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DOOR OPENS

Winston Meyer helps Peel's human services find the key to their financial and business footing

"It is more difficult to give money away intelligently than it is to earn it in the first place."

Andrew Carnegie

BY RICK DRENNAN

During the gilded age of unfettered capitalism (1890s), Carnegie, the Scottish-born American industrialist, acquired unimaginable wealth as owner of U.S. Steel. He spent most of his life giving it all away.

Mississauga's Winston Meyer isn't Carnegie rich, but 'comfortable' as a first vice-president of CIBC Wood Gundy, located in the city centre.

Like Carnegie, his purpose-driven life included creating a bucket list at the age of 16. On that list was a goal of having \$1 million by the time he reached the age of 30 and to have donated blood 100 times by age 50. At 30 he changed his financial goal to giving away \$1 million by the time he reached age 50.

Last month Meyer turned 50, surpassed his philanthropic milestone and, for the record, will make his 200th blood donation before year end. He now sits at 198 donations.

Is Meyer like Carnegie – too good to be true? In a way, yes. But giving to help others is all part of the business of living "a significant life," says Meyer, who, along with his partner, Karen Duffy, has five children.

Creating a model that gives back to the community in perpetuity is an even higher calling, and Meyer is quickly closing in on his greatest accomplishment yet: the creation of Community Door Inc.

Housing all the human service agencies in Peel Region in one or two or three buildings seems, on the surface, next to impossible. At last count there were over 1,000 of them in the region – from the huge United Way of Peel agency, to mom and pop operations.

But the problem isn't just logistics. Community Door acquired a large commercial property at 7700 Hurontario Street, right across from the Davis Courthouse in Brampton. It is currently being retrofitted to house about 12 agencies for an early-January arrival.

In an unprecedented development last month, the Region of Peel offered up a \$500,000 repayable line of credit that will, in effect, ensure its survival and allow it to grow over the next few years.

Meyer, a wizard with numbers, is quick to caution that "this is not a grant."

With the economy in freefall since September '08, many charitable agencies have been begging for more funds.

For that reason, Community Door makes even more sense.

• There's an economy of scale for agencies sharing the building and its facilities, including a shared boardroom, shared administration, and lower rental fees;

• A new fundraising effort hopes to collect over \$3 million to fund the cost of the project, with the Community Door brand making it simpler for those to give; and

• The model will be self-sustaining.

Meyer says that his job at CIBC Wood Gundy is to ensure his high net worth clients receive a healthy return on investment – with little risk.

He's adopting the same philosophy at Community Door. The founding of Community Door needed a massive leap of faith. Meyer approached Shelley White CEO of the United Way of Peel Region with the idea a couple of years ago. She embraced it and soon, she and Meyer were recruiting some of the top business and human services minds in the region for its board of directors.

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Winston Meyer Photo Stephen Uhrancy

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NEWS

Business model empowers non-profits

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This eight-person board includes leaders of human services agencies, like Ray Applebaum CEO of Peel Senior Link, Sandy Milakovic CEO of Canadian Mental Health, and people on the financial industry side, like Michael Cristofaro, a partner with Deloitte & Touche LLP.

The Meyer-Milakovic presentation to the ad-hoc grant committee at the Region a short

while ago, received a total buy-in from the politicians.

The debate was spirited and the conclusion clear: the Region would set a precedent.

"We didn't want it to start with government," says Meyer. "It had to work on its own."

In effect, Community Door will do what many standalone agencies haven't been able to do in the past: make better use of donated

money. That means everybody – stakeholders, fundraisers, donors, real estate firms, taxpayers and government – wins.

Besides, it will continue to expand as more agencies leave their present leases and move into the Community Door's facilities on Hurontario.

There will be other buildings in Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon in the near future, says Meyer.

Sharing space and ideas isn't new, but it is for the deliverers of human services.

This partnership could be Meyer's most stunning legacy as a community giver. "It's the most exciting thing I've ever done in my life," he says.

