



JIM STEVENS HAS A VISION

WRITTEN BY NICHOLAS CARRIGG

“I AM EMBARRASSED BY THE LEGACY OF MY GENERATION.”

That’s how Jim Stevens, founder and CEO of the Acushnet-based nonprofit, Gifts to Give, starts explaining why he started the organization. Stevens, now in his mid-sixties, characterizes himself as a son of the Greatest Generation, but a member of the Baby Boomers—whom he believes aren’t using their talents and resources to their fullest potential.





THIS IS JUSTINE. SHE IS DOING HER INTERNSHIP AT GTG AND WANTS TO BE A SOCIAL WORKER.

“You can only play so much golf,” says Stevens, referring to upper-middle-class retirees. “You’re at the pinnacle of your skill set, and yet in our society that is just wasted.”

To use his own abilities to their fullest, Stevens looked around for a problem he could remedy.

In doing so, he noticed a conjunction of issues plaguing the younger generation. He saw that many of the community touchpoints that his generation relied on such as Boy Scouts, the Rotary Club, and the Masons were all in decline. He also saw that there was a growing disparity between children: those that didn’t know how good they had it, and those that didn’t know what resources were available to them to

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overcome their disadvantage.

“I’m a member of a community school committee, and only about nine parents show up to the PTO meetings,” says Stevens. “If the parents won’t support their children, who will?”

Firmly believing that families and com-

munities are the key to a better society, Stevens founded Gifts to Give, whose main purpose is to help children give back to their peers through service. At a glance, the company’s concept is similar to other charity organizations. People donate new or lightly-used clothing, books, and toys, and then Gifts to Give cleans and repackages these items for disadvantaged children. The difference, however, is that the majority of the organization’s volunteers are also children themselves.

“We have 12,000 student volunteers and over 4,000 adult volunteers,” says Stevens. “We also have 35 people on staff, seven of them full-time.”

Another key to the success of Gifts to Give is the company’s transparency. 100% of donations go back to the charity. There is no payroll—even for the full-time workers. Instead, most of them retirees, they

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donate their time to the cause. Gifts to Give has never applied for or received a cent of government grants, and even posts their tax returns right on their website.

“We don’t qualify for an independent

audit because we don’t take government funds,” says Stevens. “So instead, we pay to have our own independent audit done.”

Stevens says that the charity has also started a Saturday thrift sale that they use to fund the business, and he believes that within another couple of years, expanding this aspect of the nonprofit will pay for the entire business.

Another key aspect of the Gifts to Give model is that no one in the organization ever comes into contact with the needy children. Social workers and other caregivers simply place an order on the company’s website for the items that their client needs.

“When something comes in, we clean it, inspect it, and organize it,” says Stevens. “Then agencies, school nurses, and social workers go online and order what they need.”

Gifts to Give then puts together a care package for the child, and the caregiver



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picks it up to bring to the needy youth. Although the nonprofit doesn't have customers or employees in the traditional sense, Stevens says that for the sake of explaining the business model, it's helpful to think of the children in need as primary customers and the social service agencies as secondary customers. The employees are the volunteers.

“Most of the children volunteers come here with their school or church groups,” says Stevens. “But we also have kids that come here with community groups or their parents.”

Stevens says that 47% of the children that come to volunteer at the nonprofit will return to volunteer again.

“Our materialistic society breeds the altruism out of children,” says Stevens. “But this is one of the only places I know of where they can learn and practice it.”

Stevens recounts one such story of this benevolence when he talks about a young girl who had gone to volunteer at the factory with her Girl Scout troop. Upon returning home, she told her mother that she wanted to donate all of her clothes to Gifts to Give.

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his or her treasure has value and that if they give up that treasure, it has worth to someone else?” says Stevens.

Another interesting demographic that participates in Gifts to Give is 30- to 40-year-olds with depression. Stevens says that the nonprofit is a great opportunity for people that are struggling to overcome this illness or may be in between jobs to receive the sense of fulfillment that comes from helping others. This is backed up by a 2012 study, which found that those who volunteered regularly lived longer and felt better if their intentions were truly selfless.

Of course, all of the success of Gifts to Give hasn't been without its challenges. When the company first started, they were located in an old mill building in New Bedford and had what Stevens describes as a great arrangement.

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Unfortunately, the landlord sold the property and Gifts to Give had to move. In June of last year, they relocated to the old Titleist plant in Acushnet.

“We're still unpacking,” says Stevens. “The factory was built to make better golf balls and we are building better children.”

Stevens says that they had to knock a lot of walls down and rearrange things to fit their operation. But now the company is happy with their new location. Located near a solar plant, the company is even able to buy sustainable energy at a cheap price.

According to Stevens, regardless of the location, the model that Gifts to Give has developed could work anywhere. And indeed, there are plans in the works to build franchise-type operations in other parts of the state.

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THESE ARE THE KIDS.

VOLUNTEERS OF ALL AGES HELP PREPARE ITEMS WHICH ARE GIVEN BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

Donuts,” says Stevens. “It's not rocket science. It's simple! It's just not easy.”

Currently, Gifts to Give serves communities from Newport to Wareham, and Stevens says that another “repurposing factory” could one day serve the North Shore of Massachusetts in the vicinity of Lowell.

Stevens says that if people would like to

get involved for themselves, they need only stop by. The organization doesn't have drop-off boxes like the Salvation Army or Goodwill, so any donations should be brought directly to the Acushnet location. In the process, people are welcome to come in and have a look around, and if they're so inclined, volunteer for a few

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hours repurposing some donated goods. “You don't need an appointment,” says Stevens. “Just drop in and bring your kids. It's a call to action!”

For more information about Gifts to Give, including to place an order or learn more ways you can get involved with the organization, visit giftstogive.org. ★