Fund continues family philosophy

Through ten decades, three generations, a depression, an oil embargo, real estate volatility and life’s curveballs, the Sommer family’s philanthropic efforts have been guided by one philosophy – helping others improve themselves.

“We want to provide an opportunity for people to improve their lives. That is the philosophy of our family. We are trying to promote the opportunity for others to improve their lives and help them,” family patriarch Ken Sommer said.

The next evolution of that philosophy was the recent creation of a donor-advised fund, the Sommer Family Fund, through the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln.

“The Foundation will come up with needs. That’s when we will come around and fund the areas we want to support,” Sommer said. “The beauty of the Community Foundation is it lets you look at those opportunities. We have been very blessed. I know the Foundation will allow us to share those blessings.”

The family considered a variety of ways to build its philanthropic efforts but felt the Community Foundation offered access to and knowledge of a wide variety of causes that the family would like to pursue.

“It seems like the best fit for us was the Community Foundation,” Sommer said.

Philanthropy has long been a part of the Sommer family. The family was active charitably in more than 30 communities across the region through its Harper on the Way gas and convenience stores. It sold the stores in 2010 but is still active in a variety of other business ventures. The changes will enable the lifelong Sangamon County residents to focus their efforts on their home area for the foreseeable future.
Ken and his wife Mary K. will not be alone in deciding where to focus the Fund’s giving. Sons Chris and Bruce and daughter Stephanie will also play key roles.

“The whole family is invested in it,” Sommer said. “Everybody had the opportunity to express the philosophy of the fund. That was one of the great things about it. It serves at the will of everyone rather than an individual.” The decision making will include the six grandchildren as they grow older.

“The third generation can continue to build upon the philanthropy,” Sommer said. “Hopefully, they get a sense of the importance of helping those in need.”

For more information on donor-advised funds, contact the Community Foundation at 217/789-4431.