



LIVING

PHILANTHROPY

A CONVERSATION WITH
PHILANTHROPIST LEA CULVER

In 1984, Lea Culver co-founded Culver's, a fast-casual restaurant chain that now has more than 700 locations in the U.S. Ever since the business's founding, Lea's cultivation and strengthening of supportive relationships with local communities has been a primary driver of company success. Both Lea's recognition of the role that local families have played in company growth and her passion for philanthropy have led her to leverage the business as a platform from which to give back to both employees and the community. The cornerstone of the Culver's Foundation, the company's not-for-profit arm, is an employee scholarship program, and the community-based mission of the foundation consists of charitable giving to local organizations and causes. We recently sat down with Lea at Culver's headquarters in Prairie de Sac, Wisconsin, to discuss the work of the Culver's Foundation, her personal approach to giving and her efforts to engage the next generation in philanthropy.

Brown Brothers Harriman: Tell us about what motivated you to become a philanthropist. What values and life experiences led you to be so charitably inclined?

Lea Culver: I have always tried to give back as much as I can, and it goes back to the example my parents gave me while I was growing up. They did not have a lot of money to donate, but they gave back with their time and talent.

In 1984, when we opened Culver's, we were mindful that we did business in a small town, where everyone helps one another. Once we were established, we started giving back to the community as much as we could. I always thought that was important because the community supported us in the beginning and helped us survive those first few years. Giving back became a core of our business.

I really believe that one of the best ways to serve other people is in the restaurant business. People come in with things on their mind, and it's our opportunity to give them a great experience. That was one of our key values – that we welcome everyone in and make them feel like guests in our own home. Sometimes it might be the only smile they get for the day. You never know why they are coming in, so always make their time with you as pleasant and wonderful as you can.

BBH: Talk about the work that is being done through the Culver's Foundation.

LC: The Culver's Foundation is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit entity that we started in 1993. The cornerstone of the foundation is a scholarship program. We have talented young people working with us, and we believe our responsibility is to help instill a good work ethic in them and give them the tools that they need to succeed.

We developed the scholarship program at the suggestion of one of our suppliers. He said our young employees did an amazing job and asked if we ever considered giving back with a scholarship. We didn't have any extra money at that time, so the supplier donated the first \$500 for a scholarship. That started growing, and this year we will give over half a million dollars to young people who are working at Culver's and continuing their education. The scholarships are for one-, two- or four-year accredited programs and range from \$2,500 to \$3,500.

The other part of the foundation is our charitable giving. As time went on, I started working less in the restaurant and



focusing more on the foundation and the charitable giving.

BBH: What other organizations do you support through the foundation?

LC: Our mission is to support children, education and overall family well-being. At first, it was organizations in our own community – schools, churches and parks, for example. As we’ve grown and people start recognizing that we have a foundation, we get requests for donations from farther away. Our franchisees really support their local communities so that we can narrow our geographic focus.

BBH: So the franchisees are self-directed when it comes to philanthropy?

LC: Yes, and one of the reasons I think they choose Culver’s is because we emphasize supporting our communities. They’re individually owned and operated, so we don’t really have a say in what they do, but we certainly instill that when you move into a community, you don’t simply move in as a business. You move in as a partner, knowing that you’re going to help make the community a better place. They give back in a variety of ways, but one of the significant efforts that many of them undertake is hosting a “share night,” where an organization comes in and presents to visitors and receives a certain percentage of that night’s profits.

BBH: Tell us about your personal philanthropy and how that has evolved over time.

LC: There is a lot of talk lately about philanthropy. I never thought of myself as a philanthropist. I used to think of a philanthropist as someone who makes significant financial donations, but I have a new philosophy because I looked up philanthropist in the dictionary. A philanthropist is a person who seeks to promote the welfare of others, so everyone can be a philanthropist.

As I talked to friends, I started thinking about “living philanthropy.” Anyone can be a philanthropist every day simply by doing something to make the world a better place for someone else – buying someone a cup of coffee, donating to the food pantry, taking old clothes to a donation bin or simply talking to someone who is lonely. A lot of it is giving back



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to the community that supports you. Sometimes it’s just helping in the moment and doing whatever you can to make the world better for someone else.

