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GOODWILL TO ALL

After 25 years of expansion, Roland Blahnik is still pursuing aggressive mission for non-profit

By Nancy Miller



Goodwill Industries of Kentucky CEO Roland Blahnik is on the site of yet another new facility for the organization in the Commonwealth.

Roland Blahnik is an anomaly. In a world in which many people change jobs as often as they change cars, he has led one of Kentucky's most highly regarded not-for-profit organizations for 25 years. But the erudite and charming CEO of Goodwill Industries of Kentucky is quick to direct a conversation about his tenure away from length of service, preferring to guide it toward a discussion of the organization's challenges, accomplishments and growth. It is revealing to discover how dramatically his motivation and personal objectives influenced how he grew and strengthened a dynamic, far-reaching organization.

He got on track for his not-for-profit career early.

"In my formative years I decided to do things that had direct impact on people - that isn't to suggest that for-profits can't do that, because they can," Blahnik said. "I was a Vista volunteer training in Huntington, Tenn., when in 1967 I met Professor Seets, who had been superintendent of the black school district. He said to never work for money but instead work for something you believe in.

"When I finished my master's degree at the University of Wisconsin, I had loved working at a community rehabilitation program in Madison. I had become bored with the federal government and started investigating what organization was the best community-rehab program. I kept going back to Goodwill Industries. I decided to join and make it my career."

Achieving success

Under Blahnik's leadership the past 25 years, Goodwill Industries of Kentucky transitioned from a small agency with two donated good centers to one of the most successful Goodwill organizations in the country, with 57 centers employing 630 people in the thrift program alone. Among 184 Goodwill organizations, his ranks 14th in the world in donated goods.

"In placements we are (ranked) in the 20s. I don't want to become No. 1 in either category because then it becomes a name game, but I would like to be in the top 10," admits Blahnik. Goodwill of Kentucky serves 103 of 120 counties in Kentucky.

Government funding accounts for less than 10 percent of his overall budget. "Some of my non-Goodwill colleagues tell me that is pretty remarkable," he said. "The great thing about it is that we don't have to chase grants. We can use them selectively to meet our mission."

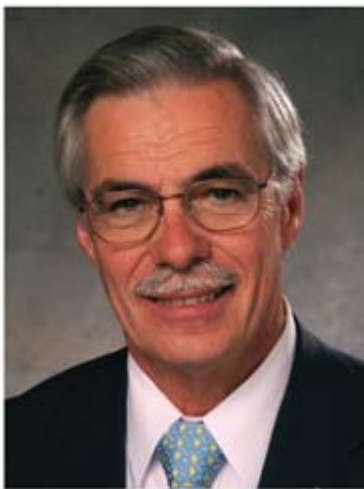
Blahnik reports that Goodwill Industries of Kentucky has suffered from the recession, but in relation to the retail industry, the dropoff is minor. Retail traffic is now good. Donors are bringing in less each time, but the number of donors is up.

Historically, the Goodwill donated goods program had been an urban model. But in the 1980s, Blahnik and his colleague, Dr. Marsha Berry, developed a new model that expanded the initiative into rural areas. Their model requires entire communities to participate, not just through donating but by buying. Blahnik believes a diverse shopping population removes some of the stigma from shopping at the donated goods stores.

A model for the nation

Whether in rural or urban neighborhoods, Blahnik's model matches the size of a donation store to the neighborhood's donation capacity. Although there is something appealing to many people about large stores, he said, the smaller model concentrates on volume and keeps handling costs to a minimum. According to him, keeping it simple works well.

Blahnik's success isn't confined to Goodwill Industries of Kentucky. He and two peers have been instrumental in shaping Goodwill Industries' national movement, helping influence structural changes in the organization throughout the United States.



Roland Blahnik

The donated goods program is not Goodwill's singular program. The organization's umbrella also encompasses GTS Staffing, which is designed to help people find employment; the Alice H. James Adult Learning Center, which helps clients improve academic skills and obtain better jobs; Job Junction, in Elizabethtown, a free resource that assists clients in the job search process; three commercial cleaning contracts that operate under a federal program, employing about 60 severely disabled persons; industrial services that include handiwork, packaging and salvage work through Independent Industries; the Power of Work Employee Placement Services, which offers skills assessment and training, and matches employees with employers; and the Workforce Development program, which includes job placement assistance, referral services and vocational service.

He is pursuing an aggressive expansion plan with an energized commitment, focusing on several areas of growth. He expects to open new donated goods stores in Bowling Green and Central City by the end of the year.

Even though the Goodwill donated goods program in Kentucky is considered a stellar success by national standards, Blahnik has a strategy to increase the number of jobs and improve service. He is expanding capacity to offer soft skills training and assist clients in job searches, while determining whether the organization has a role in hard skills training.

1,800-plus job placements last year

He believes there is great potential for growing the commercial cleaning business, providing significantly more employment opportunities. He and his staff are evaluating ways to improve the Job Junction program. And he says Goodwill Industries of Kentucky will be deciding whether to keep its population very broad or to focus on a couple of distinct populations.

"I'm more excited now than when I joined in 1984. We could rest on our laurels, but we're not going to do that. Last year we placed over 1,800 people in jobs and paid \$14 million in mission-related wages. We set the table. Our overriding challenge is to find the resources to deploy the assets to help people with disabilities and other disadvantages get their shot at having a paycheck and stability in their lives.

"In about three years we will overcome the asset hurdle and can use imagination and data to evolve the organization, even doubling it. I am very happy where I am and where Goodwill Industries of Kentucky is, but I'm not content because there is so much more to be done," he says.

Blahnik is a member of the Louisville Downtown Rotary, World Affairs Council, Sister Cities, University of Wisconsin Alumni Club, and the Beckham Bird Club. He and his wife Marie often host international visitors through various organizations.

Goodwill Industries of Kentucky Locations

Bardstown	Louisville (9)
Berea	Mayfield
Bowling Green (3)	Maysville
Campbellsville	Middlesboro
Crestwood	Morehead
Danville	Mount Sterling
Elizabethtown	Murray
Frankfort	Nicholasville (3)
Georgetown	Paducah
Glasgow	Paintsville
Harlan	Prestonsburg
Harrodsburg	Radcliff
Hazard	Richmond
Hopkinsville	Shelbyville
Lawrenceburg	Shepherdsville
Lebanon	Somerset (2)
Lexington (6)	Stanford
London	Williamsburg
	Winchester

