

Refugee alumna donates \$9 million to support GCSU students

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Gertrude Ehrlich's class photo from the GSCW 'Spectrum' yearbook circa 1943, Gertrude Ehrlich (second from left, rear) in the GSCW Math Club group photo. | COURTESY OF GEORGIA COLLEGE

When Dr. Gertrude Ehrlich fled Nazi-controlled Austria with her family in 1939, she found an educational haven in Georgia College & State University (then called Georgia State College for Women), which she leaves a lasting legacy at that will pay forward for years to come.

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1923, Ehrlich was a teenager when Adolf Hitler's Nazi forces took over her home country in the late 1930s. With the help of an uncle who, a few decades prior, had emigrated to the United States, most of Ehrlich's family left the unstable European environment for America.

The Ehrlich family wound up in Atlanta, and Gertrude attended Georgia College on a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) refugee scholarship. Ehrlich lived in Sanford Hall and served as vice president of the math club on her way to earning her bachelor's degree in mathematics.

After graduation, Ehrlich went on to receive her master's degree from the University of North Carolina and doctorate from the University of Tennessee before becoming a math professor at the University of Maryland. She authored several math textbooks during her 37-year teaching tenure, and Georgia College presented her with an alumni achievement award in 1970.

Supported by scholarship funding, Ehrlich became one of the university's first international students. The class of 1943 alumna died earlier this year in Gaithersburg, Md., at 102 years old, but her legacy will live on through a \$9 million donation from her estate to the university, marking the largest gift in the institution's 136-year history.

"Dr. Ehrlich's life serves as a case study in the power of resilience," said GCSU President Cathy Cox. "Her legacy will benefit generations of students to come, creating opportunities for those who need it most to make a similarly positive impact on the world around them."

The funds will be used solely to support students in need.

"They (YWCA) were so kind to me," Ehrlich said in a 2017 video interview with GCSU. "I didn't pay a penny for anything. It was all taken care of."

The Dr. Gertrude Ehrlich Endowed Scholarship will offer similar impact, providing need-based scholarships for students, with a portion of the fund designated for housing scholarships for local Pell Grant-eligible students. This will be Georgia College's first endowed housing scholarship.

This historic gift, which will begin awarding scholarships in fall 2026, comes at an opportune time for students, as GCSU has seen all-time highs in student demand, leading to record enrollment numbers.

"As the university celebrates all-time high student interest, these scholarships will ensure that students have access to an elite education and will be supported throughout their college careers," said Joel Robinson, senior associate vice president of Enrollment Management. "It is truly a lifechanging impact."

Ehrlich's gift also highlights a recent increase in donations among alumni and donors to GCSU.

"The university has seen unprecedented support from its alumni and donors in both 2023 and 2024, and Dr. Ehrlich's transformational gift this year continues the trend," said Dr. Seth Walker, vice president for University Advancement. "This level of generosity illustrates the immense pride alumni feel for their alma mater, as well as their support in our unique purpose as serving as Georgia's designated public liberal arts university, which will create ripples of benefits that will be felt far into the future."