

**Executive Directors Speech by Russ Gartner at Annual Meeting
January 27, 2010**

There's a new national YMCA initiative that's going on to "REBRAND" the YMCA.

Studies show that over 98% of our country's population can identify the YMCA logo at a glance.....

And nearly all of them identify the YMCA as a good place where kids and families come for fun and recreation.....

But only 65% can identify what the YMCA's PURPOSE is.

They have difficulty seeing the YMCA as a charity.

And, as a result, the YMCA struggles to raise it's fair share of contributed support dollars when compared to other similar not for profit organizations around the country.

Findlay is no exception.

It's not hard to see why really.

We don't LOOK NEEDY. We maintain our facilities well.

Even those we serve don't appear to be needy.

They're usually having fun and enjoy coming to the Y.

In a sense, this is testimony to how well we do our charitable work.

The Y is the cement that holds the foundation of our communities together...bringing people together regardless of their social religious or economic status.

Judges play basketball side by side with juvenile offenders that they've adjudicated earlier that morning.

Corporate executives play racquetball with the unemployed, and under-employed of our community.

People who otherwise might never meet or engage in a social situation with one another come together at the YMCA.

Even the children in our care come from the most affluent of homes in Findlay, and play together daily with children from the poorest of neighborhoods.

This alone makes the YMCA one of the significant assets of any community lucky enough to be able to support one....and not all communities can.

YMCAs spring up in communities when communities realize they have a pressing social need.

Findlay YMCA began in 1887 after the Civil War ravaged this area.

Residents of Findlay put their financial resources to work to build a YMCA with the sole purpose of rescuing returning soldiers from crime and temptations found on the streets.

After World War I and World War II the same was true.

YMCAs sprung up all over the country to help re-unite returning soldiers with their families and to help rebuild neighborhoods throughout the country with an emphasis on “FAMILY values”.

And then.....In the 1960s, during a tumultuous time rife with a new drug culture and filled with racial unrest when racism, prejudice and injustice spread throughout the country, tearing neighborhoods apart and turning neighbors one against the other..... the YMCA emerged in its most significant role in history.

Then.....as is still the case today.....the YMCA became the “common ground”a place for Americans to PLAY....a Point of LIGHT in dark times.

A place where THE BAGGAGE OF social, economic and religious status is dropped at the door and people enter as engage one another as equals.

Under the guise of health, recreation and play the YMCA became a melting pot of diversity where the country’s torn social fabric was knit back together, a place where healing began.

The YMCA meets people.....ALL PEOPLE..... where they are at critical moments in their lives, whether they are single or married, with or without children, rich or poor, employed or unemployed.

Much work in an inner city YMCA where poverty and crime were just part everyday life.

Neighborhood kids were defined by the color of their skin, the shelters they lived in or the tattoos on their bodies.

They came to the YMCA to escape the streets, the sirens and the gang wars, the playgrounds covered with glass, or homes where they were little more than targets for physical and verbal abuse.

In these areas the YMCA logo was not just recognized.....the PURPOSE of the YMCA was CLEAR as could be.

For those with so little and in need of so much, the YMCA was a lifeline.

EVEN THOSE THAT WERE WELL OFF.....THOSE WITH FINANCIAL MEANS didn’t question the YMCA’s purpose.

They knew **exactly** what would happen in their neighborhoods were the YMCA to ever disappear and so their support for the YMCA was passionate.

No one dared to compare the YMCA to any private club or fitness center.

Its purpose shines brightest for those whose need is greatest.

But here in Findlay, OHIO, we live a different life.

SURE....We have huge gaps between social classes.

For some.....the PURPOSE of the YMCA shines bright.....for many.....Not so bright.....and for some.....it's invisible.

For them....the YMCA, becomes just another fitness center another option for where they will get their recreation.....a grocery store, where people go to buy a product.

This may be our greatest challenge that lies ahead of us this year.....

To define our purpose for ourselves and for our community, and embrace that purpose as the justification for all that we do.

We're extremely fortunate in that we have an excellent YMCA and excellent volunteer leadership providing our YMCA with direction.

Our services don't touch just the underprivileged the unemployed, the physically and emotionally disabled or only children at risk.....we touch the lives of everyone living in our community.

There are more families who find themselves living between the **extremes of wealth and poverty** than at either end of the spectrum.

And that these people on the edge sometimes need help too.

You probably know some of these people.....some of you ARE these people.....

The family whose child watches from the sidelines because they can't afford the cost of a uniform or a team fee this year.

Or the family that find themselves facing unemployment for the very first time.

LAST year, when the economy wrapped its arms around thousands who were close to the edge and pushed them over the brinkGAPS that existed between what people had and what they needed grew wider than ever before.

The Findlay YMCA had to make some difficult decisions and the "PURPOSE" for the YMCA suddenly became crystal clear for us at our committee and board meetings.

THE YMCA had to provide some sort of a safety net to catch families pushed over the edge.

In 2008 the YMCA provided DIRECT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE THROUGH OUR ACCESS PROGRAM to over 850 individuals so that they could be part of the YMCA. That number was hundreds more than ever before in our YMCA's history.

But last year, in 2009 that number rose to over 1,100.

Thousands more were helped, when you chose to eliminate program fees for kids and the elderly.

Before 2009 closed, over \$860,000 of subsidized services were provided by the YMCA to our community.

