

2023 Distinguished Alumni Award Winner

Philip Nicholas

By Micaela Myers

Some students leave the University of Wyoming ready to change the world. For Phil Nicholas, that desire was amplified by a liver disease diagnosis in his 20s. The doctor said he had about five years before he'd reach end-stage liver disease. He set big goals. After the first five years, he was still healthy and continued setting new goals, helping him accomplish big things as a father, a lawyer and a legislator. He eventually received a liver transplant but never stopped setting those goals.

Nicholas grew up in Lander. After attending college in Oregon, where he met his wife, he returned to Wyoming. Nicholas earned his J.D. from UW (1979) and settled down to raise a family and practice law, founding Nicholas and Tangeman in Laramie. He also served in the Wyoming Legislature starting in 1997 — the House of Representatives for eight years followed by the Wyoming Senate for 12 years. Nicholas took part in many committees, including chairing of the appropriations committee in both the House and the Senate (10 years total). In the Senate, he was vice president, president and majority floor leader.

Two of his major accomplishments were improving Laramie and investing in UW.

“There comes a time in your career where you realize what a gift it was to have that education,” Nicholas says. “I wanted my children to go to the best



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college and have the best experiences.” He quickly learned that many other legislators, governors and citizens felt the same way.

All four of his children attended UW, where Nicholas saw firsthand how the university offers avenues for students to excel and also caring professors for those who need extra help.

“It brings tears to my eyes just knowing you have professors there who will help guide your children — help them not only learn but also get through what can be a hard time,” he says. “It’s a pretty special quality.”

Nicholas’s ancestors went all the way to Oregon as settlers on the Oregon Trail but turned around and came back to Wyoming. He recalls his grandmother telling tales of taking a wagon from the Devils Tower area

to attend UW back when there were just two buildings. Now, thanks to Nicholas and others, UW grows each year with new state-of-the-art facilities.

“We knew UW needed a facelift,” he says of his time in the Legislature. “We successfully implemented a 20-year plan to recapitalize the campus and to improve teaching and learning opportunities. We all shared a common goal, and education was an important part of that. We also set up the Hathaway Scholarship and invested \$70 million toward endowed chairs at UW.”

Nowhere else but UW can you see people from all over Wyoming, Nicholas says. “You realize it’s a special institution — not only for us, but for everyone in the state. The people want a spectacular university.”

Nicholas cofounded the Laramie Beautification Committee and served on many other boards and organizations, including the Wyoming Trial Lawyers Association, the Uniform Law Commission, the Albany County Hospital Board of Trustees, Hospice of Laramie, the Laramie Area Chamber of Commerce Board, the Albany County Planning Commission and the Laramie Economic Development Corp. As a trial lawyer, Nicholas was awarded the highest rating of AV by Martindale-Hubbell and Super Lawyers by Thomson Reuters.

For his tremendous dedication to UW and Wyoming, Nicholas earned the 2023 UW Alumni Association Distinguished Alumnus Award.