

A CONVERSATION WITH Perry Schuckman

[Executive Director, Nonprofit Chamber]

BY KIM BENSON

One afternoon in early summer, I sit with Perry Schuckman on the patio at Chester's Chophouse, overlooking The Waterfront fountain. He has chosen the Chicken Cordon Blue "stack" and roast corn and wild mushrooms. A native Kansan, he talks about dabbling in politics as a teenager, moving out to California and opening a homeless shelter, and coming home to help Wichita's nonprofit groups.

Schuckman grew up in Hutchinson and threw newspapers on the doorstep of former state Representative and Senator Bert

Chaney. This inspired him politically; at 19, he was president of Kansas Young Democrats and the Hutchinson Community College student body.

The same year, someone mailed him \$100 with the suggestion to run for office. So in 1978, he entered the state board of education race. His biggest campaign thrill, he says, was riding in a car with Miss Kansas at a pageant parade. (Sitting on rodeo bleachers and wearing a three-piece suit to meet potential voters was the downside.) He received forty-two percent of the vote—

a strong showing, but not enough to win.

At 21, Schuckman moved to California and eventually owned a business that sold and installed underground piping systems. But one day he spotted a newspaper ad that caught his eye: a position to open San Mateo County's first homeless shelter for adults.

He landed the job and was given \$15,000 in cash, a National Guard armory as a facility, and three weeks to get ready. The first night, more than one hundred people came.

Schuckman's own experience as a staff member staying at the shelter was interesting, considering he never lived in a college dorm. "Sleeping with one hundred people in one large room is unusual. You have your nightwalkers and talkers...What struck me was the lack of dignity they experienced just to survive—and how much we take for granted."

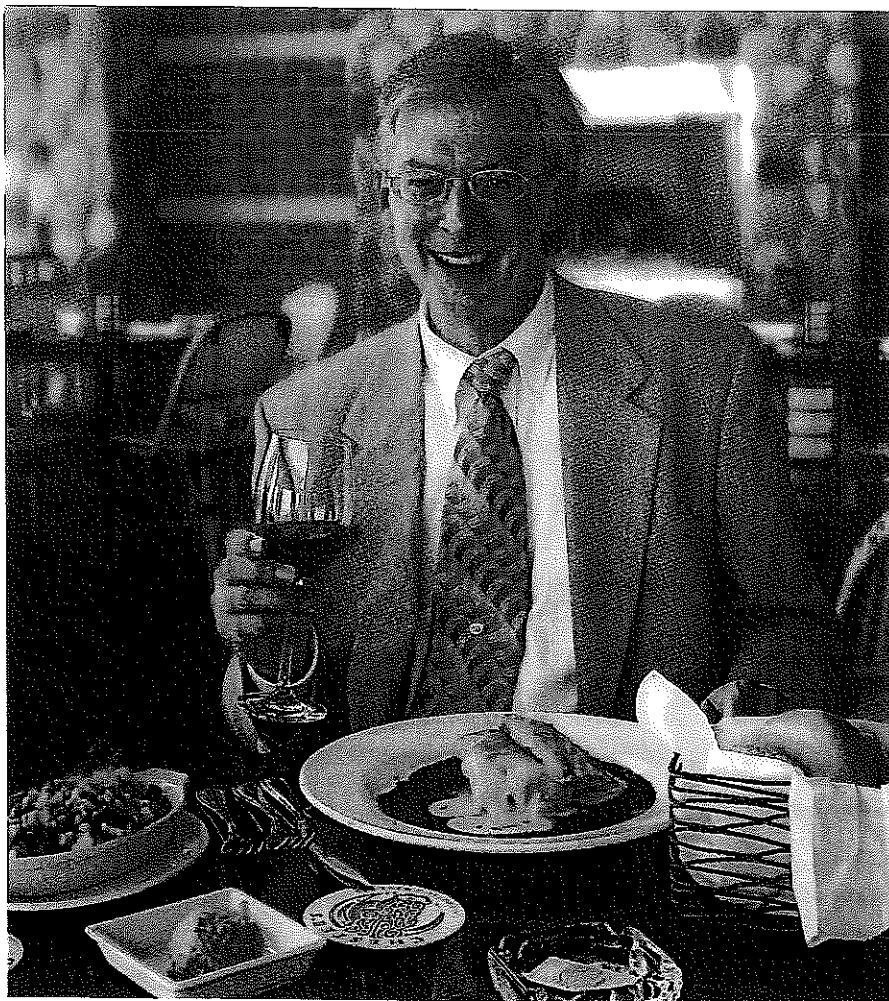
His next challenge was mainstreaming fifty of the most difficult cases at the shelter, in six months' time. The short timeframe, Schuckman says, was too rapid for most to begin a new life. But twenty or so people did find jobs, and the shelter received widespread community exposure as a result.

In his opinion, nonprofits build a community. "And the breadth of nonprofits in this community is amazing. Did you know there are 1,400 nonprofits in Sedgwick County alone?"

Eventually, the San Mateo shelter merged with a food program and became a new entity called Samaritan House. On Family Day one year, fifteen hundred volunteers gathered to make Christmas cards and sort through stacks of food and toys. In a Frank Capra-esque scene, the group stood together around a Christmas tree to shoot a Samaritan House video Christmas card, the floor completely covered with glitter. Schuckman calls it one of the most exhilarating days of his life.

"When everyone yelled, 'Happy holidays from Samaritan House!' the rafters just

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lifted off, and everyone felt that 'It's-a-Wonderful-Life' feeling," he recalls. "You can't help but love it. That's what a nonprofit is all about—tying the community in with whatever nonprofit services are being provided, whatever the mission."

During his tenure at Samaritan House, first as associate director, then as executive director, the staff grew from five to eighty-five. The agency added two free medical clinics and garnered front-page coverage in the Sunday *New York Times*. And San Mateo teens volunteering for Samaritan House set a Guinness World Record for the largest holiday high school canned food drive.

But back home, his family needed him. Schuckman returned to Kansas in 2003 to care for his daughter, seriously injured after being hit by a drunk driver, and his mother, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. His daughter has recovered, and Schuckman is deliberately making new memories with his mom to replace the ones she's lost.

As executive director of the Nonprofit Chamber, he fosters networking opportunities for nonprofits. Last November was the first-ever Board University, where people responded enthusiastically to learning about serving nonprofits in key roles. "We expected 60, and 180 came," he says.

His goal is to grow the membership to 200. (Already, they're halfway there: on July 18, the Nonprofit Chamber will celebrate a "Turning 100+" event at Botanica). It's all about building partnerships, he says, because too many times, nonprofits know their story, so well that they assume everyone else does, too. "Sometimes it takes somebody on the outside [of a nonprofit] to make a difference. They can offer freshness of thought and creativity."

The most motivational thing in this man's life? "Ending human suffering. George McGovern said that 25,000 children starve every day. We live in the breadbasket of world. Can you imagine how many Gandhis, how many Martin Luther Kings, Eleanor Roosevelts, Abe Lincolns and Einsteins we lose to hunger?"

He quotes the ancient philosopher, Glaucon, who believed that everyone has a purpose for giving, and adds, "For some, it may mean something deep in their hearts, while others may just want to buy a brick with their name on it and place it in a wall. That's where things like volunteering and board governance come in. You just have to find out what your giving purpose is." ☆

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