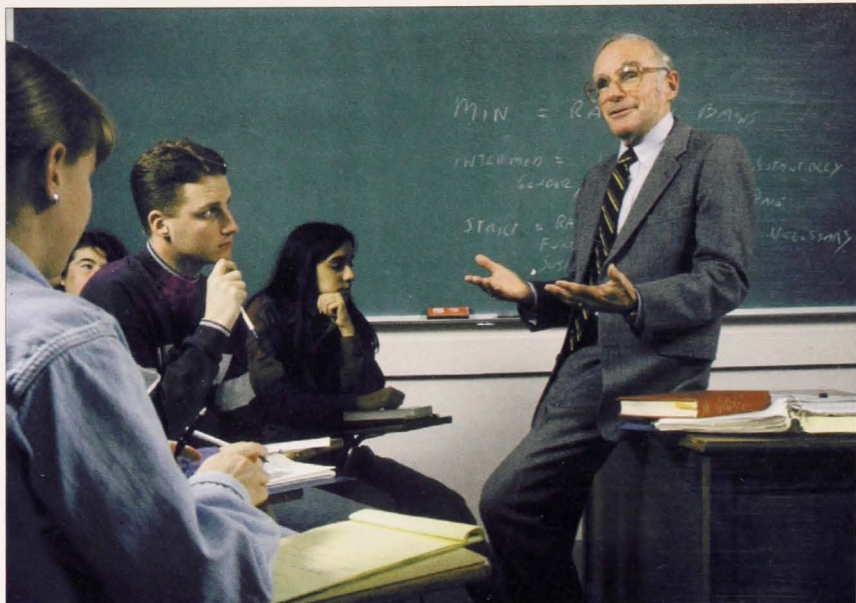
What is remarkable about that list two decades later is that it reflects many of Cotter's proudest accomplishments as president.

• Colby's emphasis on international study turned it into a national leader among colleges both in international study and campus-based international programs.

• The number of minority students increased from 64 (4 percent) in 1979 to 249 (14 percent) last year, and the number of minority tenure-track faculty members increased from four (3 percent) to 23 (16 percent).

• Library space was doubled with the opening of an addition to Miller Library three years into Cotter's presidency, and a new music and art library and a science library were built in the 1990s.

• The value of the endowment soared from \$23 million in 1979 to more than \$300 million today.



• The number of women tenure-track faculty members increased from 18 (17 percent) to 57 (39 percent).

• And Colby now ranks among the nation's top small colleges by any measure.

When former *New York Times* education editor Edward Fiske did his first ranking of American colleges, he used the Michelin system, where four stars is the top rating. In the first edition of Fiske's guide, Colby got three stars while Middlebury, Bowdoin and other of Colby's peer institutions had four. Armed with charts, graphs, data and briefings—"at least 50 pages," according to Bob McArthur (philosophy, former dean of faculty)—the lawyer-president went to New York to enlighten Fiske. "As Bill left, [Fiske] probably wondered why he ever got into the college guide business in the first place," McArthur said. The next year, after the Fiske guide appeared with four stars next to Colby's name, students wore stars on their gowns at commencement,

people," he said. Cotter was the only American lawyer in the region and, consequently, the only one who had studied constitutional law, so he helped write a constitution. Also the only one who had taken a tax course, he wrote the first tax code. "It really was a heady time for a short while. There was all this optimism," he said.



Cotter served as one of the first White House Fellows during the Johnson Administration.

1963-65 Cotter was a law associate with Cahill, Gordon, Reindel and Ohl on Wall Street. "That's where I learned to write," he said. "The quality of the analysis and the rigor of the legal writing

in a Wall Street law firm is unparalleled. I thought I would be fired; every sentence was just shredded. . . . Nurturing is not big on Wall Street," he said.

