

# The Donor's Turn

People who make a difference through generous giving

By Mary Ellen Collins

## Bernie Marcus: A Renaissance Philanthropist

Bernie Marcus is a problem solver par excellence. The co-founder of Home Depot, and recipient of the 2007 Paschal Murray Award for Outstanding Philanthropist at the AFP International Conference on Fundraising in Dallas, combines a compassionate spirit with business acumen and visionary leadership to address the needs of people around the world.

Marcus focuses on issues that need a champion. One particular example illustrates his ability to turn one person's crisis into a solution that has benefited thousands. In the late 1980s, when one of Marcus' Home Depot employees could not find any local facilities for her severely disabled son, he launched into action. He did research and identified Baltimore's Kennedy Krieger Institute as the model of what he wanted to create in Atlanta. The Marcus Institute opened in 1991, and since then its benefactor has contributed more than \$70 million to support what has become the most renowned center for autism in the southeastern United States.

"A theme runs through his philanthropy," says Paula Lawton Bevington, director of development at the Marcus Institute. "He donates his money not only to address a particular issue or fill a specific need—his gifts also are aimed at finding the underlying cause of a problem and bringing resources together to solve it."

Marcus also contributed \$25 million to launch Autism Speaks, a Princeton, N.J.-based international organization through which he hopes to raise \$100 to \$500 million for research and treatment.

"I'm very fortunate. I have six grand-



children and, knock on wood, none of them has autism," he says. "I got the winning number in the lottery. I've seen what this does to families. It destroys them, emotionally and financially. One of 150 children born is diagnosed with autism, and there's no cure, there's no silver bullet. But if you get to these kids early enough, you can have a profound

effect on their lives."

Once Marcus became aware of the challenges and capabilities of people living with autism and other disabilities, he made those individuals a priority, professionally and philanthropically.

"Bernie is a tireless advocate for our patients as well as all people with dis-

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abilities,” says James H. Shepherd Jr., chairman of the board of directors of the Shepherd Center, a catastrophic care hospital in Atlanta. “He made Home Depot a role model in disability awareness through its hiring practices and offering merchandise designed for the special needs of the disabled population. The Marcuses have contributed approximately \$23.7 million since 1987, and we are eternally grateful for the financial resources, time and energy they have given the patients and families of the Shepherd Center.”

A hands-on approach is another hallmark of Marcus’ giving. He’s not

a silent partner who just writes the checks. He remains engaged in the work of the organizations he supports, from serving on boards and soliciting other donors to playing in golf tournaments and acting as auctioneer at fund-raising events.

“Bernie has been much more than a benefactor to us,” says Bob Wright, founder of Autism Speaks. “A member of the Autism Speaks board from its inception, Bernie takes an active role in the organization and inspires others to do the same. As a chair on event committees, Bernie’s involvement ensures the highest level of supporters. He is a

donor, a sounding board and, most importantly, a friend.”

It is difficult to find a part of Atlanta that has not been touched by Marcus’ desire to improve people’s lives. Tourism received a significant boost from his stunning \$200 million gift to build the Georgia Aquarium. His gift of \$15 million to build the Marcus Nanotechnology Building at Georgia Institute of Technology has given the university the first facility in the United States designed to house biomedical research at the nanoscale. He also funded Emory University School of Medicine’s Marcus Chair in Vascular Medicine and

## Small Successes, Big Results



**Q. How do you choose the organizations you support?**

**A.** It seems to me that many executives who have very sane business judgment suddenly lose their brains when they move to the charitable world. Our money was hard earned, and we do in-depth research on every organization we support. We look at them the same way we

look at a business. Do they have good management? Good leadership? A strong budget?

**Q. Explain the expectations you have of the organizations you support.**

**A.** The organizations we support agree ahead of time to certain budgets and outcomes. Some organizations that were apprehensive at the beginning realized that we made them better. They became more businesslike and became stronger organizations.

