

HERE'S SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

Throughout the world, a staggering 24,000 people die from hunger or hunger-related diseases each day. Simply put, in the time it will take you to read this story, approximately 64 people will die from hunger.

Sort of makes the daily dilemma over whether to have pasta, chicken or fish for dinner seem a bit trivial, doesn't it? And with the amount of hungry people in the world, it seems like a problem that is insurmountable. But it just may be a fight we can win with leaders like Phil Skilnik on the front lines.

A 1962 alumnus of the college, Phil entered the working world unaware of how those early, post-Canisius years would later prove formative to his future fight against hunger. Over the course of a decade, Phil traveled the country in various sales positions with Proctor & Gamble, Hunt-Wesson and AE Staley where — at the age of 29 — he became the youngest vice president of sales at a Fortune 500 company. When the traveling became tedious, Phil settled down in Chicago at a food brokerage firm, representing major manufacturers in their sales, merchandising and marketing to retail grocers. He was successful enough that when one of his biggest clients moved its representation to a neighboring competitor, Mid-Central Food Sales, Phil was asked to go along. He did and became a partner and today is a senior vice president of what is now the Chicago Division of Advantage Sales & Marketing. Some of his clients include Hershey, Dole, Tyson, Lipton and Tropicana.

Phil certainly established a name for himself in the food brokerage industry. Yet he never considered how his success might one day benefit his community — until the president of Jewel-Osco, the largest retail grocer in the Mid-West, turned to him for help.

"He asked me to join him as a volunteer at the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which at the time," explains Phil, "was a fledgling food bank attempting to fight hunger in the city." Phil admits it was the last thing he needed in his life. "You feel your life is already full and you really don't have the time to do other things. I agreed to help only because somebody at the leading retailer in the market asked me to and you don't make

the mistake of saying no to those kinds of requests."

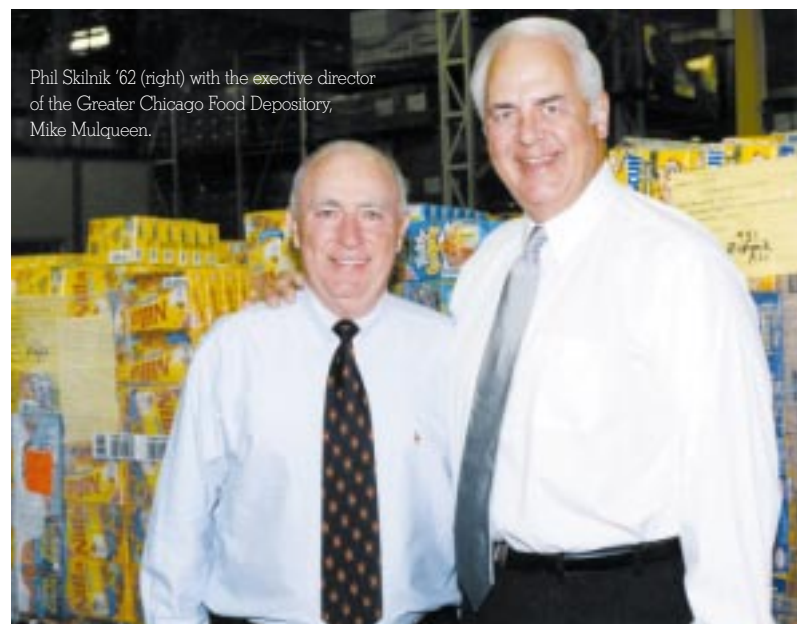
Phil's decision to volunteer at the food depository turned out to be anything but a mistake. Although he confesses to having no idea what he was getting into, Phil concedes his commitment to the food bank deepened over time.

"Lightning sort of struck in a bottle," he explains. "I found something that touched my heartstrings and I wasn't even looking for it. When you see some of these hungry children and how they react to a good meal, you walk away wondering what else you can do and how fast you can do it. So as those years unfolded, I became a little more active. I was no longer there because I had to be, I was there because I wanted to be."

As Phil's commitment began to grow, the sources of actual food donations to the organization began dropping off. Manufacturers were becoming more efficient in production so there were fewer overruns, fewer mislabeled cans and boxes, and virtually no product out of spec. Something drastic needed to be done and Phil had a solution.

"I started championing an idea that would bring food manufacturers into a promotional program with grocery retailers and other food brokers. The express idea was to sell more products and jointly raise money for the food bank and its fight against hunger."

