

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF RONN RICHARD, THE CLEVELAND FOUNDATION HAS BECOME A CONVENER AND A CATALYST.

BY ROBERT L. SMITH



"The whole restaurant industry is very interested in this one," says John McMicken, the CEO of Evergreen Cooperatives, which runs the greenhouse and the two other cooperative businesses supported by the foundation. "It's a type they not only serve raw in salads, but it's robust enough to sauté."

Richard nods appreciatively, and the two men begin to talk about sales and profits.

The hot, humid confines of a greenhouse may seem an unlikely place to find the president of a community foundation, but Richard is an unlikely leader. He helped build this urban farm in a neighborhood of blight and abandonment. It's part of a larger economic revitalization thrust that has come to define the Ronn Richard era at the Cleveland Foundation.

Since he arrived 14 years ago, the foundation has swerved from being a grant giver and check writer to becoming a convener and a catalyst. Increasingly, it leads complex and varied projects aimed at creating jobs, from investing in creative enterprises to seeding new industries.

The economic development thrust has made Richard a new kind of business leader, one who leverages the wealth and influence of a philanthropy to fill a void in the region's economy.

"Ronn has done many projects that were not typical, but innovative," observes David Goldberg, the former chairman of the Cleveland Foundation and AmTrust Bank.

Goldberg is not just talking about a greenhouse.

Evergreen Cooperatives sprang from the Greater University Circle Initiative, a collaboration of institutions united by the Cleveland Foundation that has led to tens of millions of dollars of new investment in the neighborhood near Case Western Reserve University and the city's world-class hospitals.

In all likelihood, windmills soon will rise off the coast of Cleveland, heralding the nation's first freshwater

wind farm. Richard, the project's longtime champion, envisions not just clean power but the start of a new manufacturing line.

Goldberg predicts there's more to come. "Creating is in his blood," he says.

Goldberg served on the search committee that picked Richard in 2003. The Cleveland Foundation is one of the oldest and largest community foundations in the world, with assets near \$2 billion. The opening for a president attracted hundreds of quality applicants. But the committee was looking for someone a little different, Goldberg says. The city was struggling. Population was fleeing. Startups were something that happened elsewhere.

"We thought we needed someone who could not only run a foundation but help revitalize the economy," he says. "We knew he was a passionate person, but we liked his business background, too."

It's a background made for a movie. Earlier in his career, Richard, 61, worked as a U.S. Foreign Service officer, stateside and in Japan. He went on to lead research and development at Panasonic's North American operations, and later directed the venture capital fund at the Central Intelligence Agency.

So he knew something about diplomacy, tech and the spy game. Richard also knew Cleveland, and the goodness of its charities, better than many.

Richard's parents, both orphans, grew up at Bellefaire Orphanage. They were 14 when they met, 18 when they married. A posting with the Marine Corps brought Richard's father to Washington D.C., so Ronn and his four siblings grew up in the nation's capital.

He talks of Cleveland as a home he returned to; as a once-great city poised to do great things again.

"I think there's so much potential in Cleveland, and we really want to promote that," he says.

From the start, Richard steered money and foundation expertise toward business accelerators like JumpStart and

BioEnterprise, aiming to lift the city into the new economy. He instructed his staff to target new industries, like advanced energy, and not only because he thought sustainability was a good idea. He thinks a city that can bend metal can make wind turbines — and ship them out of the Port of Cleveland.

"That's where his business venture background comes in, because he won't shy away from taking risks," says Shilpa Kedar, the foundation's program director for economic development. "When we make a grant, we also provide a degree of credibility to a fledgling nonprofit, to a risky idea."

The foundation worked with Cuyahoga County to launch the Icebreaker Wind project in 2003. By spring of 2016, it had enough momentum to attract a \$40 million investment from the U.S. Department of Energy. Turbines are expected to rise from the lake bed in 2019.

"This could be incredibly transformative," Richard says, displaying some rare outward enthusiasm. "The Midwest could become the epicenter of wind turbine manufacturing. And we could ship them across the Great Lakes."

He's a robust-looking man with a gentle demeanor, clear blue eyes and an inquisitive nature. He's as comfortable talking about gardening as renewable energy. He tends to speak from experience, especially when describing his motivations.

As an economic officer in Japan, he says, he observed a different kind of corporate culture.

"Companies existed not to benefit shareholders, but employees," he says. "I came to believe that businesses need to have standards beyond their shareholders. They need to care about the communities in which they exist."

After the exodus of so many corporate headquarters, Cleveland suffered a lack of business leadership, Richard says, as well as a dearth of new jobs.

"We sort of felt like, 'We'll have to step up,' he says. "Decay had set in. It wasn't because the people had become lazy.

The opportunities left. They were stuck in persistent poverty. So, how do you address poverty?"

Education and training play vital roles, Richard believes, but so, too, do jobs. Jobs in the neighborhood. He chairs the board of Evergreen Cooperatives, which include a commercial laundry and an energy-efficiency contractor. The worker-owned businesses still struggle. But they manage to employ 120 people, many of whom would not otherwise have jobs.

"It's aligned with our mission to revitalize neighborhoods by creating jobs," Richard says matter-of-factly. "The Evergreen companies have been a challenge. But you could expect that with something so new. I think we've sort of cleared the bar."

Jason Rice certainly hopes so. Before getting hired on at the greenhouse, he worked for a pizza shop in East Cleveland. Before that, he spent six years at the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield.

He's 42 and lives on East 93d Street in Cleveland with his fiancé and their blended family of three children.

"I said, whoever gives me a chance wasn't ever going to regret it," Rice says, as water purification pumps groaned and gurgled in the background. "I was going to be their best employee."

In three years, he worked his way up from farmhand — what they call a transplanter — to harvest supervisor. He's responsible for the picking, packaging and shipping of lettuce and basil that will be sold at area restaurants and grocery stores. He manages people who hail from Cleveland, Guatemala, Africa and Nepal.

Every day, he marvels at his workplace.

"I never knew that this huge place even existed, right smack in the middle of the 'hood," Rice says. "It's amazing. It's like family. I'm so committed."

Profits are thin at the greenhouse in the 'hood. But the greens are selling, lives are changing.

That's enough for Richard. "I'd like to see 20 more of these," he says. ■

Ronald "Ronn" Richard walks the crop rows of the giant greenhouse in Cleveland's central neighborhood like he's been here before. The president and CEO of the Cleveland Foundation is, in fact, a frequent visitor to Green City Growers, an unusual farm

under glass near East 55th Street and Kinsman Avenue.

He pauses at one of the hydroponic ponds, abloom with brilliant green heads of lettuce, and asks if something has changed.

Indeed, the staff recently introduced a new variety of lettuce.