

A man of many hats

Retirement provides time to help others

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BY GUY TRIDGELL Staff writer



Despite being retired for 15 years, Don Schwarz wears many hats in the volunteer work he does from his home office in Frankfort. (Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

Don Schwarz had been out of the corporate world about 15 years when he got the itch.

Schwarz, a longtime Frankfort resident who retired in 1993 as external affairs director for the international division of telecommunications giant Ameritech, was approached with an offer: Would he be willing to volunteer with other retired CEOs, COOs and CIOs by dusting off their skills to help nonprofit agencies and other charitable causes?

Schwarz, 68, leapt at the chance and became a member of the Executive Service Corps of Chicago.

"I was back in a working environment with people who were executives in other companies," he said. "And there was a selfish aspect of it for me. It was a good opportunity to rub shoulders."

The Executive Service Corps of Chicago, a sort of domestic Peace Corps of mostly high rollers in retirement, celebrates its 30th anniversary this year.

The group counts about 250 members who donate their expertise on everything from raising funds to organizational troubleshooting.

Bill Cospers, the organization's vice president for development and external relations, said the mission harkens to a time when corporations grew deep roots in the community and top executives could be counted on to roll up their sleeves for civic endeavors. When those executives retired and with corporations increasingly turning to professional marketing staffs to take their places, there was a void.

"There was all of this genius capital out there," Cospers said. "The thought was maybe we should be doing something with it."

For Schwarz, it was a natural fit.

"One of my main thrusts when I was with my company was making sure I got involved with community activities. I always did it willingly and energetically," he said. "I sort of became hooked."

The Executive Service Corps put Schwarz in touch with SouthSTAR Services, a Chicago Heights agency that helps people with developmental disabilities find jobs and places to live. Schwarz assisted in developing a marketing strategy to raise the nonprofit group's profile. He also helped devise a strategic plan to guide the organization for years to come.

Another outlet was found with the Glen Ellyn Community Resource Center, which provides literacy training and academic assistance to poor families and new immigrants.

But the biggest eye-opener for Schwarz has come during his time as a consultant for AIDS Care, a Chicago agency that finds housing for families and individuals affected by AIDS and HIV.

"A lot of the population, because there are new drugs to extend the quality of life, believes that AIDS is no longer a problem. It makes it very difficult to raise money," Schwarz said.

"There are many people in a 'traditional' lifestyle who are affected by it. It can be a spouse, a child; there are a lot of different impacts."

One frustrating constant Schwarz has found is all nonprofit causes are struggling to stay afloat because of eroding government support. More time is devoted to raising money just so the groups can survive, he said.

"The federal budget is so out of line. Money is not coming back to the state. The state can't pass it on to the counties and the villages. Organizations become dependent on private donations," Schwarz said. "A lot of them don't have the skills or the staffs to generate the necessary funds. There is a lot of talent out there, but there also is a lot of need."

The work is a long way from 1961, when Schwarz, a Decatur native and Millikin University graduate, walked into a management training program at what then was Illinois Bell.

At various stops with his 32 years with the company, he oversaw a customer service team made up of 600 women and spent six years on "temporary" assignment in New York.

But finding the time to volunteer always was important. In addition to his duties with the Executive Service Corps, Schwarz serves with the New Lenox Performing Arts Committee and Sunshine Through Golf, a Chicago District Golf Association program that teaches golf to people with developmental disabilities.

When he's not volunteering, the grandfather of five spends time at Prestwick Country Club, where he also finds time to hone his golf game.

"My personality is such that I can't help but get involved," Schwarz said.