1965-66 Cotter was one of 15 in the first group of White House Fellows chosen to serve in the Johnson administration. He was assigned as a special assistant to Secretary of Commerce John T. Connor,

and at the Commerce Department he set up an equal employment opportunity program and "got a real sense of what government does," he said. He recalls lunches

with Lady Bird Johnson and J. Robert Oppenheimer, dinners with the President, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Supreme Court justices and congressional leaders. "I had a debate with Dean Rusk (secretary of state) in the State Department dining room," he said. After Cotter asked, sympathetically, about Robert Kennedy's suggestion that the U.S. start negotiating with the North Vietnamese, Rusk snapped back, "What are you, some kind of communist?" Cotter recalls. He co-wrote a proposal to merge the commerce and labor departments into the Department of Economy—an idea that Johnson included in his State of the Union address.

1966-70 After finishing the fellowship, Cotter called on a contact at the Ford Foundation and was offered an opportunity to go to Latin America as the foundation's assistant repre-



Dan Maccarone '98 got a special gift from Cotter at Commencement—a button that said, “Have you hugged your college president today?” “I blinked, revealed the candy I had for him and threw my arms around him as if he were a long lost lover,” Maccarone recounted. Students responded to Cotter’s humor and warmth; when this year’s Broadway Musical Revue cast learned Cotter would be out of town both show nights, they went to his office to perform.

luck. ‘I didn’t know exactly what she meant.’ After listening to a rather prolonged debate, Cotter relied on his tried and true approach and suggested a procedural compromise. He remembers saying, “Well, why don’t we . . .”—and the “stunned silence” that immediately followed.

“I learned that the president presides—the faculty proposes and disposes,” he said. “In the sphere of the faculty, particularly hiring, tenure and curricular matters, the president’s role is to see to it that their autonomy is protected.”

It’s remarkable how little changed the man who retired this year was from that young president in 1979. His hair had grown a few shades grayer in two decades, but he retired fit and trim, purposeful as he strode across campus and enormously energetic right through a coast-to-coast farewell tour of alumni clubs this year. The tour left aides-de-camp awed by his stamina and gasping to keep up. Linda Cotter recollected the Chicago, Denver and Seattle events, on successive nights in March, and said, “at breakfast they would ask for my room number and I couldn’t even remember what city I was in.”

It was a bit of a grind, Cotter admitted, “but it’s a very efficient way to do it.”

The Cotters were a near-ubiquitous presence at student events—concerts, plays, athletic games, lectures, committee meetings and art

and one woman also wore a sign that said, “Thank you Mr. Cotter.”

The increasing strength of the College coupled with Cotter’s hands-on attention to detail lifted Colby as high as 17th in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings (18th this year), into the “most competitive” bracket in the *Barron’s* guidebooks and among *Yahoo! Internet Life’s* “most-wired” colleges in every list the magazine has compiled.

Colby’s rise resulted from Cotter’s analytical approach grounded in his training as a lawyer, Hurwitz said. “He’s good at analyzing a problem, then looking for the institutional mechanism that can address the problem.”

“Everything I had done in leading [prior to Colby] had been in consensus building,” Cotter said. That model generally served him well at Colby, too, but early on he ran into a glaring exception. “I was on my way out the door for my first faculty meeting and Millie Keller [former secretary to the president] said, with a twinkle in her eye, ‘Good

sentative in Colombia and Venezuela. When the person hired as the foundation’s representative didn’t show up, Cotter stepped up. The foundation gave scholarships for Colombians and Venezuelans to attend U.S. colleges and made grants to support population control, economic planning, education, agriculture and science and technology initiatives. “This is where I really began to work with American universities,” he said. He hired academics to put their expertise in to practical applications in South America. He returned to New York in 1970 to coordinate the foundation’s educational programs.

1970-79 As president of the African-American Institute, he made three or four trips to Africa each year and went to Washington about every other week. The mission was to assist African development, particularly through education,

and to strengthen American-African relations. He worked with Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, members of Congress and the leaders of numerous African countries. Cotter worked with the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia and independence movements in Zimbabwe, Angola and

Guinea Bissau. He helped set up a school in Tanzania for rebels in exile and was in Mozambique on its independence day. The in-



As president of the African-American Institute in the 1970s, Cotter worked with Andrew Young.

stitute had a staff of 100 and a board of directors and, as a non-profit organization, relied on fund raising. All of these elements proved good training for his next job, as Colby’s 18th president, Cotter says.

Cotter said his parents “were quite surprised when we went to Africa” but were always supportive, curious and interested.

