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GUEST COLUMNIST

Practicing philanthropy for a lifelong commitment

By Larry Sterrs

My mother always said “practice makes perfect.” While I am not perfect at anything, with a lot of practice I learned to play a passable game of tennis, and to hold my own on the basketball court. I have also had a full career “practicing” business and am now overseeing the legacy of one of Maine’s most influential yet not-well-known philanthropists, Bert Clifford.

Bert was raised on a farm in Unity, and pursued ways to improve things in his community. He petitioned the government through Ed Muskie to open a post office to make it easier for Unity residents to do business. When he couldn’t find the right higher educational match for one of his children and assumed others faced the same challenge, he became one of the founders of Unity College. And, when he expanded the UniTel telecommunications company and founded Unicel, he found ample opportunity to share his business success in the community.

When Bert died in 2001, he left his assets to benefit the communities of Maine in the form of the Unity Foundation. His intent was for the foundation to make grants to help organizations that help people, and as importantly, to teach people in communities how to help themselves by leveraging grants to solicit greater community involvement.

Being smart in philanthropy is much the same as being smart in business. As our economy continues to sour, it is more important than ever to help Maine people focus on how to best help each other. This takes practice. Learning how to dedicate our resources to help the greatest number of people in the most efficient way takes understanding and experience.

Unity Foundation, with funding partners UniTel and the Maine Community Foundation, is helping 3,200 of Maine’s high school and middle school students practice how to donate money wisely in their local communities. Through a new program called Jumpstart Our Youth, we are giving 61 groups of Jobs for Maine’s Graduates teens \$1,000 each to contribute to local organizations.

By teaching young people how to work together to measure community needs and evaluate giving opportunities, we believe they will learn smart philanthropy practices. The hope is that they will implement these practices as they go on to become nonprofit staff and board members, give out company contributions and make regular personal contributions to causes that mean something to them.

Jobs for Maine’s Graduates students have had plenty of experience committing their time and talent to local nonprofit organizations. They work with Boys and Girls Clubs and the

Make-a-Wish Foundation among others; they see firsthand how their time, knowledge, energy and creativity make a difference to those in need.

Philanthropy experts say that the more time a person gives to an organization, the more likely he or she is to make a financial contribution. In this case we also believe the corollary to be true: If people learn why it is important to provide funds for community groups serving those in need, and how those funds are used, they are not only likely to make giving a lifelong practice, but to volunteer on a regular basis.

At the Unity Foundation, we know that the needs will be great this year and we strive to leverage our resources. We work with community organizations as they help themselves through better education, management and investment in infrastructure tools such as strategic planning and evaluation. We were humbly honored for our efforts as the Outstanding Foundation of the Year by the Association of Fundraising Professionals of Northern New England.

While Bert Clifford would have appreciated that award, he would have been more deeply moved to know that young people in Jobs for Maine's Graduates chapters across Maine will be donating his hard-earned assets to the needy in their own communities and learning how to set goals, raise expectations and contribute their time and skills to causes close to home. They will practice philanthropy just as they practice for band, for baseball and for the school play.

Maine will be better off with an emerging generation of those who know how to give and how to make it count. And perhaps, like Bert Clifford, one of these JMG students will leave his or her assets to benefit others; one day becoming one of Maine's many philanthropists who make a difference by example — and practice.

Larry Sterrs is the chairman of the board and CEO of Unity Foundation in Unity, chairman of the UniTel Board, and CEO and chairman of the board of UniTek, UniTel's parent company. He has more than 35 years' experience in the telecommunications industry and serves on the boards of several nonprofit organizations.