Garden of Gratitude

By Shannon Toronto

How Alan Ashton’s side project to support his family produced an international company and a local landmark
In the late 1970s, Karen and Alan Ashton were expecting their eighth child, and money was tight. Alan had a job as a computer-science professor at Brigham Young University, but Karen had to push his salary to its limits, devising ways to feed their growing family with a pound of hamburger. The couple brainstormed ways to cut corners on spending and supplement the family income, weighing whether Alan should take on consulting work. But then Alan remembered a dormant idea.

In 1966, Alan had graduated from the University of Utah and begun his doctoral studies in the university’s brand-new computer-science department. He had submitted two options for projects to his professors: one centered on music, and the other on word processing. He received grant money for the former and went with that. But in their moment of financial crisis, Alan dusted off his word-processing idea and began to draft the designs for an invention that would fundamentally transform the way we write.

Early word processors had very clumsy features. Some required special computers in order to function. Others made users memorize a series of keystrokes for commands, and letters within words could be mistaken for commands. In one system, the mischievous letter “k” meant “kill” and would erase everything in a document.

Ashton set out to create simple and easy software that could run on a personal computer of any kind. He recruited a star student, Bruce Bastian, to help with design, and a secretarial pool from local government to road-test the product in realistic working conditions.

What emerged eventually became WordPerfect Corporation in 1982. WordPerfect software equipped writers with a host of useful tools. Ashton and his team aimed for “WYSIWYG” (what you see is what you get)—which means writers see words on a screen the same way the words display on paper. Text could be centered, italicized, and bolded; and, in later versions, font size and style, sophisticated graphics, and tables were possible. The program included a spellchecker, thesaurus, and word count. In 1986, it was the bestselling software application, and in 1987, Ashton left BYU to lead his company full-time.

Meanwhile the Ashton family kept growing, until the couple had eleven children (who have by now produced 64 grandchildren). Karen said she knew she was comfortable financially when she could buy anything she wanted at the grocery store.

By 1994, WordPerfect had more than 5,000 employees worldwide. That year, Ashton and Bastian sold the company to Novell, another Utah tech company.

Giving thanks

Alan says that giving thanks “is a wonderful way of quenching greed. It refines your character when you are truly grateful.” “It would be difficult for anyone to earn what has happened to us,” Karen adds. “We thank God for his generosity to us.”

As devout members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Ashtons kept in mind Brigham Young’s warning when the pioneers first entered their region: “The worst fear that I have about this people is that they will get rich in this country, forget God and his people…. My greater fear for them is that they cannot stand wealth.”

As the Ashtons’ finances improved, the couple vigilantly focused on family and faith to guard against the pitfalls of prosperity. Alan made it a priority to spend each evening with his family, even if that meant putting in extra time at odd hours for business calls and assignments. The Ashtons made a point of studying the Scriptures daily together, observing morning and evening family prayer, and taking Sunday as a day of rest without work. Karen committed to follow direction from her leaders and accept volunteer assignments: “Whenever they asked us to do something, we would do it immediately.”

Alan kept a monthly tally in his pocket planner of the money each of his children earned from allowances and chores. He would often sit and ask them how much they would like to contribute as a “fast offering,” an amount in addition to their 10 percent tithe. Early in their marriage, when the family struggled financially, Karen remembered hearing a leader ask members to consider giving as a fast offering over the cost of two skipped meals “much, much more—ten times more where we are in a position to do it.” Karen determined to follow this counsel even though it was difficult. She increased her offering until she felt a stretch—then the offering was a true sacrifice.

Giving thanks for the Ashtons took a distinct turn in 1993. Karen was serving on the general board of the Primary, an organization that provides religious education and activities for children 18 months to 12 years old. She would travel to congregations near and far to instruct teachers and children. On one of her visits, she noticed a plot of farmland in Lehi, Utah, south of Salt Lake City. The empty, undeveloped area along the old Pony Express route spoke to Karen as the right place for a public garden.

After having her last child, Karen suffered from postpartum depression and found nature nurturing and healing. She felt better when she was outside, enjoying her colorful gardens at the end of the day. She pictured the undeveloped land as a garden where people who hurt could come and relieve their suffering.

After WordPerfect’s sale, Alan bought the plot of land Karen identified and gifted it to her. The Ashtons named the property Thanksgiving Point. In 2000, the gardens opened to the public with mature trees, blossoming flowers, manicured lawns, and one of the largest man-made waterfalls in the Western hemisphere.

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Strolling couples and countless moms with children meander through botanical mazes, even a replica of the Secret Garden from the classic book. Stemming from her love for children’s literature, Karen founded the Timpanogos Storytelling Festival as a fundraiser for the children’s library at her local public library, and she initially held the event in tents in her backyard. Now in its 31st year, the festival is held at Thanksgiving Point the week after Labor Day weekend and draws about 25,000 guests, along with esteemed authors and presenters, making it the largest storytelling festival in the western United States.

Patrons of the arts
Twenty years ago opera singer Angela Johnson left her singing career to become a sculptor whose work focuses on spiritual themes. Her Light of the World Garden features larger-than-life-size bronze sculptures of the miracles, parables, ministry, and sacrifice from the life of Jesus Christ.

In 2008, Johnson attended a women’s leadership conference held at the Ashtons’ cabin. When Karen learned that the artist hoped to find a place for her bronze statues, she was immediately interested. Johnson eventually completed 35 figures that comprise 15 scriptural scenes in a permanent exhibit at Thanksgiving Point. Besides providing a home for these works, the Ashtons sponsored the bronze “Lazarus Come Forth.”

When aspiring artist Thomas Holdman returned from a two-year mission, he wanted to begin a career in stained glass. He did not gain entrance to his desired formal art program, so he began researching, bought tools, set up shop in his parents’ garage, and saved money to travel to Europe where the intricate designs of jewel-colored windows inspired him.

Holdman had attended high school with the Ashton daughters and struck up a friendship with their parents. As a result of their first meeting, Karen commissioned him to complete a stained-glass window around the theme “What e’er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part,” a saying with particular importance in Alan’s family history. Since then, the Ashtons have commissioned Holdman to create art glass that embellishes religious and secular buildings. Eventually the artist moved his workshop into a 10,000-foot building at Thanksgiving Point and has now crafted glass for structures in all 50 states and in 30 countries. The largest work created here consists of more than 60,000 individual pieces of glass. He now employs 80 craftsmen. Richard Oman, founder of the Church International Art Competition, calls the Ashtons “modern-day Medicis” for their patronage of lasting art the public can enjoy.

With the boom in local tech development, the Ashtons’ landmark Thanksgiving Point has helped put formerly sleepy Lehi on the map and transformed the surrounding area. The attraction has grown to include not just the gardens, but a natural history and a dinosaur museum, a petting farm, a butterfly biosphere, and more.

Alan and Karen Ashton are dedicated donors to many other causes as well, from libraries and cultural attractions to mission work to humanitarian aid to local universities to a lead gift to Utah Valley Hospital’s capital campaign.

But to the Ashtons, their prosperity connects to the fast offering as described in the book of Isaiah—a sacrifice to the Lord followed by blessings: “And thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.”