

CUSTER ALUMNI HOUSE / 473 E. FULTON

Hosts: Grand Rapids Community College / Grand Rapids Community College Foundation

This stately home was built in the Colonial Revival Style that reflects the influence of the English and Dutch style houses on the Atlantic seaboard. Clapboard was used for the exterior. The facade of the home is symmetrically balanced with large, double-hung windows, a central door and three prominent dormers. From a charming porch, visitors will be welcomed into this impressive, newly repurposed and renovated home.

Grand Rapids Community College purchased the building in 2009 and, after a \$1.8 million investment, it was dedicated to two of the college's most devoted supporters, Dave and Karen Custer. As the Custer Alumni House, it provides a meeting space for the GRCC Foundation Board, offices for GRCC Foundation and alumni relations personnel and a pleasant, home-like "living room" that is perfect for entertaining alumni, donors and friends of the college. The largest room on the first floor has the original fireplace and floors, large windows and artwork from alumni and students of GRCC. The nearby state-of-the-art kitchen is equipped with new cupboards, high-end appliances, beautiful tile floors and marble countertops. Students from the culinary arts program often prepare meals for the guests that can be served in the dining room. The alumni relations and Foundation offices and the Foundation boardroom, that was created by combining what would have been two of the former bedrooms, can be found on the second floor. The tile in the restrooms is skillfully designed. The facility is like an art gallery with an eclectic collection of original works gracing every room and hallway. All of the furnishings are fittingly from Custer Inc.

This structure was built on a large lot that originally belonged to an early pioneer settler in Grand Rapids named Wilna Cole. He along with his brother, Edwin, had a successful business as purveyors of boots and shoes. He had previously built two other houses on the property along College. Because of address changes, the history of the house is a bit confusing, but it seems that this house was built around 1903-4 and the city directory lists I. Preston Rice, President of Rice Veneer & Lumber, as the first occupant. In 1912, ownership passed to William S. Thomas, President and Treasurer of the Thomas Canning Company.

In 1922, Mrs. Julia Hawkins March became the next owner of what was, after several address changes, officially 473 E. Fulton. Thrown upon her own resources after the death of her husband and with capital of only \$5, Mrs. March started a small business designing and making unique and decorative articles for ladies' desks and dressers and specialty items for the kitchen. She opened a small shop on Division Ave., eventually including items for men. Her artistic talent and ingenuity led her into decorating and designing lampshades, a business that prospered and eventually required the hiring of 15 employees. She married Edward Hart in 1934 and remained in the home until 1938.

It was purchased at that time by Howard E Sherman, of Hazeltine & Perkins Drugs who remained in the home for 46 years. Sherman was the grandson of Wilna Cole, the original owner of the property. The house was divided into two parts at this time with

Mrs. Sherman living in the back and her son and his wife occupying the front. Later, it was divided into three apartments. The Sherman's remained in the home for 46 years.

In 1986, Davenport College bought the house to use as the Lettinga Entrepreneurial Center. Offices were created to house the Institutional Research Institute, the General Counsel and miscellaneous meeting rooms. A new roof was put on, windows were reglazed, the exterior and interior were painted and necessary changes were made to bring the building up to code for its new use. The Center was named after Bill Lettinga, a graduate of Davenport Institute, who, after a successful and varied career, became a generous contributor to Davenport as well as many other community organizations. Notably, he initiated the Hope Network Foundation.

When GRCC purchased Davenport College in 2009, plans began for the renovation of what is now the Custer Alumni House. Though many changes and improvements were made, the spirit of this 119 year old home remains. The bright yellow color reflects the warm, welcoming feeling that greets you as you enter.

The building is dedicated to Dave and Karen Custer, enthusiastic supporters of the institution. Dave is the founder of Custer Inc., a major office furniture manufacturer in Grand Rapids. He credits GRJC with giving him an affordable opportunity to begin his journey toward the successful entrepreneur and philanthropist that he is today. He has committed over 30 years to the college as a member and chairperson of the GRCC Foundation Board striving to provide a similar chance for a higher education to the entire community. The current board president, Dr. Jim Buzzitta, has said of Dave, "He pushes us to think innovatively, and his love for his alma mater is evident in all that he does"

Karen Custer is an inaugural member of the GRCC Foundation's Women in Philanthropy group and her support of the college is only one of the many ways in which she is involved in the larger community. She serves on several boards and volunteers with many local charitable organizations. Both Dave and Karen have received numerous awards recognizing their generous contributions to others in their community.