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PART 5: FOSTERING THEIR VISION

Path of love, learning The Ahmansons look to their future, as well as that of their teenage son.

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Byline:PETER LARSEN The Orange County Register

Part 5 **Howard** and **Roberta Ahmanson** look like a pair of professors as they slide into a booth at the restaurant that they walk to most mornings for iced tea and eggs.

Millionaires in blue jeans and sneakers, they are casual people with formal ideas who seem largely at peace in the world. Not just from the comfort that wealth affords -- though that allows them the freedom to do what they want -- but with the direction their lives are headed.

Today, at 54, **Howard** and **Roberta Ahmanson** are at that midpoint in life where with reasonable clarity they can see their future unfolding before them -- everything from preparing their teenage son to handle his eventual inheritance to continuing to work in the many areas that interest them.

They say their compass always is their Christian faith and the idea that the work they do in this life will be rewarded in the next.

"The most important thing to me is to know that I'm going to look God in the face someday," **Roberta Ahmanson** said. "And I want to be able to stand there and have God say, 'Well done.'"

"I've made an awful lot of mistakes in my life, but I hope that I learn from them and do better," she said. "I want to know as much as I can. I want to know God. I want to understand his purposes in the universe, and I want to be part of the good."

advancing their causes

After 20 years and tens of millions of dollars, the Ahmansons have a good sense of how their work has changed the world.

They have built buildings. Their money restored a historic hotel and created a museum in Iowa, and they were major donors to new buildings at the Orange County Rescue Mission in Santa Ana and Tustin.

They have bankrolled politicians who share their ideas -- most actively in the early to mid-1990s -- and laws such as Proposition 22, the ban on same-sex marriage in California.

Perhaps more than anything else, they have spread ideas. They have financed books of the earliest Christian commentaries on the Bible and sponsored think tanks on a wide range of political or religious advocacy.

Asked where they feel they've done the most good in the past 25 years, they rattle off a few of their personal favorites.

"I think one of our biggest successes, we were working with people trying to raise awareness of Sudan for 10 years before it burst on the public in 1999," **Howard Ahmanson** said, referring to the persecution of many there.

"Another thing is the increasing awareness of the global nature of the Christian church," **Roberta Ahmanson** offered, describing work with Christian groups around the world.

Even in their losses, they see success. The school-voucher initiative they backed in 1993 failed, but they believe the campaign put the issue on the map.

Because they believe they are doing God's will in their work, they express few doubts over the effect of their most debated work or the possibility that it might cause pain to those on the other side of the ideological fence.

"We all get unhappiness and pain in our lives in various ways," said **Howard Ahmanson**. "We all are frustrated in various different ways."

And besides, **Roberta Ahmanson** adds, who says we all have to agree with each other and be happy all the time?

"My good friend, Pam Jenkins, is not a Christian and I love her dearly," **Roberta Ahmanson** said of her high school pal who now serves as research director at the museum in Perry, Iowa. "And we disagree."

On the May weekend the museum opened, **Roberta Ahmanson** says she, Jenkins and several others stayed up late one night talking.

"They think the war in Iraq is wrong, they're all for gay marriage, they're all pro-choice, they can't stand the president, they think religion -- well not so much Pam, but her friends particularly -- think the Christian religion is pretty misguided," she said.

"I like those people, and I wish them well," **Roberta Ahmanson** said. "I don't agree with them."

THE RIGHT TO DISAGREE

The main thing, **Roberta Ahmanson** says, is that people should have the right to "argue in the public square" and the ability to do so with respect.

"Christianity has been clear that you've got to love your neighbor and love God," she said. "And that means you don't demean them. When they disagree with you, you have to show them love."

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But what of those who believe the Ahmansons through some of the groups they have supported do not show love for their neighbors?

"Depends on what they mean by love," **Howard Ahmanson** said.

"If love means you have to agree with everything, well, no," Roberta **Ahmanson** said. "Because we don't all agree. Even Jesus says, 'So what if you love the people who are close to you? It's when you love the people who aren't that counts.'"