**Q. Why do you maintain hands-on involvement with the organizations you support?**

**A.** There’s the “feel good”—you write the check and walk away—and there’s the “do good”—you write the check and then stay and help the organization become better. If you write a check *and* help an organization become more efficient and effective, the return on investment increases. They can help more people.

**Q. Who was the greatest influence on you with regard to your philanthropic values?**

**A.** My mother was the best teacher of all. Even when we were dirt poor, she gave to charities, like Trees for Israel. She taught us at a very early age that we had to give back. It was expected; it was doing God’s work.

**Q. You have said that the Georgia Aquarium was a thank-you gift to the city of Atlanta. What were you thanking them for?**

**A.** I came to Atlanta broke in 1978. I had just been fired, and at [age] 49 I thought this [Home Depot] was almost my last shot at being successful. The people of Georgia accepted us and taught us a lot about taking care of customers. I realized how good these people were, and I really wanted to do something for the customers and our [Home Depot] associates. I thought and thought and tried to come up with something that everyone would love and I came up with an aquarium. Now, people are coming from all over the world to see it.

**Q. Your philanthropic interests cover such a broad range. How did you become interested in nanotechnology?**

**A.** I wanted to be a doctor. I’ve always been very interested in medicine, and I began to realize that nanotechnology was a new frontier. I want to be a part of that, and I began to study and ask a lot of questions. I think it will be the opening of a new phase of fighting disease.

**Q. Have you passed on your mother’s legacy of philanthropy to your children?**

**A.** Each of my children serves on the board of the Marcus Foundation and also has their own foundation. From the time they were young, they knew they had to give back. Your children learn by being around you and watching you, and hopefully they’ll emulate the good things you do.

**Q. Is there one philanthropic endeavor that you can point to and say, “That’s the best thing I’ve done”?**

**A.** Probably the Marcus Institute. That’s the one where I see the faces of the children, parents and siblings who’ve been helped. You see small successes—from a child who doesn’t know you’re alive, to a child that hugs you. Small successes, but everything is relative.

provided funding to recruit and retain six national leaders in pediatric care and research.

Marcus credits his Judaic upbringing by Russian immigrant parents for his commitment to Jewish causes, at home and abroad.

"The only time I saw my mother cry hysterically was when she became a citizen," he recalls. "I remember my parents having help from organizations with all kinds of issues, like getting us food when we were hungry, and I've always felt that I had to do something to continue that."

Marcus has given millions of dollars collectively to the Atlanta Jewish Federation and the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County, as well as additional gifts to the Hillels of Georgia, the Birthright Israel Foundation and Washington, D.C.'s United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Marcus also founded the Israel Democracy Institute, which he describes as "a think and do tank" engaged in activities that include helping to write a constitution for the state of Israel.

"I am privileged to live in a community where generosity of Bernie's depth and dimension exists," says Steven A. Rakitt, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta. "Bernie's philanthropy has largely blessed Atlanta, but ultimately his vision crosses all boundaries and national borders."

Although Marcus focuses his giving on children, healthcare and Jewish causes, he is somewhat of a philanthropic Renaissance man whose generosity also extends to education, social services and arts and culture. His gifts include \$5 million to the American Friends of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, \$3.3 million to the United Way of Metro Atlanta, \$1 million to the Salvation Army, \$1 million to the Weber School and numerous smaller gifts to organizations ranging from the Atlanta Police Foundation to the Boys & Girls Clubs of America to the Flying Carpet Theatre in Queens.

The best way to synopsize Marcus'

philanthropic vision is to say that he is always thinking about how he can improve people's lives and then taking pro-active steps to turn his ideas into reality. He is a philanthropist who talks the talk and walks the walk, setting an

inspiring example for anyone who has ever wondered, "What difference can one person make?"

Mary Ellen Collins is a freelance writer in St. Petersburg, Fla.

## mile·stone *-noun*

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