

JIM GIBBONS: PURDUE GRAD, GOODWILL CEO

BY JENNIFER STREISAND

The holiday season strengthens the idea of goodwill toward one another. Today, that can be translated literally, by supporting — and learning more about — the many aspects of Goodwill Industries International. Its president and CEO, Jim Gibbons, began his accomplished journey in West Lafayette, when he was one of only a few blind students to attend the engineering program at Purdue University. He graduated with a bachelor of science degree in industrial engineering in 1985.

Gibbons, who grew up in Indianapolis and now lives in Fairfax County, Virginia, says engineering seemed like a natural discipline for him.

“My father was an engineer, my brother was an engineer, and my brother-in-law did engineering work, and they were role models for me,” says Gibbons. “I studied it, and I was pretty good in math and science, and it just kind of led me down that path.”

Gibbons’ interest in the business-end of engineering steered him to the Harvard Business School, where he became the first blind person to earn a master’s degree in business administration from Harvard, graduating in 1994.

It is inspirational that Gibbons was able to get academic degrees from two distinguished institutions during a time when there was little technology for the blind and a lot less understanding of disabilities in general. In fact, while Gibbons began to lose his eyesight in the third grade, he lost it totally during his sophomore year at Purdue, he explains.

Without oversimplifying the situation, it was in large part his attitude that enabled him to achieve all that he did academically, says Betty Nelson, who was associate dean of students in the early 1980s and the primary contact for students with disabilities. Nelson later became the dean of students and is now retired from the position. Gibbons credits Nelson with being an important mentor for him at Purdue.

“It was challenging to get the necessary textbooks on tape for any higher education courses then, but it was especially difficult to get texts for STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) courses,” she says. When taped texts were not available, readers were used on a part-time basis. Gibbons says the readers often became mentors, too.

“Jim Gibbons was a pioneer as an engineering student,” Nelson stresses. “His upbeat attitude, along with his very bright mind and disciplined work style were the perfect combination for educating faculty about the potential for success of students with disabilities. This was a two-way educational process — the faculty teaching Jim, and Jim teaching the faculty.”

In addition, blind students taking STEM courses in the 1980s did not have the advantages that the personal computer would later provide by enabling specialized soft-

ware to convert equations and graphics into Nemeth Code, which is the name for scientific Braille. The software streamlined the process and made it a lot less expensive, explains Fred Lytle, professor emeritus in the department of chemistry at Purdue.

In the 1990s — long after Gibbons had graduated — Lytle wrote the first software program at Purdue that automatically converted equations into Nemeth Code, reducing the time involved in the process from “days to minutes,” Lytle says. Also during the 1990s, the chemistry department, with the help of graduate student David Schleppebach, set up the VISIONS lab to assist blind students in accessing the most efficient resources for their studies.

“Even with everything we did,” says Lytle, “I was always stunned by the amount of work that the blind students had to do to overcome their disability.”

In February 2014, the Purdue University College of Engineering honored Gibbons by inducting him into a new class of Distinguished Engineering Alumni.

And Gibbons has given back to the Purdue community over the years. In 2003, he returned to campus as an Old Master, a program that enables individuals who have achieved success in their work to teach students in their fields and share their wisdom.

“During one of the sessions, the Old Masters were asked what factors led to their success,” explains Nelson. “Jim responded that he considers passion and skill to be the most critical factors.”

Today, Gibbons uses all of his life experience — his education, his business background, and the challenges he and other blind people have had — to incorporate the theme of social consciousness into the Goodwill business



Goodwill CEO and Purdue University graduate Jim Gibbons considers Betty Nelson (right) one of his mentors at Purdue.



model and to establish and expand the

company's many initiatives beyond the operation of the Goodwill retail stores in the United States, including three in Greater Lafayette. Goodwill Industries International is true to its name, with agencies in the United States, Canada and a presence in 14 other countries.

The retail stores are the most visible part of what Goodwill does, but they are just part of Goodwill's projects in communities, Gibbons notes. The stores are critically important, because the revenues earned from sales are used to help create jobs, fund job training programs, provide education for adults seeking high school diplomas, and establish partnerships with for-profit companies to help promote all that Goodwill is doing.

One such project that began in Central Indiana is the Excel Center, a school for adults who are studying to get high school diplomas, says Jim McClelland, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana, Inc.

"Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana created the Excel Center and operates nine locations in Central Indiana, including one in Lafayette," says McClelland. The first Excel Center outside of Indiana opened in Austin, Texas, in August, and other states are working to open Excel Centers, McClelland adds.

"I see the Excel Center being really a nationwide movement within Goodwill," Gibbons says.

Another component of Goodwill is the concept of "green shopping." By donating and shopping at Goodwill, shoppers are reusing clothing and goods that would otherwise end up in the trash and a drain on the environment.

Gibbons says that when he came to Goodwill in 2008 from National Industries For The Blind (NIB), he wanted to continue the social enterprise business model that National Industries for the Blind had done so well. This model incorporates the social good into business practices. At NIB, Gibbons was also president and CEO. Before NIB, Gibbons worked at AT&T, holding various leadership positions.

The opportunity at Goodwill gave Gibbons the chance to work with new populations around the globe, he explains.

"It is extraordinarily satisfying work in terms of the business challenges that we deal with every day, trying to solve some very tough social challenges, especially in this economy, and then finding success," Gibbons says. His satisfaction as CEO of Goodwill also includes "being part of a team and a group of leaders throughout the Goodwill network that are consistently in problem-solving and solutions mode."

During this holiday season then, consider donating and shopping at the Goodwill retail stores in Greater Lafayette.

"The best way to support Goodwill during the holidays — or at any other time of the year — is to shop and donate," says McClelland. "Sales of donations create jobs and generate support for employment and education services."

In addition to gently used clothes and furniture, Goodwill also accepts donations of cars, trucks, boats and other vehicles in any condition and will tow them to the donation center at no cost, adds McClelland. Donations to Goodwill are tax deductible.

VISIT GOODWILL'S STORES IN GREATER LAFAYETTE:

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