

# Jim Gibbons

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## Giving a Hand Up, Not a Hand Out

When Jim Gibbons graduated from Purdue University in 1985 with a degree in industrial engineering, he applied for jobs with 50 separate companies and, in turn, received 50 separate rejection letters. It wasn't that he had earned bad grades or had questionable records. The one thing working against him, it would seem, was his blindness.

Jim, however, was no stranger to the power of hard work and commitment. He didn't give up, and his persistence paid off when he landed a position with AT&T. Similarly, when he applied to Harvard Business School shortly thereafter and received another rejection letter, he persevered, applying again several years later and going on to become the first blind student to graduate from the school. Now, serving as the ninth President and CEO of Goodwill Industries International, Inc., Jim's quiet but adamant stance on achieving success in the face of adversity indicates an internal reservoir of resolution that never seems to leave him high and dry.

"The ideas of leadership and impact were what motivated me then, and they're what motivate me now," he puts it simply.

It would be an understatement to simply say that Goodwill® has become a widespread and permanent fixture of American society. With 165 member agencies across the United States and Canada, and a global presence boasting more than 4,000 retail stores and donation centers across 13 countries, the brand is instantly recognizable and a common household name. An equally prominent aspect of the organization is the fact that its mission and impact extend far beyond the collection and resale of used goods.

In fact, Goodwill placed more than 150,000 people in jobs last year through its relationships with approximately 100,000 employers across the

country. "We leverage the infrastructure of a \$2.5 billion business built on donated goods retail as a platform to provide solutions for transitional employment, training and first-time opportunity employment for people who have trouble gaining or maintaining employment," Jim explains. As a result, Goodwill served nearly 2 million people in a variety of job training and employment services programs last year alone.

The enterprising agenda of the organization doesn't stop there. It extends even further to supply funding for various social impact and training services within the communities where it operates. In fact, Goodwill currently has \$600 million in contracts, half of which goes toward employing people with disabilities in federal grounds maintenance, food service, and document management, to name just a few of its employment options. Yet another \$600 million is held with direct program services in mind.

Goodwill's success is the product of many years of trial and error, observation, and improvement. It was first established in 1902 when Rev. Dr. Edgar J. Helms, a Methodist minister, began collecting goods from the community to give to the poor immigrants in South Boston. He soon realized, however, that people didn't want to receive handouts — they wanted to earn what they received. With this in mind, he collected donations in anticipation of the first Goodwill store. The immigrants would also fix any broken items for sale and earned wages in the process.

The unification of this initial store and Helms' recognition of the value of a hand up, not a handout, spelled the birth of Goodwill Industries®. Soon, "the Goodwill way" spread like a systematic wildfire, as Helms went from town to town to share the idea, eventually taking the approach



abroad as he traveled the globe. Helms was a compelling motivator and continued to rally support through the end of his life, acting as a strong advocate and speaker for the cause even after he resigned from the position of CEO in the 1930s. With that, the Goodwill we know today had begun to take shape.

This is not to say that the organization settled into a state of stagnancy thereafter. On the contrary, throughout the 1960s and 70s, it withstood a gradual transition away from being a faith-based enterprise as it began to hire professional managers instead of ministers to fill the roles of President and CEO at each local agency. Despite this shift, many people still consider the organization to maintain an element of the faith upon which it was originally built.

The various Goodwill agencies in the United States and Canada are referred to as *members*, and each has operational control over its stores, donation centers, contract services, and job training and employment services within their local communities. These members are essentially the lifeblood of the organization's ability to impart change. "Each member is structured to serve certain territories or regions," Jim explains. "This allows them an extraordinary synergy such that, when the organization has great projects or programs to implement, they can be replicated, scaled and launched as quickly as possible with local needs in mind." Goodwill Industries International, in turn, exists to provide leadership and service to the membership, but not to instill operating management directives in local Goodwill agencies. This business plan has allowed the idea to evolve from a movement to a social enterprise and to a scale such that power rests within local operations — addressing the unique needs of local communities and thereby making the greatest impact.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Goodwill is the simple elegance of its business model, which rests on the ability to connect several widespread dots across the planes of various social issues into the kind of constellation that lends a new breath of hope to each one. Take, for example, the 68 billion pounds of textiles that are sent to landfills each year. When someone donates a sellable item to Goodwill instead of adding to this waste, the positive impact extends both to the environment and to the community.