The Board of Directors for the Food Depository was very skeptical that Phil's idea would work. The board maintained that the intense competition between grocery retailers and food brokers would make it virtually impossible for them to participate in a joint



Phil Skilnik '62 (right) with the executive director of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, Mike Mulqueen.

"When you see some of these hungry children away wondering what else you can

campaign — no matter what the cause. But Phil remained confident that he could challenge the retailers, food brokers and manufacturers, with whom he worked every day, to 'do the right thing.' He jokes about how his persistence paid off.

"The board finally said 'you know, we're all tired of hearing about this. If you think you can pull it off, you go ahead and try.'"

Those words set the wheels in motion for Phil who immediately went to work organizing a promotional program that he later named Hunger Knows No Season. In its most basic sense, the promotion encouraged shoppers to purchase specific products of

participating manufacturers such as Minute Maid, Bumble Bee and Sorrento cheese. In return for each product purchased, retail grocers would donate a portion of that purchase to the Chicago Food Depository. Sounds simple for the average shopper looking to contribute to a good cause. But in terms of measuring the campaign's success, Phil needed a 'behind the scenes' plan to secure necessary funds for the food depository.

He turned first to his fellow food brokers and clients at various food manufacturers, persuading each to promote one of their products, at a cost of \$5,000 per participating brand. He then rallied support from the



Skilnik (center) with two of the dedicated Greater Chicago Food Depository workers.

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grocery retailers, convincing them to set aside their competitiveness and unite to match those donations made by manufacturers.

"For example," Phil explains, "if we secured 20 manufacturers at \$5,000 a piece, we've raised \$100,000. We then turn to the retailers and say 'we need you to match that \$100,000 donation based on your market share.' So if one retailer grocer has 40% of the market, we would ask them to donate \$40,000 on behalf of their company."

What was once considered an 'impossible feat' by the depository's Board of Directors, soon became a reality due to Phil's determination to put food on the table of those less fortunate.

In its first year (March 2000), Hunger Knows No Season raised \$180,000 for the food depository with more than \$200,000 in donated advertising from the Chicago Tribune Foundation. The second year proved even more successful with \$250,000 raised for the food bank (providing more than one million meals to Chicagoland's hungry) and close to \$1 million in donated radio, TV, print and Web site advertising. Phil's hope for this year's campaign is to raise a half-million dollars for the Food Depository.

"To talk about this being a homerun would be an understatement," says Phil. "The success of this program is beyond the wildest dreams of

the food depository. It's been a turn-key program for them that their people have had to do little except collect checks."

Phil's leadership in Chicago's fight against hunger has not gone unnoticed. In April 2000, he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, the largest single market food bank in the world. And last October, more than 600 food industry representatives recognized

Phil as the Chicagoland Food Industry Executive of the Year — a humbling award for someone who believes his fight against hunger is just beginning.

"We live in the land of plenty. We've never had to worry where our next meal is coming from. Yet here in Chicago alone, we have 300,000 people who are desperate for food and the problem isn't going away.

The need gets bigger and it exists everywhere."

This reality is what drives Phil's steadfastness to stamp out hunger nationwide. Just recently, he spoke to more than 30 food bank representatives across the country about how to initiate a similarly successful campaign to Hunger Knows No Season. And he has no intention of slowing down. Already Phil is planning to further his fight by educating food banks in the smallest of towns and the largest of cities on how to build promotional campaigns that will universally alleviate hunger. It is an enormous and somewhat ironic challenge for a man who was initially reluctant to even enlist in the cause.

"In the process of becoming successful, there's a point in time where you need to think about giving back. Life has allowed you — through hard work, dedication and good fortune — to have a measure of success. And because we have the benefit of a good education and because we have the benefit of success in our endeavors, we have an advantage over those that are less fortunate."

Now — armed with years of personal experience and a professional knowledge that he never imagined could have benefits beyond just business — Phil is on the front lines and leading the fight to make the dinner table a happier and more plentiful place for those less fortunate; one state, one city and one town at a time.

"All of us sit with our expertise and our success and our goodwill and all we need to do is focus on something that needs championing and become passionate about it and good things happen."

And thanks to Phil Skilnik and people like him, maybe, just maybe, we will see the day when no one will have to go to bed hungry. ■

Phil and his wife, Pat, live in Oak Forest, IL. They have six children and six grandchildren.



If you would like to learn more about the Hunger Knows No Season program and how to help further the fight against hunger in your city, you may contact Phil Skilnik at 1-800-854-9326 or by E-mail at pskilnik@asmwc.com.