I’m involved in several organizations that I’m passionate about. One is Gio’s Garden, which is a therapeutic respite center for parents of children with disabilities who need constant care. If these parents can’t get a break, the whole family suffers, so we give them that respite, and they know their kids are taken care of.

In addition, about six years ago, two friends and I quietly launched “Women on a Mission.” The idea was to bring women together to help make our small hometown community an even better place to live. We each bring \$100 to a quarterly, one-hour meeting. If we are working on a community project or

know of a specific need in the community schools or nonprofit organizations, we put our name in a basket. As the meeting begins, three names are drawn, and those are the women who have an opportunity to present their idea to the group. After we have heard all three, the group votes, and one is chosen. All dollars go to the same cause. Anywhere from \$8,000 to \$10,000 is presented as an unexpected gift. We do not advertise what we do; it is all word-of-mouth, and together we make good things happen. We keep it easy to give and do not ask for thanks. It is a perfect example of “living philanthropy.” One of the benefits of gathering quarterly is that we all learn from each other. Who knew how many children went to school needing socks and underwear that fit and were without holes? Some things are taken for granted.

BBH: You are also involved in Big Dreamers United, which focuses on helping nonprofits with marketing. Tell us about this project and what drove you to get involved.

LC: I was speaking with a friend who had his own production company, and he explained that a lot of his favorite work was for nonprofits because they typically don’t have a marketing budget, but they still have to tell their story. Otherwise, how can they get other people to be passionate about what they are doing and to donate? We’ll help organizations with their marketing efforts, from putting together videos to designing invitations to helping put on an event – whatever they need.

We’re in our second year, and we have nonprofit status. We’re starting to raise funds and get people to believe that if we help nonprofits tell their story, it’s a great benefit to the organizations. I know that when I would give to an organization, I would always want my contribution to go to the nonprofit’s programs, until I started looking at it from a different angle: If budgeting limits an organization’s ability



to share its mission and story, how can it ensure that it is reaching and moving the widest possible audience?

BBH: How do you evaluate the impact that you are making on the organizations and communities you support?

LC: People often ask how you can quantify and know the results and impact of what you're doing. It's hard to know, but if you impact one life, it's worth the donation. You might not know until five or 10 years later, if ever, but you just do it because you know it's right.

BBH: Tell us about engaging your children in philanthropy. How has that evolved over time?

LC: My daughters understand that we grew Culver's by taking care of families, so they always knew that we give back. They're all young adults now, so they're starting to look at things in their community and want to help.

We talk a lot about philanthropy. Whenever I get a chance, I share what I am focused on, and I run all my donation decisions by them. We have a family

foundation that they are involved in and that I hope they will run someday, and we are working together to establish an official mission statement.

Our conversations about philanthropy are organic, but the girls are on the board of the family foundation, so we have official meetings. In addition, to help prepare them to take over, they come to all our Culver's board meetings as observers. Several years ago, we decided it was important for the next generation to come and learn what it's like to be on a board. The first time I joined a board, I didn't know the expectations, and I've come to realize that the earlier you can start learning, the better.

They're learning, and I will keep teaching them as much as I can.

BBH: What advice would you give somebody who is just getting involved in philanthropy?

LC: Whenever you see the opportunity to do something that helps another person, do it. That's how it all starts. Then, follow your heart.

If you're going to give a big amount, you do want to do some research on impact to make sure it makes a difference for the future. But sometimes you need to help right now, and if there's an immediate need, help take care of it.

I try to lead by example. A few years ago, I was evaluating what I wanted my legacy to be and whether my actions were going to achieve that. I kept thinking back to my daughters. I want them to understand what I believed in and to make sure that they're strong women and that they know they can make a difference. I didn't always feel that I could make a difference. I believe it more now, but I don't want my children to wait that long. I want them to believe in themselves and know that right now, every day, they can make a difference. That's the legacy I want to leave for them, and if I'm leaving it for them, hopefully I'm leaving it for a lot of other people.

BBH: Lea, thank you for sitting down with us. ■

Interview conducted by Jake Turner and Karin Prangle, and article written by Kaitlin Barbour.



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