It's perhaps the best kept secret in Findlay, Ohio...

The PURPOSE of the YMCA shines brightest for those with the greatest need:

Hundreds of older adults, many in nursing homes or on fixed incomes or who have crippling disabilities get relief from the programs provide by the YMCA.

Kids and adults with mental and physical challenges from Blanchard Valley School and Industries find acceptance, comfort, friendship, companionship, and a sense of self worth at the YMCA.

At the Mary Brenner Child Development Center hundreds of children daily find love, and comfort and enjoy the feeling that comes with being surrounded by familiar friends and care-givers they come to trust.

And YES....almost 20% are subsidized in some way.

Their parents find peace of mind knowing the YMCA has their children while they continue to work or in all too many cases now.....while they search for work.

Last year thousands of kids participated in swimming and sports programswithout cost.....and with uniforms.

IN 2010 the YMCA is being called upon again to fill several more gaps that have come about because of the economic times:

City Pool

City Day Camp

Back-pack Program to help feed kids on free lunches over weekends

AND THIS IS THE PURPOSE FOR YOUR YMCA

THE YMCA FILLS GAPS IN PEOPLES LIVES AND CEMENTS THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR COMMUNITY WHEN THEY SHOW SIGNS OF CRUMBLING.

It shines brightly when times are tough and the gaps get wide.

Sadly it gets forgotten and becomes invisible when times are good.

That's when our community begins to use the YMCA like CONSUMERS use a GROCERY STORE.

Forgetting all about the purpose.....They shop us and compare what we have to fitness centers, health clubs and they expect sales, specials and rebate forms that make them feel like they're getting a bargain.

They'll tell us, "I need something for my husband to domaybe basketball or volleyball".

"A ball is the only thing that gets him off the couch.....just like the DOG!"

"And I really need to get my Mom out of the house too!"

"Her doctor says she has to lower her blood pressure and if I can get her out of the house it'll help mine too!"

"And the kids are driving me crazy!"

"Always saying their bored. Nothing to do."

And can I drop off my 2 yr. old twins while I'm here?

I really do need some time to myself.

AND,.....What's all this going cost?

If it doesn't work can I get my money back?

CONSUMERS BUYING PRODUCTS

BUT we know what the REAL products are that we sell.

NO SALES....NO COUPONS.....NO REBATES

The real products that the YMCA stuffs your grocery bag never wear out, never in need of parts and they come without batteries.

Share them.....and they multiply.

What these shoppers are really looking for is to feel good about themselves and maintain a healthy, balance in their lives, SPIRITUALLY, PHYSICALLY and EMOTIONALLY despite all the turmoil that may be going in their lives.

They want a sense of well-being for themselves and for their families.

That person who wants to look better?

What they really want is to feel a sense of self worth, a sense of self- respect. And they'd like to have fun doing it **and maybe even meet some good friends along the way.**

And for that lazy husband sitting at home?he'll find all kinds of energy at the YMCA.

A few hours of being 19 years old again with a crowd of other 50 year old teenagers on a basketball court makes life bearable again.

What he really stuffs in his grocery bag is a little bit of inflated ego..... pride in what he found he can accomplish..... a sense of belonging and the companionship that comes with sharing time with good friends who share some of the same experiences and day to day concerns that he has.

He'll leave with a new perspective on what's really important in life.

Hopefully, he'll bring some home to share with his family.....his wifeand his children.

Maybe he'll even have enough to take into work the next day.

And that aging Mom with high blood pressure?

She'll find that medicine doesn't have to taste bad..... that there are lots of others who share her lifestyle and would enjoy her company each and every day!

And the kids. Well, their choices are endless.

They can learn to swim, catch a baseball, throw a football, hit a racquetball or tennis ball, throw a six foot 200 lb guy to the mat, build a campsite, walk a mile or run a marathon.

They can challenge themselves to sleep out in the woods, climb up and jump off a 50 ft. tower.

They can be a lifeguard, a babysitter, a mentor, a friend, or just hang out with friends who enjoy the same things they do.

They can be who they are!

IN TIME..... People come to “FEEL” what it is the YMCA provides.

They feel a sense of belonging, and in control of their own lives.

They come to value themselves and they start recognizing that value in others in much the same way.

When they finally check out we hope that they are satisfied with their purchasesjust like any other business.

AND.....When they leaveIF.....

Their doctor says their hearts are stronger **they feel satisfied.**

If their Hearts really ARE **stronger...bigger..... more sensitive and more compassionate**, then we're satisfied.

If they feel like their minds are clearer and the weight of the world has been lifted from their shoulders for a short time.....**they're satisfied.**

If their minds really ARE **CLEARER..... BROADER and more Open.....**and they take some of that back home to their families or into work to share with co-workers the next day.....we're satisfied.

If their bodies are stronger and their doctors say “you're taking good care of yourself”, then **they're satisfied.**

If they **REALLY ARE Stronger.....**Strong enough to reach out and lift someone else up, we're satisfied.

If they look in the mirror, like what they see and are able to buy their clothes a size smaller, **they're satisfied.**

If they **stop measuring what's on the inside by what they see on the outside**, then we're satisfied.

When that happens, we have succeeded in preparing peopleto be better parents, better spouses, better kids, better employees and better employers.

We have started on our way toward strengthening the foundation of our community.