



PHOTO BY RAKITHA PERERA

STEPHANIE VONDRAK

For her 21st birthday, Stephanie Vondrak visited Paris and fell in love with a small oil painting by Claude Monet at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume. It wasn't the first time that a work of art touched Vondrak's soul deeply. But little did she know just how much the arts would matter to her throughout her life – and how much her life would, in turn, matter to them.

In August 2021, Vondrak made a \$1 million endowed gift to the UNLV College of Fine Arts. Not only is the gift among the largest endowments in the college's history, but it is an unrestricted gift, which allows for the most flexible use of the funds. The David and Stephanie Vondrak Endowment for the Creation of Knowledge in the Arts will provide support for emerging, collaborative, and innovative projects and works in perpetuity.

Vondrak made the gift in memory of her husband, David, who passed away eight years ago at age 66. Today, supporting UNLV is just one way she continues to share her husband's legacy, and their good fortune, with the world.

"This is special, with UNLV," she said. "One can only hope that other people feel the same way and will give, too."

Over the course of many years, Vondrak would continue to visit the Jeu de Paume. When she took David for the first time, it "knocked him over," she said. Eight months later, he traveled to Paris for work – he was a highly successful financial executive in the film and television industry – and stayed an extra day just to visit the Jeu de Paume again.

"Talking about him still chokes me up," Vondrak reminisced. They had been married 43 years when David passed.

Together, the couple cherished art in many forms, including the theater. They especially loved the opportunities they had to see performances by Patti LuPone, who won a Tony Award for her role as Eva Peron in the 1979 Broadway production of "Evita."

"When I saw 'Evita,' it resonated with me," Vondrak recalled.

But one particular performance stands out in her mind. It was the time when LuPone was on stage, and before she could begin singing, a man in the audience began choking.

Two nurses jumped up to help him and the theater raised the lights. Seemingly having a heart attack, he was rushed away in an ambulance.

Vondrak recalls the story of what happened next.

"Let's wait for news before going on with the show," LuPone said to the sobered audience. A short while later, they received word that the man had died on the way to the hospital.

LuPone addressed the crowd again: "I don't know if I should continue..." she said. But the audience agreed that she should dedicate the show to him instead. LuPone did just that.

Another time, Vondrak and her friends were in Manhattan to see LuPone perform. Before the show, they happened to run into her on the street, hailing a cab. It was pouring rain, and LuPone was dressed in a raincoat, collar up. She was in a rush to get downtown and back, so Vondrak and her friends gave their cab to her.

A third time, the Vondraks saw LuPone's one-woman show in Las Vegas with friends. Afterward, they went to dinner, and LuPone happened to be at the same restaurant. They chatted again.

Through serendipitous and magical encounters – with a museum, a painting, and numerous plays and performers – the Vondraks' lives were enriched by art.

When David was working, he never even had time to read a novel, Vondrak said. But after he retired at age 50, he became a mentor and gave talks at the library. He traveled and golfed. And he also believed wholeheartedly in supporting the arts. Vondrak's gift to UNLV is a testament to the love and life she shared with David, and to the College of Fine Art's inspiration.

"I've been very lucky. I've been blessed," Vondrak said.

"When you have a good life, you're a fool if you can't share that with others."



STEPHANIE AND DAVID VONDRAK