“My mother said, ‘I guess you know what you’re doing.’ . . . They were less surprised when we came to Colby and actually came to visit us.”

Following a fire that gutted Wadsworth Gymnasium, Cotter conferred with Athletic Director Dick Whitmore, Dean of the College Earl Smith and Director of Physical Plant Alan Lewis. Cool under pressure, whether disasters like the 1992 arson fire, the 1998 ice storm or occasional confrontations involving student groups, Cotter described his leadership style as consultative and consensus-driven.



museum events. In his spare time Cotter is a reader, and he never missed contributing four or five of his favorite books of the year to the annual faculty and senior-class list of recommended reading. Famous for advising seniors in his baccalaureate address to “carry a good book,” his recommendations this year were *Questioning the Millennium* by Stephen J. Gould, *Another Life* by Michael Korda, *The Hungry Ocean* by Linda Greenlaw '83 and *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* by Thomas Friedman.

The 1979 *Echo* interview that previewed Cotter's eventual legacy also contained this Cotter quote: “Fraternities are apparently one touchy problem.”

The transformation of Colby's residential and social systems from one dominated by Greek organizations to the residential commons structure of today is an important part of the Cotter legacy and one of the early demonstrations of his inclusive and consensus-driven leadership.

Fraternities had been an important part of Colby's history and were essential to the college experience in earlier times, but the nature of the organizations had changed by 1979. The year before the Cotters arrived at Colby there was an infamous bonfire on fraternity row, well covered in the Maine press. “There was a sense that ‘Here's a new president; this is a good time to do something,’” Cotter said.

Since there are no fraternities at his alma mater, Harvard, Cotter was relatively unfamiliar with them. “So, as a lawyer, I tried to gather all the facts,” he said. “It surprised me that their role on campus was so huge and that the passions ran so high.” Initially a series of guidelines and contracts that spelled out mutual expectations between the fraternities and the College were signed. “Some [fraternities] did very well; some did very badly,” Cotter said.

A Trustee Commission on Campus Life, including faculty, students, alumni and trustees—both fraternity members and “independents”—was appointed in 1983 to study the problems. Nine months of study led to a report that stated: “Colby without fraternities will be a better place than Colby with fraternities—provided the residential commons system and other recommended improvements are adopted.”

The plan was kept secret until the January 1984 trustees' meeting, where it was accepted unanimously in a rare secret ballot.

“Then all hell broke loose,” Cotter said, recalling how fraternity presidents were notified before an announcement to students in the chapel. Afterward “a hideous bonfire erupted. I think we lost another piano,” Cotter said. “It was pretty tense.”

And the tension continued. There were lawsuits and the threat of an injunction to hold up commencement that May. “There were hearings in court in Augusta the Saturday before commencement,” Cotter said.

Since then the intensity of feelings on both sides has dissipated. “As each year passed it became more and more evident that this was the right decision,” said Larry Pugh '56, a trustee and chair of the campus life commission.

Cotter's leadership in external affairs was exhibited even earlier in his tenure. One of the things that had impressed the search committee about Cotter was his international experience, and even before he arrived at Colby the debate over appropriate initiatives directed at the ruling minority in South Africa was roiling the campus and the world. Soon after arriving, Cotter took a courageous stand on apartheid and put Colby in the vanguard of concerned institutions as the first college to divest itself of investment holdings that benefited the regime in South Africa. “I'm urging economic pressure, and political and diplomatic pressure, on the South African government in order to avoid violence, not to escalate it,” he told an anti-apartheid rally on campus two decades ago. “I believe that our pressure can in fact change the white South African government.”

In her commencement address this spring, the Honorable Margaret Marshall, a native of South Africa who is chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, said, “President Cotter played a noble part in the enterprise that meant so much to my life: the transformation of South Africa from a racial tyranny to a constitutional democracy. . . . His firm stand against apartheid, long before that view was popular in the United States, made a difference.”

“It was a remarkable page in Colby history,” said Tom Tietenberg (economics) in “The Cotter Years” video. “The South African situation had the potential to fracture the Colby community and create wounds that it would have taken years to heal. But out of that situation, Bill Cotter's leadership allowed us . . . to exercise national leadership in an important area, to gain a sense of our underlying principles and to strengthen, not weaken, our sense of community.”

