2008 AMSA Lifetime Achievement Award

“You never want to stifle one section of business because something else is successful.”

Stephen Burns
Wheaton World Wide Moving

CEOs are often known for a singular quality—some for their business acumen, some for their passion. And others, for ruling with an iron fist, unafraid to do what it takes to get their company to the forefront of an industry. Few have managed to effectively and compassionately combine all three. But that’s what makes Stephen F. Burns, chairman of Wheaton World Wide Moving, an anomaly. A lawyer-turned-corporate executive, Burns’ 27-year tenure at the Indianapolis-based relocation services company is a study in how to create exponential revenue growth while inspiring passionate devotion and loyalty from a corporate staff and network of independently owned agencies across the country.

After graduating from Denison University and earning a law degree from Indiana University, Burns went to work for his father’s law firm. He was a trial attorney for 20 years and served as judge pro tempem and special judge for the Municipal and Superior Courts of Marion County.

It was through the law firm that he began working with Earnest S. Wheaton, founder of the small van line that he started in 1945. Wheaton was far from a household name compared to some of its behemoth competitors headquartered just down the street.

Mr. Wheaton, as he was known, led with stubbornness, conservatism and precision that began building Wheaton’s enviable balance sheet early on. He took Burns under his wing and gave him the helm of the company in 1987.

Along the way, Burns built a fanatic following. His style is tough, but fair; down to earth and familiar. His interactions with hourly workers and drivers are legendary. There are stories of Burns helping drivers who were down on their luck by paying their bills. Making personal visits to the ill relatives of employees and cutting up during serious business meetings with top executives.

“Have a cup of coffee with employees,” he advises. “We have a monthly meeting where I tell what’s going on and take questions. It’s something they look forward to, and I do, too.”
“We acknowledge birthdays and anniversaries and recent superior performance, talk about developments in the industry, and I tell them where I’ll be traveling. Then I open it up to questions. And I ask our vice presidents to give presentations. It gives everyone a chance to see what they’re a part of so they don’t just say, ‘We’re just going to do whatever Steve tells us to do.’”

In 2001, Burns formed a relationship with Orlando-based Give Kids the World that helps children with life threatening illnesses realize their dreams of visiting Disney World. Burns visited the facilities where the children and their parents stay while in Florida and it soon became his passion. Through Wheaton’s own donations of time and money, and Burns’ influence on Wheaton’s network of 250 agents around the country, it’s safe to say that millions have been raised for the organization over the years.

And while Burns may be best known for his larger than life personality, his humor, compassion and benevolence, he’s also a shrewd tactician in an ultra-competitive industry where price pressure has commoditized a highly orchestrated set of logistical services. Through a number of initiatives, including corporate restructuring, a revised management philosophy and establishing an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP), Burns has built Wheaton World Wide Moving into the sixth-largest van line in the country.

The decision to create an ESOP corporation was one of the first changes Burns implemented, as well as the adoption of an open book policy to freely share information with associates and to seek their input for key decisions. This was a dramatic shift for a company in the moving and storage industry—a hands-on industry that historically separated the agents and drivers in the field from the white-collar corporate office. Truck drivers and agents had not been treated equitably by their employers throughout the years. Wheaton’s employees came to learn that the people in charge were listening to ideas and suggestions.

Under Burns’ leadership, Wheaton’s military business expanded through additional military companies representing more military installations and bases. While the military business is today in constant flux, it’s a testament to his entrepreneurial talents that he was able to grow the business line more than 100 percent over a five-year period during the early 2000s.

“We don’t want to become too reliant on one section of business,” he explained. “Over the last few years, the group that’s grown the most is military, so we had to revise our goals and understand that’s a little bit larger segment, but we have to be mindful of growing the others.

“You never want to stifle one section of business because something else is successful. We just keep saying, ‘Let’s get a little bit more in balance here. We never want to cut back; we want to work on growing the other segments faster.’”

In 2005, Burns instituted mandatory background checks for all relocation service providers. His vision was to provide comfort and security to customers, ensuring that all Wheaton service providers have been screened.

The same policy holds true today and has grown even more stringent, requiring background checks on temporary help as well.

Burns and his management team came up with a five-year plan for Wheaton to reach $95 million in revenue by 2007. That goal was reached two years early in 2005. Today, the company boasts revenues in excess of $160 million across all of its business lines.

After more than 26 years of service to Wheaton and the household goods industry, Burns stepped down as Wheaton’s CEO in September 2008, appointing Mark Kirschner as CEO and Dave Witzerman as president. Both have worked closely with Burns over many years. Burns will continue as the company’s chairman and focus his efforts on potential new acquisitions and business diversification.

What’s his advice to other business leaders? “Lighten up. I think the hardest thing is probably not to take yourself too seriously; there are some ramifications to that. One is if you put yourself on a pedestal, you start to think that just because you have been successful that you can take everything for granted, or that you have all the right answers.”

Burns has made it clear that his door will continue to be open according the policy he set for employees and associates a long time ago. Wheaton’s employees and executives will do well to continue to walk through it to gain access to a wealth of experience and wisdom.

Note: The profile for this issue is a departure from our usual Q&A format as we spotlight our 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Service winner, Stephen Burns.