He's taken on an extra 10 hours a week to see his project reach fruition, and that means a buy-in from his family and his employer. "They've all been great in helping see this through," he says.

The original meeting to install a "business oriented" model was attended by many of the human service agencies that will now move into the new building.

Meyer was not only blown away by "the energy in the room," but how all the partners stayed long after the meeting was over to discuss like-minded problems.

It's a buzz that will permeate the new building, says Meyer.

The Community Door concept wouldn't work if it were a top-down model, driven and implemented by government, says Meyer. It had to be a grassroots movement. Meyer's roots meant that community giving would be part of his DNA – thanks to his parents, Henry and Marion.

Being Jewish and surviving the horrors of occupied Europe during World War II, they left to find a bountiful new life in Canada. Meyer says he could give until he's blue in the face, but it would never match what his parents have given back to society.

Both were on hand last month as a roomful of friends, family and local dignitaries celebrated his 50th birthday.

Meyer penned his life's goals at an age when most kids were thinking about partying. Not that he didn't have his fair share of fun. He actually quit school at age 16 to play drums with a rock band. He quickly found out that the band needed more than talent to survive. It took money, something he learned to acquire after returning to school, breezing through Trent University in Peterborough, and acquiring his MBA at Queen's University in his hometown of Kingston.

His timetable to raise money and give blood helped hurry his progress up the corporate ladder. He's been one of the most active community givers in Mississauga for years.

But it wasn't until he conceived the idea of Community Door, that his business talents could be fully unfurled to create a paradigm shift in the giving model.

Like Carnegie, Meyer believes giving for giving's sake only goes so far. Creating a self-perpetuating model is how to reach a golden standard.

Meyer is glowing in his praise of others who have contributed to Community Door. They include White ("an amazing partner"), the eight-person board, and two realtors: Bob Cranch and Jim Murray of DTZ Barnicke. They found Community Door's new site, showed how an old commercial building could be retrofitted, and steered the process through the procedural spaghetti.

Meyer shrugs off all that he's accomplished so far in his life. He says he was blessed with parents who set a great example.

"My dad gets up every day and says, 'what can I do to help today,'" says Meyer.

He says there's something magical and life-changing about the act of giving.

"Generosity has nothing to do with how much you give," he says. "It's all about how little you keep for yourself."

He was certainly heartened this past year when 40 of the best-known billionaires in the United States – including Ted Turner, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates – vowed to give back most of their fortunes to charity.

A "lost generation" of the mega-rich are letting their excess capital work for the betterment of their fellow man.

Community Door has Meyer's handprints all over the doorknob. Its success will no doubt be his greatest legacy.

Dale Carnegie isn't remembered today as the owner of U.S. Steel.

His "smart philanthropy" created nearly 3,000 community libraries across the U.S., and the Carnegie Concert Hall in New York has been the venue for some of the finest artists of the 20th and 21st centuries. The Carnegie Foundation is still a mover and shaker a century after its founder's death.

Meyer isn't trying to outdo Carnegie or anyone else. He's simply programmed to give back. The human services agencies in Peel were just too "fractured" to be effective. Community Door will stop the duplication of resources, and give the disparate groups something they haven't had before: buying power.

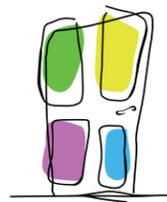
Now that he's 50, Meyer continues to check off things from his bucket list. No. 1 was creating a new business model for human services delivery in this region. It's a model that can be replicated right across Canada.

Carnegie once said: "The man who dies rich dies disgraced."

Those who know Meyer will respectfully disagree.

He will die rich in friends, rich in community accomplishments, and rich in the knowledge that he led a significant life.

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"He talked about creating a human service centre, in which social service agencies would be located together under one roof, sharing space, equipment, administrative support and other resources. Winston's vision became a reality."

Shelley White