The Public and Private Linda K. Cotter



More than half of living alumni graduated during the Cotter years and knew Linda Cotter's warm smile.

In a conversation this spring, Linda Cotter mentioned many things she will miss about Colby. But there were, of course, reasons she was looking forward to the new chapter that would begin in July.

For the first time in two decades she will be able to have pizzas delivered to her home, for example. It seems that soon after her family took up residence in the president's house, prank calls to area pizza shops necessitated telling all the pizza parlors in town to assume all orders were jokes. "When we want a pizza, we still can't get it delivered," she said this spring—with an indulgent smile offering absolution to generations of student pranksters.

"I'm looking forward to a private life," she confided, acknowledging the public roles she has played since the early 1960s when she was a young schoolteacher and the only white American woman in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria. There have been many roles—as a professional teacher, a volunteer, a mother, a wife, a daughter, a friend to many, a formal and informal advisor to students—but "slipping into this representational role was something I've been doing since early in our marriage," she said.

As she prepared for a less public life and looked at houses in Concord, Mass., last winter, Cotter would size up the dining rooms and wonder, "How many can I seat at a time?" Then she would catch herself, realizing it will no longer be a week-to-week concern.

Moving back to Boston will be a homecoming for the Cotters. As an undergraduate at Wellesley College in the 1950s, Linda Kester was too young to vote but not too young to chair Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign in Massachusetts. "The [Democratic] party knew Eisenhower was going to win," she recalled. "They couldn't get the Massachusetts politicians to do anything." So she stepped in and made some calls, including one to the president of the Harvard Democratic Club, an undergraduate named Bill Cotter. He helped recruit some Harvard students, she ran the

statewide campaign, and their personal relationship turned out to be far more successful than their candidate.

After graduating from Wellesley, Linda, like Bill, was accepted to Harvard Law School—one of 15 women in a class of 500. But the climate was not entirely receptive to women. With the Socratic method in use, the law school scheduled a special "ladies day" for those interrogations. And Linda recalls the dean of admissions asking her, "How would you feel knowing you would take a place away from a man who has to support a family?"

Ironically, after reconsidering and declining Harvard Law's invitation, and turning down a doctoral fellowship at Columbia as well, she was the one who took the role of supporting a spouse. She taught school in Lexington, Mass., while earning a master's in education at Harvard. "She changed her

life to support me," Bill Cotter said.

Linda went on to teach on three continents—in New York, in Nigeria and at the University of the Andes in Colombia, where she taught English and English literature—before and after the Cotters' three children arrived. Now grown, David is a lawyer in San Diego, Deborah is a legal researcher in Washington, D.C., and Elizabeth works for the United Way in Wisconsin.

David was a high school freshman when the family arrived in Maine, and the two girls were younger. At Colby, interaction with college students informed her role as a parent, Cotter said. "Our children were disconcerted that they couldn't shock us."

Similarly, Cotter's roles as the president's wife and as associate director of off-campus study coordinating student internships complemented each other. Travel that introduced her to alumni and her regular contact with students helped her forge connections between the two groups and put Colby ahead of its peers as internships gained importance. The depth of her interest in the program resonates in her voice as she describes summer and January internships underwritten for students who needed financial aid from the Linda K. Cotter Internship Fund, endowed and named in her honor last fall.

Many events during the spring semester were tinged with melancholy for being the Cotters' "last"—their last symphony and choral concerts, senior scholars' seminars, and International Extravaganza. "We had a real affinity for the international students, and they were so talented, spirited and genuinely happy at this year's Extravaganza," she said. "It is so enjoyable to get to know them. I think we both feel in many instances a kind of parental pride."

"I'll miss the beauty of Maine and the access to lectures and music and theater. I won't be able to just leave the house, walk over and visit the Renoir or the Homer at the museum," she said.

"As we get closer to the end, I know what I'll miss most, and that's the interaction with young people," she said in May. After so many years on campus, she began to take for granted the ability to go to a college dining hall, strike up a conversation with bright, friendly students and sit with them for dinner: "There aren't many people in their 60s lucky enough to feel that connected."



