Thinking back to the 1980s and her years as an East High student in Cleveland, Ohio, Jacquelyn Meshelemiah doesn’t immediately reflect on dances, boyfriends, or Friday night football games. Instead, her memories turn to a special chemistry teacher and his wife who taught home economics. Together, Kenneth and Lynette Hoehn opened their home, wallets, and hearts to students in need.

Jacquelyn credits Kenneth, who was also the school’s director of athletics, with making chemistry fun and recalls how patient and encouraging he was with struggling students. Although her sister, older by a year, took the class first, it was Jacquelyn who spent more time chatting with and asking questions of her teacher, prompting invitations for both sisters to join in student events at the Hoehns’ residence.

“I don’t know how they provided help for so many students to play sports and participate in programs at East High, but they managed,” said Jacquelyn, now an associate professor with the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University, where she earned three degrees. “Not only did they buy us little things, but they took us on trips and to visit colleges.”

In her heart, Jacquelyn knew she would find a way to honor the Hoehns one day. That day arrived recently when she established the Kenneth E. and Lynette O. Hoehn Endowed Scholarship Fund to provide financial assistance to African Americans and other underrepresented groups studying social work at Ohio State.

When Jim Stahler, a 1976 graduate of the College of Social Work and retired from the United Way of Dayton since 2000, heard about Jacquelyn’s gift and her reasons behind it, he was touched. Jim and his wife, Kay, a retired teacher, had been looking for a way to make a difference at Ohio State. They decided to help complete the Hoehn endowment and make Jacquelyn’s dream come true.
The Stahlers also had personal reasons for wanting to help students. Jim’s father, John Stahler, had a life-changing experience as a young man when he received unexpected guidance and support. “A coach from a neighboring high school knew my dad from having watched him play basketball and baseball,” said Jim. “It was in September that Coach Whitehead noticed my dad working alongside a highway and asked why he wasn’t in college. Beside the fact his family had little money, my dad’s coach no longer spoke to him following a difficult basketball game loss. My dad figured his school days were over.”

Coach Whitehead, however, thought differently. He drove John to Ohio Northern University and helped him through the admission process, even securing him a job at a fraternity house to cover his room and board. After freshman year, John transferred to Ohio State, where he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in biological sciences in 1943 and from the College of Medicine in 1946. During World War II, the military oversaw medical schools and paid for John’s medical education.

Jim is pleased to help Jacquelyn fulfill her endowment and pay tribute to his father at the same time. “It’s essential to thank people who’ve made a difference and who have positively influenced our lives,” said Jim, who remains active in social work as a guardian ad litem for Montgomery County Juvenile Court. Kay continues to volunteer in the classroom.

Jacquelyn can relate to many of the financial struggles of today’s students. She helped to put herself through Ohio State by working at the university’s Thompson Library. “Many college students have to choose between buying books or paying the rent,” she said. “I’ve heard stories from my students and have invited some to lunch or dinner to see what’s inside their troubles.”

Jacquelyn’s five children, ranging in age from 7 to 15, are growing up in an atmosphere of compassion and gratitude. “I encourage and require my children to give some of their allowance to charity. It’s really an expectation that we all do a little part,” she said. “They are caring kids. They give me purpose.”

While they remind her that she can’t save the world, Jacquelyn said she is fortunate to have a family and a career she loves. “Ohio State has been good to me,” she added.

The Stahlers have two adult children—their son is a third-generation Buckeye with a bachelor’s degree in aviation engineering—and three grandchildren, from a one-year-old to a high school senior. All of them live in Texas.

Jacquelyn, her sister, and their children get together every year with the Hoehns, who are now retired, and talk with them frequently. She knows that many East High alumni consider the Hoehns to be extended family members and stay in touch. The Stahlers are looking forward to meeting the Hoehns in person next May.

When the Hoehns heard about Jacquelyn’s tribute to them, they cried. “I had called them and later they sent an e-mail and asked to pardon any typing errors because their vision was blurred with tears,” Jacquelyn said. To share what you have with others, “you don’t have to make a huge sacrifice that changes your lifestyle. Simply make a commitment to give a little now because it will make a huge difference in the lives of people who benefit.”