

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## A hospital CEO starts a second career leading Goodwill

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Tom Feurig has succeeded prodigiously since taking the pilot seat of Goodwill Industries of Southwest Florida Inc. six years ago. He nearly doubled the yearly budget from \$11 to \$20 million, more than quadrupled the number of people the organization serves, and snagged Goodwill International's prestigious annual accolade for the best CEO.

"That (success) has come from the efforts of a ton of people," said Mr. Feurig, quickly darting out of the spotlight. "It's also because the demand had grown for our services — that's a reflection of the economy and people's needs."

It's also a reflection of plain old good business practices.

Mr. Feurig has strongly encouraged his staff of 450, including workers at 24 retail stores in the five-county area, to compete with discount, for-profit chains like Target or Wal-Mart, by focusing on customer service. In fact, 85 percent of the company's profits come from its retail operation (and the rest from federal and state funds and grants).

Looking back, Mr. Feurig is clearly the right man for the job. But that wasn't always so obvious. When he applied for his first Goodwill job as CEO of the much smaller Traverse City, Mich., location, two years before coming to Florida, his resume gave way to concerns at the interview. Mr. Feurig's entire career up until then had been running "mega-sized, \$350 million (per year not-for-profit hospitals.)"

"They thought I'd be unable to transfer a lot of the skills at that size," Mr. Feurig said. "Sometimes what you find is the challenges have some common threads."

Mr. Feurig, 58, said he always has been a health care man. And there was never any doubting that career path.

As a teenager, he took a close look at his father's job — he was a physician who ran the health center at Michigan State University — and decided he too wanted to manage a health care system (but not become a medical doctor).

"I knew in high school I wanted to be in the not-for-profit health care field," said Mr. Feurig. "I got to see both the business side of health care and the physician side."

His first job was cutting the grass at Michigan State University. But after graduating from there, he switched to the University of Michigan for a master's degree in health care management. A 30-year career in that field followed. It took him to hospitals in Detroit, Milwaukee and finally Little Rock, where he became CEO of a Catholic health care organization (Mr. Feurig is also Catholic), re-examining best business practices in a way that reflects the work he has done for Goodwill.

Mr. Feurig doesn't cite specific problems with hospitals he managed as his reason for leaving the field; but instead, a growing disillusionment with where the health care business was heading in general — that it was more focused on profit than health care — and a feeling that 30 years at the job was enough.

"I decided it was time to look at a different professional direction," he said.



Tom Feurig

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"I wanted to be involved in something more than making a product or selling a product."

He went to his second home in Traverse City, a few hundred miles north of where he grew up in East Lansing, to get away from work and think things over.

"I was reading the Sunday paper and saw that the local Goodwill was in trouble, lacking direction and looking for a CEO," he said.

Building on a few years of experience in Traverse City, he came to Southwest Florida, where social service needs continue to grow. He's opening a new retail store in LaBelle, and an office in Clewiston to serve an espe-

cially downtrodden community there.

If he were to take a detailed look at the regional Goodwill's growth in the future, Mr. Feurig said, "I'd guess that over the next two or three years, we'd foresee the need to grow services at least by half. I think demand will be that great."

Goodwill in Southwest Florida supports an array of social services that help people who are blocked from employment or being independent — for example, a pregnant teenager, a person with Down syndrome or a wheelchair-bound adult — to find jobs through career development services, housing at one of 11 complexes or transportation through the Four Wheels for Work program. Goodwill also runs the L.I.F.E. Academy, a vocational high school, where Mr. Feurig attended a recent graduation that symbolized to him what Goodwill stands for.

"To see the parents; to see the four graduates — and they are individuals who have special needs — was dramatic as far as crystallizing what this is all about," he said. "Because they're going to be more independent in their lives than before they came to our school."

When he leaves work at night, Mr. Feurig drives home to Matlacha, a small island community in northwest Lee County that people often describe as "artsy." Mr. Feurig describes it as "kind of like going back to the days of Mary Poppins, riding her bike at night," because he finds the community has some of that story's quaint charm. He is also moved by the beauty of nature there.

"Can I be corny again?" he asks. "Just seeing a dolphin come up through the water is kind of a kick." ■



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