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By Rosa Nguyen

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 14, 2015

AMHERST — Two alumni have bequeathed \$5 million to UMass Amherst for scholarships and an endowed faculty chair in Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, as well as for programming in the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies.

The gift, granted by Pamela and Robert Jacobs, also provides support for UMass Hillel, which offers resources to Jewish students.

The bequest is part of the UMass Rising fund-raising campaign, to which the Jacobses have already donated \$250,000. The college said half of the bequest, \$2.5 million, will be used to create the Pamela M. and Robert D. Jacobs Chair in Judaic and Near Eastern Studies within the College of Humanities and Fine Arts.

“There’s a Jewish word — tzedakah — which means doing good works,” Pamela Jacobs said in a phone interview Tuesday. “We wanted to support these programs and assure they would be part of the university as long as it exists.”

Jacobs, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in English in 1969, is a member of the board of directors of the UMass Amherst Foundation. Her husband received his bachelor's degree in government from the university in 1968, and helped found Rock Creek Partners LLC, a legal advisory and research firm based in Washington.

When the couple met in college, the school's fledgling Hillel program was still very small, and the Judaic and Near Eastern Studies program had not yet been established.

"There was never this program when we were there," Jacobs said. "We want Jewish kids [on campus] to have a place to go."

Nevertheless, Robert Jacobs said UMass Amherst is "a real crown jewel of the state."

"When you think of great Boston-area colleges, UMass Amherst is the flagship campus," he said. "If Jewish people don't support Jewish elements on campus, who will?"

Previously, the couple provided the early funding and a permanent endowment that enabled the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies to open, according to the college.

Late last year, questions arose about the institute's future when a for-sale sign appeared on the front lawn, and the hunt for new donors intensified. A coalition of donors bought the North Pleasant Street property for \$460,000 and donated it to the university, according to state records.

Now, the Jacobses' bequest will help fund the institute's programming, which includes genocide studies, refugee studies, and studies of large-scale human-caused disasters.

"It offers a space to contemplate past catastrophes in light of current events," said professor James E. Young, director of the institute. "It's a place for different groups to study what happens, and how what happens goes on to the next generation and gets remembered."

Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Rosa Nguyen can be reached at rosa.nguyen@globe.com.

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