With some of their biggest projects winding down -- they are almost finished in Perry, Iowa, and the 28-volume series of Christian commentaries will be completed soon -- the Ahmansons are planning new projects.

Howard Ahmanson wants to work more on local government issues -- such as redevelopment projects or regulations that limit the ability of religious groups to build places of worship. He's also turning over the idea that local government has become more of a bureaucracy than the state or federal government.

Roberta **Ahmanson** says she wants to return to writing -- she recently co-wrote a book on Islamic history and beliefs -- and work more on art-related projects such as the upcoming show of the Baroque painter Caravaggio's work in London.

"I've got a journalism project that's related to better coverage of religion," she said. "There's a group of us who are working on a book called 'They Got It Wrong' -- all the major stories that weren't covered accurately or totally accurately because they left out religion."

And they plan to travel.

This summer, Roberta **Ahmanson** spent nearly three months with groups of friends in Turkey, Greece and Italy. **Howard Ahmanson** joined her for legs of the journey, as did their son, whose preparation for adulthood represents perhaps the most important part of their future plans.

David **Ahmanson**, who like his father has Tourette's syndrome, is 16. In a few years, he will finish high school -- he is taught by tutors at home -- and go to college. Further down the road lies the responsibility of inherited money.

When **Howard Ahmanson** dies, his plan is to give away all of his personal wealth over a period of years -- foundations that last forever tend to stray from their founder's intent, he believes.

But the inheritance checks that come from his trust fund -- the exact amount of which the Ahmansons do not share -- will then shift to David.

Teaching him how to handle that is a matter of faith for his parents.

"He has to know certain things about the law, he has to know certain things about finance, but the most important thing is who he is, his character," Roberta **Ahmanson** said. "The thing that means the most to me is whether or not he knows God, and whether or not he's a person of character."

"And that's a challenge every parent faces," she said. "Because if he knows all about finance and all about the law, and he's an awful person, it doesn't matter. Who he is is more important than what he knows. That's true for everybody."

open to change

Many glasses of iced tea later, the breakfast table is cleared. Conversation turns to the strength of their convictions and whether they think they might ever be swayed to different points of view.

"We have strong beliefs and strong opinions, but it doesn't mean we aren't open to change," Roberta **Ahmanson** said. "For one thing, we've both been thinking a lot about the death penalty."

She described a conversation she had in Cambridge, Mass., with a man who was vehemently opposed to the death penalty, but unlike **Ahmanson**, did not oppose abortion. Afterward, she walked around Cambridge thinking about capital punishment.

"And I've been thinking about it a lot ever since," she said. "I think the prison system in America is in sorry, sorry state, and I think what happens in prisons may border on cruel and unusual punishment. So, I've been thinking about whether or not a secular state, which is what we have, can impose the death penalty."

"And I'm not sure it can," Roberta **Ahmanson** said. "It's one thing for a country that has an established church, because you can say to the person, 'May God have mercy on your soul,' and mean it. The United States cannot say that, so when you take somebody's life, for all intents and purposes the state is ending it."

Nearly everywhere they go, by car or on foot, they carry heavy backpacks filled with books -- volumes that range from religion and philosophy to politics and mysteries.

"You always want to have your book because you don't know, you might get stuck somewhere," Roberta **Ahmanson** said. But it's also part of their continuing quest to learn.

"We both keep reading because we don't think we have it all figured out," she said. "I wouldn't want you to give the impression we do."

"We're convinced about certain things. About what it all means, we don't know. That's why we keep reading. Because we have questions."

So, on like this they plan to go: reading, traveling, funding arts shows and political campaigns and charitable or church groups and the research of the scholars whose books they then read.

Do philanthropists ever retire?

"Never absolutely," **Howard Ahmanson** said. "Our sabbaticals will get longer and longer but we'll ..."

"Old philanthropists never die, they just fade away?" Roberta **Ahmanson** interjected.

"Yes, that's the case," her husband replied.

"Are you fading?"

"Are you?"

"No. ... No."

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Who is the Biblical person with whom you most identify?

Howard: Moses

Roberta: Probably Peter. He

always rushed in where angels

feared to tread.

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