JOHN COURI ’63, CHAIR OF THE SYRACUSE University Board of Trustees, was inspired by a relatively brief time on campus to give the University a lifetime of service and support. A transfer student who enrolled as a junior, Couri found his calling as an entrepreneur at Syracuse, majoring in economics at the College of Arts and Sciences and taking as many business courses as he could fit on a busy schedule that included ROTC classes, a job at Mohawk Airlines, and membership in Sigma Nu. He recalls those years as a luminous time. "I studied economics with Mel Eggers, saw Ernie Davis play football, and met a lot of wonderful people," Couri says. "One of them was my future business partner, Carl Reimerdes [SUNY ESF ’63]." Couri and Reimerdes co-founded a company that eventually became Duty Free International Inc. (DFI), building it from a shoestring operation to a dominant player in North American duty-free retailing. Chancellor Nancy Cantor feels a special bond of gratitude to Couri for putting his nearly half-century association with the University at her service when she arrived in office. “He was hugely helpful to me in my transition to Syracuse,” she says. “This place really put its mark on John, and he responded in his characteristic way—by giving back and putting his mark on the University.”

Couri, who was elected a trustee in 1998 and elevated to the chair in 2004, served on the search committee that chose Cantor for Syracuse and swore her in as the University’s 11th Chancellor. He counts the launch of Scholarship in Action as a historical milestone of his tenure as board chair. “It was wonderful working with Nancy as she shaped her vision for Syracuse, and I’m proud of my role in taking her ideas to the board members and winning their support,” says Couri, who will step down from the post in May and hand the gavel to chair-elect John H. Chapple ’75.
John is such a great advocate for the University that it's simply hard to say 'no' to him. His institutional and business acumen has been instrumental in moving the University forward.

Melanie Gray G'81, Trustee  
Co-chair, The Campaign for Syracuse University
CULTIVATING ENTREPRENEURSHIP
The primary focus of Couri’s long-term commitment to Syracuse has been ensuring a rightful place in the curriculum for the study and cultivation of entrepreneurship—a place commensurate to its impact on American life. In Couri’s view, the attractions of working for large corporations, especially their implicit promise of job security, caused many business executives and scholars to lose touch with the core meaning of entrepreneurship. “I define an entrepreneur as someone who is willing to take a risk, someone who can make a decision and act on it,” he says. “It has been personally gratifying to see the entrepreneurship initiatives I’ve supported become so popular with Syracuse students and so much a part of their education and campus life.” Among those initiatives are the Couri Entrepreneurial Complex, which serves as home-base at the Whitman School of Management for the nationally heralded Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises Program, and the Couri Hatchery, a “business incubator” offering practical services and mentoring to promising student businesses. The hatchery’s start-up enterprises, determined by a competitive application process, have thus far included a T-shirt producer, a web site developer, and a coffee house offering live music in the Marshall Street district.

Couri’s faith in taking risks on one’s own ideas is born of disposition and supported by experience. In 1970, while traveling to Japan to negotiate a new production deal for his uncle’s rug company, he stumbled into an inconvenience that revealed the opportunity of a lifetime. “I was flying out of JFK, and figured I would have no problem picking up a gift at the airport to bring to my Japanese hosts,” he says. “But this particular terminal at JFK—the old Northwest Orient Airlines terminal—handled mostly domestic passengers and, as I learned the hard way, had no duty-free shopping. The whole trip, I’m thinking, ‘Gee, this would be a wonderful business to go into.’ When I got back, I called Carl, my old college roommate, who had a job that I knew he didn’t like. We put together a presentation.” After two years of effort, the pair was awarded a concession at the terminal, establishing a “shop” in an empty space behind a moribund flight insurance counter. From that single location, they built DFI, a company doing $570 million in annual sales at airports and border crossings from the St. Lawrence Seaway to the Rio Grande River. “We took in $330 on our first day,” Couri says. “To keep costs down, we had just two employees, one at the warehouse and the other at the sales counter, and Carl and I didn’t take any salary at all. Later on, we brought in a third partner. We spent so much time working at the airport that all three of us met our wives there.”

If some see evidence of a “charmed life” in that kind of phenomenal success, Couri’s own view of luck is that it cuts both ways. “We had our ups and downs,” he says. “In 1987, just 24 hours before we were scheduled to go public, the stock market crashed and we had to scrap the idea until two years later. The devaluation of the peso in ’94 cost us $50 million in sales overnight. On the other hand, an airline adds some new international routes, and sales begin to increase, even though you haven’t done a thing to make it happen. I just tell young people, ‘You have to work hard, no matter what. That’s a given. But luck, especially when it comes to timing, will always play a key role in how things turn out.’