"We all have a responsibility to the

communities where we live and work," Jim explains. "Goodwill had an opportunity to connect the dots in a meaningful way, so we did. As a direct result, we are an organization that goes beyond expectations, continually pushing ourselves to be truly great — today and for tomorrow. This is what I see in Goodwill."

As part of Goodwill's social responsibility efforts, the organization recently created the Donate Movement, a public awareness initiative focused on raising consumer awareness about the power of donated goods and how they impact both the environment and the community. The Donate Movement is envisioned to help Goodwill grow its mission and keep up with the increased demand for services by securing increased donated goods.

This attitude illustrates the strong platform of genuine, thoughtful and authentic corporate responsibility built into the company's culture that so profoundly distinguishes its market share and bottom line in a way that is not only ethical, but forward-thinking. "Consumers want to know that they're doing business with an organization that has a conscience," Jim points out. "All the data suggests that, even if this isn't the typical customer today, it *will* be the typical customer tomorrow. The new generation really feels strongly about this."

In many ways, Jim's life and experiences are a microcosm of the spirit of respect, responsibility, cooperation and supported independence for which Goodwill advocates. He grew up the youngest of eight children in Indianapolis, Indiana. His father, an engineer, was the quintessence of self-advocacy, hard work, and perseverance regardless of circumstances. It is very likely that, had such strong values been lacking in the young man's life, his diagnosis of macular degeneration when he was in the third grade would have had a crippling effect on him. Jim's parents took the news in stride, and resolved to maintain the same expectations of their son as they did for all their children. He was expected to do chores, to complete his homework, and to always treat others with respect and kindness. Despite this firmness, however, his parents never failed to provide him with the tools he needed to succeed in his endeavors. "I don't remember an evening when my dad wasn't helping me with my math homework, either reading the problems out loud to me or helping to explain the principles," he

remembers.

“This blend of high expectations and constructive support figures strongly into my management philosophy today, as well as in the overall personality of Goodwill,” Jim reports. In this way, high expectations are matched with a supportive culture and ample resources for personal growth and opportunity, creating the perfect climate for a strong sense of self-worth and prosperity to thrive. “When you have a clarity of purpose, goals and objectives, and then give your team the tools, skills and opportunities they need to garner their own independence, you create an impact as widespread and as positive as Goodwill’s,” Jim explains.

Throughout his childhood, Jim’s parents always expected him to work hard and do good in the world, but they never anticipated that he would one day lead an enterprise as large and pervasive as Goodwill. “In truth, I always thought I’d spend my whole life in Indianapolis – that is, until I went to college and realized the importance of mobility,” Jim explains. Starting his post-collegiate career in Cincinnati with AT&T and then transitioning to New Jersey, followed by a move to Boston for business school and an open horizon after that, he came to the conclusion that upward mobility was inextricably linked with geographic mobility. “Opportunity is the intersection of preparedness and luck, and it is mobility that imparts this luck,” he explains.

Operating with this tenet in mind, Jim spent 13 years with AT&T and rose up the ranks until he was President and CEO of a \$15 million, wholly owned subsidiary of the company. Later, he was offered the position of President and CEO with the National Industries for the Blind (NIB), a social enterprise focusing on employing people with visual impairments. “Working at NIB gave me the opportunity to step up, transitioning from an influencer to a direct player in terms of impacting the lives of people in need,” Jim explains.

The position also facilitated tremendous personal growth, allowing him to use his skills in an enterprising way and on a larger scale while reporting to a Board of Directors. Jim spent 10 years in that capacity, growing the operation from \$240 million in contracts revenue and \$100 million in retail to \$600 million and \$300 million

respectively. His transition to become the President and CEO of Goodwill Industries International in 2008, then, seemed like a natural trajectory for his impact to follow. “Goodwill is an incredible brand with a larger reach to help people with a broader range of disabilities and disadvantages. As such, I was presented with an opportunity to have a greater impact in an area that I’m very passionate about – the power of employment,” he reports.

Now, it seems that Jim has arrived at the perfect intersection point – that place where meaning and passion blend with enterprise to build communities that are truly operate effectively. In short, it is a position that maximizes the impact he has always yearned to achieve. As such, Jim advises young individuals entering the workforce to target that spot where their skills and passions intersect in much the same way he did. He also stresses the importance of mentors – wise and experienced people from whom one seeks nothing but perspective. “When you can glean that perspective in a meaningful way and couple your skills and passions with an understanding that there must be a level of hard work in the equation as well, then you’ll be able to launch your career in a very powerful way,” says Jim. Such is the recipe to build the kind of experience, success and transformative impact that truly makes a difference.

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon’s Blog](#).*