Linda and Bill Cotter with David, Deborah and Elizabeth, soon after arriving at Colby in 1979.

Bill and Linda Cotter's contributions to Colby were recognized last year with the establishment of the William R. Cotter Distinguished Teacher Professorship and the Linda K. Cotter Internship Fund, both endowed by gifts from almost a thousand friends. Onstage with the Cotters for the announcement were Edson Mitchell '75, Doug Schair '67 and Larry Pugh '56, leaders of The Campaign for Colby. In 1997 trustees named the student center Cotter Union.

During the 1990s Cotter turned his attention closer to home. Recognizing that the economic health of Waterville is critical to Colby's ability to continue recruiting top students and faculty, he was a founding member of the Mid State Economic Development Corporation and established a \$1-million loan fund to help recruit and retain downtown businesses. He led the effort to turn the former Stern's department store into the nonprofit Waterville Regional Arts & Community Center (WRACC) and, in his final year, established a trustee subcommittee for downtown development. In June the WRACC board and the Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce established The William R. Cotter Award in recognition of his contributions "to the improvement and revitalization of downtown Waterville."

This spring the Cotters were busy wrapping up business at Colby and preparing for a schedule that only they could consider "retirement" but that most would consider full-time work. They have moved to Boston, where Bill is full-time chief executive officer of The Oak Foundation and Linda continues consulting for the organization. The Oak Foundation is a relatively new international philanthropic foundation that commits its resources to issues of global social and environmental concerns, particularly those that have a major impact on



the lives of the disadvantaged. "He's clearly a builder," said Alan Parker, vice chair of the foundation. "He's an outstanding executive who can get the job done, and with his experience in the international world and Africa in particular, he was almost a perfect fit." Alan and his wife, Jette Parker, chair of the foundation and a Colby trustee, met Cotter when their son Kristian '94 was a student.

Before departing Mayflower Hill the Cotters were praised at events here and across the country for the enormous contributions they had made to Colby and Waterville. At dozens of formal and informal events groups not only applauded the Cotters but broke into spontaneous standing ovations saluting their extraordinary dedication to the College and their inspired leadership.

Waterville businessman Joe Karter, who worked with Cotter on downtown initiatives, said it all. "Bill Cotter," he said, "is a guy who knows how to get things done." 🏠

Linda Cotter Honor Roles

Citation read at commencement when Linda Cotter was awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree.

Linda K. Cotter: Like a fine actress in repertory, you have graciously taken roles that varied day to day—now a lead, now a valued bit player—but always one without which the dazzling Colby story would not unfold. Your steadfast support and counsel in your starring roles as wife, mother, daughter and friend have brought immeasurable strength to those you most love and who most love you. Your versatility on the College's own stage has enhanced many segments of the Colby experience, most especially for our students. In your work in off-campus study, you created and nurtured myriad opportunities for valuable internships, in January and in the summer, which have not only broadened the preparation of countless students but have also meaningfully strengthened

alumni ties to the College. Your supporting roles have taken you around the nation and the world representing Colby. Here at home, because of your special interest and attentiveness, the impeccable grace and exacting detail of special events have become the norm. Your unflinching personal acknowledgment of the good work of others across the campus and your many expressions of concern for those in trouble have been hallmarks of your time at Colby. And, like a true star, you have shared your time and talent in the greater community, playing key roles in the area United Way campaigns and for the YMCA, Oak Grove-Coburn School and the Maine Children's Home. Two fine Waterville institutions—the annual Martin Luther King, Jr., observance and the Mid-Maine Global

Forum—were created through your leading participation and hard work. Colby has honored you as you have honored Colby. You received the coveted Colby Brick Award, and in a special citation in 1994 the Board of Trustees called you "an exceptionally valuable participant in the continuing success" of the College. And, most recently, Colby friends both on and off the campus raised more than \$750,000 to create the Linda K. Cotter Endowed Internship Fund that will forevermore expand the learning opportunities for students. Today, as the curtain falls on the memorable "Cotter Years," we are proud to confirm you as a very special graduate of Colby and honor you, above all, for the role you have played as a model for more than five generations of Colby students. . . .