SUCCESS LEADS TO SERVICE
Beginning in the late 1980s, with DFI’s position at the top of the industry established, Couri began to give increasing attention to helping others. The Couri Foundation Inc., established in 1988 by Couri and his wife, Elaine, created a summer camp for underprivileged children near Moose River, Maine, and senior centers in Moose River and Bangor, Maine, neither of which had such facilities. More recently, the Couris partnered with neighbors Steven and Elizabeth Goldstone to build and operate a senior center known as Founder’s Hall in their hometown of Ridgefield, Connecticut. The 15,000-square-foot complex, which
replaced a facility that consisted of a single room, serves 3,100 seniors, offering courses in computing, fitness, art, and other subjects, and hosting a variety of cultural and social events. Couri also served on the board, including a term as chair, at the Datahr Rehabilitation Institute (now known as Ability Beyond Disability) in Brookfield, Connecticut. Gradually relinquishing day-to-day duties at DFI, he stepped down as the company’s board chair in 1994, remaining a consultant until 1999. Chancellor Cantor is impressed by the range and quality of these commitments. “John and Elaine Couri are extraordinary philanthropists, both in their financial support and in the personal human capital they give: their time, energy, creativity, and loyalty,” she says. “I see this in their work for seniors and children, and in everything they do for Syracuse University. They are generous and generative people.”

Honored in 1993 as a recipient of the George Arents Pioneer Medal, SU’s highest alumni honor, Couri will again be acknowledged by the University for his achievements and contributions when he receives a Doctor of Humane Letters degree at Commencement 2008. Not surprisingly, he has a gift for SU as well. “I couldn’t help but notice that to get to the admissions office in Crouse-Hinds Hall you have to go through a big empty area on the ground floor,” says Couri, who frequently passes that way en route to the Board of Trustees office. The bare space held his attention, so he came up with a plan to develop it into a visitors’ center, including a museum dedicated to exhibiting SU history. The board approved, and planning is under way. “It will make a terrific impression on potential students and their parents,” he says, “and I know the alumni will love it.” Couri’s talent for spotting an opportunity and taking action to pursue it is a rare asset, not easily replaced. “Being a part of building this wonderful institution has been delightful,” he says. “If you can make a difference in one person’s life during your lifetime, you’re a success. I love this place because it lets you make a difference.”

**COUNTING ON COURI**

“John has worked tirelessly, with graciousness and consummate professionalism, to advance University initiatives. During this past year, he has given his time selflessly to educate me in the role of the board chair at SU. We went to numerous committee meetings together, and he explained the history behind each of them, leaving no stone unturned in his counsel on the duties and responsibilities of the position. I will be forever grateful.”

**John H. Chapple ’75, Chair-elect, SU Board of Trustees**

“John is such a great advocate for the University that it’s simply hard to say ‘no’ to him. His institutional and business acumen has been instrumental in moving the University forward.”

**Melanie Gray G’81, Trustee**

“Working with John, we all benefited greatly from his commitment, expertise, and the professional and courteous manner in which he provides leadership. It is important to have a board chair of high character and integrity who possesses strong business sense and cares deeply about the University, taking pride in its accomplishments. John embodies all of this.”

**Louis G. Marcoccia ’68, G’69, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer**

“John has continually challenged us to innovate, take risks, and aim for nothing less than leadership in all facets of education, research, and service. He is a role model for the students we are trying to prepare.”

**Professor Michael H. Morris,**
Witting Chair, Department of Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises

“John has always shown a wonderful grace in his interactions with others, and I admire him for this rare leadership quality. He demonstrates the truth of the old saying, ‘Courage is grace under pressure.’”

**Judy Seinfeld ’56, Vice Chair,**
Board of Trustees

“John’s commitment to the Whitman School is legendary. Among his many gifts to us, he has endowed a graduate scholarship and a residency position for executive entrepreneurs, and given great support to our MBA Summer Program. We have benefited as well from his direct involvement as a panelist, class lecturer, and competition judge. John’s perpetual enthusiasm, competent counsel, and sound advice have helped Whitman achieve its high level of national recognition. By generously contributing his work, wealth, and wisdom to Whitman, he has made a positive impact on generations of business leaders.”

**Melvin T. Stith G’73, G’78, Dean,**
Whitman School of Management

“John has been remarkably effective as board chair in prioritizing business, keeping us focused, and achieving consensus. His unflinching collegiality makes the pleasure of working with him a lesson in the positive effect of style and manner on productivity.”

**Eleanor Ware G’85, Senior Vice President for Human Services and Government Relations and Secretary to the Board of Trustees**