On Campus

Financial-Aid Benefactor John W. Kluge, 1914—2010

By
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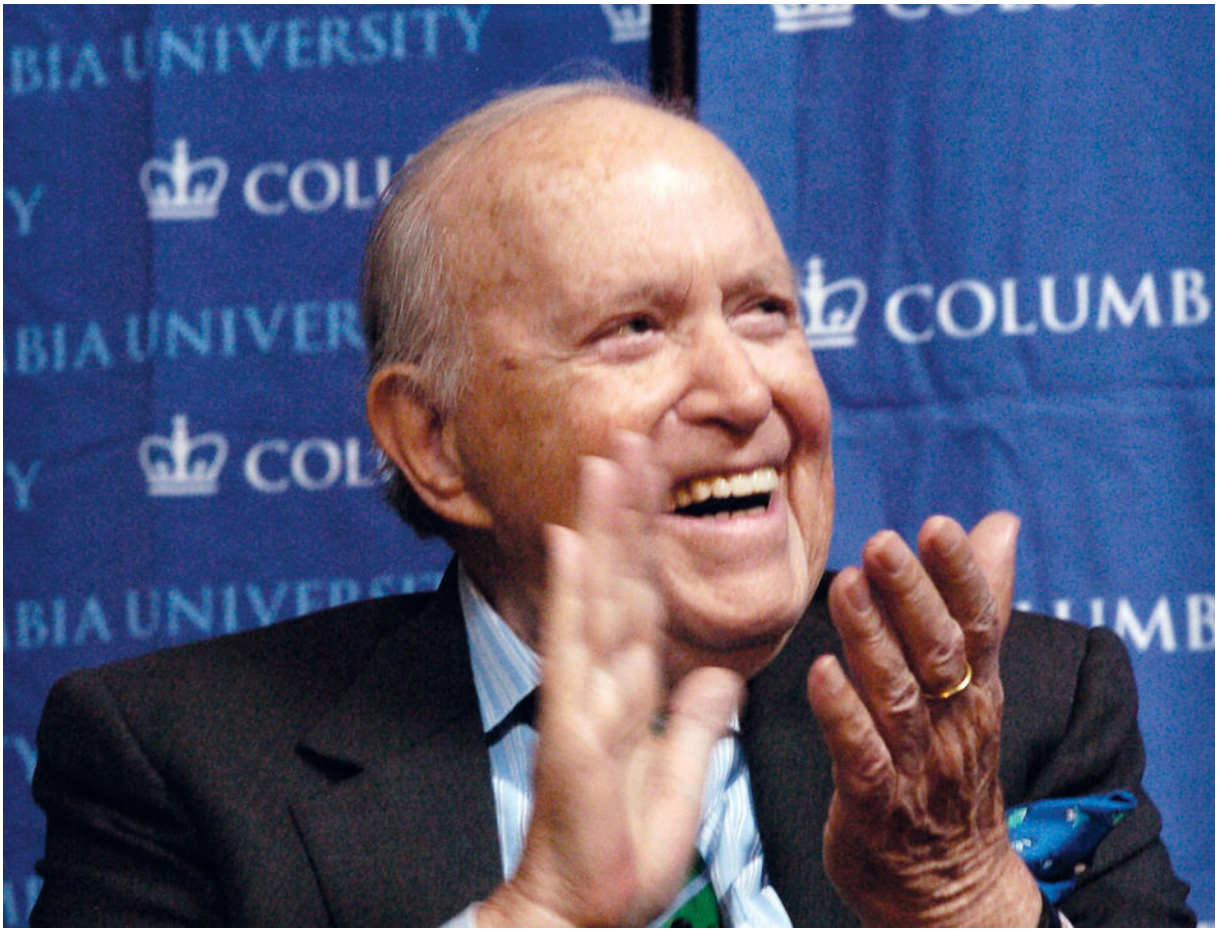
|
Fall 2010



John W. Kluge

John W. Kluge ’37CC, ’88HON, an extraordinary businessman and Columbia University’s greatest benefactor, died on September 7 at his home outside Charlottesville, Va. He was 95.

From modest beginnings in Chemnitz, Germany, Kluge rose to become, for a time, the wealthiest man in the United States.

Kluge was eight when his family immigrated to the United States, settling in Detroit; he attended Columbia College on scholarship. Following graduation, he worked at a printing company, served in the U.S. Army during World War II, and ran a food-distribution company.

Beginning with his creation of a single radio station in Maryland in 1946, he built the Metromedia broadcasting empire, which owned numerous radio and television stations and later syndicated rights to TV shows and movies. The company grew into the largest independent television business in the United States and diversified into many other areas, including telecommunications. Kluge topped the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans from 1989 to 1991.

After selling his television interests in 1986, Kluge remained a businessman but also turned his attention to philanthropy.

In 2007, Kluge pledged $400 million to the University — the largest gift ever in higher education solely for financial aid. The donation provided $200 million in financial aid endowment for undergraduates at the College and $200 million for graduate and professional students at several schools. It has been used in part to create matching programs, prompting millions in additional donations from alumni and friends.

“I want to help ensure that Columbia will always be a place where the best and the brightest young people can come to develop their intellect, make something of their own lives, and give something back to our communities, our country, and our world,” Kluge said when he announced the gift.

President Lee C. Bollinger recalls that Kluge “had a fresh and firsthand understanding of the catalytic effect a Columbia education could have on a young person’s life, as it did on his own. He was determined to ensure as many students as possible could benefit, as he did, from this kind of educational opportunity.”

Kluge’s 2007 pledge benefited the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, School of the Arts, Graduate School of Journalism, and School of International and Public Affairs, in addition to the College, to which he had already donated $110 million over

the previous 20 years. These earlier gifts were used primarily to establish and support the Kluge Scholars Program, which continues to ensure access to the College for talented and diverse students of limited financial means.

“John Kluge was a towering figure whose commitment to Columbia and to higher education sets a standard for us all,” says College dean Michele Moody-Adams. “He will be dearly missed, even as we continue to benefit from his generosity and his devotion to Columbia and Columbia students.”

Kluge often recalled his time at Columbia with affection. He liked to say he came to Columbia with $15 and left with $7000 — having earned money at odd jobs, selling stationery and shoes, and even playing poker. But he also counted his time at Morningside Heights as a formative intellectual experience, remembering classes, professors, and luminaries like former University president Nicholas Murray Butler.

“If it hadn’t been for Columbia, my path would have been entirely different in life,” Kluge said at a black-tie event held in his honor at Low Library in 2004, on the occasion of his 90th birthday. “This institution made me a better person, and I want other young people to benefit as I did.”

Over the years, the College recognized Kluge with both the John Jay Award and the Alexander Hamilton Medal. He received an honorary doctorate from the University in 1988.

Bollinger says Kluge “will forever remain a figure of signal importance in the life and work of this University.”

Kluge also contributed generously in support of the Library of Congress and other institutions and causes. He is survived by his wife, Maria “Tussi” Kluge, and his three children, Joseph, Samantha, and John Jr. ’05CC.

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