

A New Hub For Nonprofits



This is the outside of the new Emerald Foundation Community Center, at the former Jewish Community Center.

Emerald Foundation buys vacant JCC building, starts events and programs

TIM MEKEEL | Staff Writer Dec 6, 2016

Joe Besecker doesn't need more to do. He's already up to his elbows in work.

As the founder of Leola-based Emerald Asset Management, he oversees 68 employees and \$4.7 billion in assets under management.

Still, Besecker wants to see greater impact from the company's charitable arm, the Emerald Foundation, which he also started and leads.

Instead of continuing to have the foundation simply raise and give funds to local causes, Besecker wants the foundation to start serving people and organizations directly too.

So when the vacant Jewish Community Center property came up for sale, and the JCC's president told him that deals with four or five possible buyers fell through, Besecker jumped in — jammed schedule or not.

The Emerald Foundation bought the 2120 Oregon Pike building this fall for \$1.55 million, with Besecker and his wife Martha personally guaranteeing the mortgage.

"There's never a good time to do something big. You can always find reasons not to do things," explained Besecker.

"Steve Jobs (the late co-founder of Apple Inc.) used to say he didn't want to be the richest man in the cemetery. He wanted to wake up every day and think, 'Can I do something wonderful?'"

"We have plans to try to do something wonderful."

The 8.9-acre property in Manheim Township includes a 29,800-square-foot building, constructed in 1973, as well as a swimming pool,

tennis courts, baseball field, pavilion and playground.

It stood mostly empty for the past two-and-a-half years, rarely being used, according to Besecker.

"Our foundation is small. But Martha and I stepped up and did this because having a physical plant will get us to be able to execute the ideas we have," he said.

Plans for property

Besecker has dubbed the property the Emerald Foundation Community Center. Its building has been named The E.

The foundation intends to:

-- Rent The E's office space to nonprofits for their regular use (subject to township approval).

-- Rent The E's ballroom, gym and other facilities at a discount to nonprofits that want a place to hold fundraisers and other special events. (These facilities can be rented by the public too.)

-- Host the foundation's own programs and events at the property.

-- Develop additional ways to support nonprofits. Details are expected to be announced by the spring.

"The idea is to be a different kind of community center, a new age community center, one that takes the best ideas that we see around the states and tries to deploy them," said Besecker.

Besecker wants the community center to be "a hub of activity," drawing a mix of users that



reflects the county's diversity.

If The E's inaugural event is any indication, the community center will be all that.

A "Fall Family Fun Fest" in late November drew 300 children, youths and adults from the city, suburbs and outlying county.

There were e-sports such as Madden '17 and League of Legends, dance lessons, cupcake decorating, arts and crafts, hair braiding and nail painting, a scavenger hunt and free-throw shooting competition.

Of course, running a community center takes money, a reality that Besecker is well aware of.

He expects to fund its operation largely by seeking donations from companies that Emerald Asset Management knows from researching investment opportunities.

Emerald Asset Management makes more than 2,000 visits a year to companies.

"We're not going to do this through bake sales. We're going to do it by reaching out to the business community. We have great relationships with public companies," said Besecker.

Acquiring the JCC property represents a new



Joe Besecker, founder of the Emerald Foundation, stands next to inspirational quotations on the walls of its new home, the former Jewish Community Center building on Oregon Pike.

direction for the six-year-old foundation.

Until now, the foundation has focused on raising and distributing money.

Over the past five years, the foundation plus Emerald Asset Management itself have given about \$400,000 to 70-plus charities, mostly involved in education, youth and health care research.

But even though the foundation paid less than half of the JCC's asking price of \$3.4 million for its new home, the cost of acquiring and renovating the property have prompted the foundation to temporarily reduce the amount of money it awards in 2017.

Instead, the foundation will focus on launching its new location and programs, helping nonprofits by welcoming them to use its community center and developing those new supports.

"It's just the beginning. There's more to come," said Laurie Cubell, recently hired as the foundation's first executive director.

Deep roots

Besecker's commitment to the foundation comes out of a lifelong dedication to supporting charities, starting when he was a youth.

Besecker, his siblings and their mother, a nurse, and father, a pediatrician, distributed holiday food baskets to the needy and volunteered with Catholic Charities.

Their family welcomed foster children into their home as well.

Besecker kept supporting charities while graduating from Lancaster Catholic High School and St. Joseph's University, and working for Merrill Lynch after college.

Martha Besecker said her husband maintained that mindset even when he opened Emerald Asset Management in 1991, starting with zero dollars under management.

Now 59 and leading a nationally known firm, the father of four still hasn't wavered from that principle.

"I believe if you're part of a community from a business perspective, you should be part of the community in all respects. Often we fall back on, we don't have enough time. That doesn't fly with me," he said.

As part of that philosophy, Besecker encourages all of his employees to get involved in charities, by donating time or money or both.

His workforce has had "100 percent participation" in charities for more than a decade, he said.

"I challenge everybody at Emerald Asset Management to work on whatever they like, whatever they want to do — you can be into the environment, you can be into cats — whatever nonprofit you can work with to Management to work on whatever they like, whatever they want to do — you can be into the environment, you can be into cats — whatever nonprofit you can work with to make things better," said Besecker.

Cubell comes to the foundation with an impressive resume of service in both the business and nonprofit arenas.

Most recently a self-employed business consultant, Cubell is a former Armstrong World Industries and Kraft Foods executive who holds an MBA from Harvard Business School.

She also is a former board president of Aaron's Acres, a local nonprofit once based at the JCC that serves children and young adults with special needs.

(Aaron's Acres now is in the Greenfield Corporate Center. The JCC now operates "without walls," President Steve Zuckerman said, meaning it holds its events mostly at the different temples around Lancaster.)

Cubell described Besecker as "a visionary with a big heart. He knows how to get things done."

Joining Cubell as foundation employees are three other new hires: Milzy Carrasco as development adviser, and former JCC employees Kym Yeager as administrative assistant and Ian Black as facilities manager.

"If you have the right process and you have the right people, you'll get performance," said Besecker.

First ventures

Initial plans for The E call for leasing office space to the Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, which would move from downtown Lancaster, and leasing space for classrooms to NHS Human Services, to serve students who have emotional support needs or a diagnosis of autism.

Both these uses require township approval, as they would make The E a multi-tenant building on land that's zoned residential, said Cubell.

The E already is hosting other activities.

Most notably, the foundation has launched a technology center there for students. Its pilot program has 10 Lancaster Catholic High School seniors doing digital mapping and other tasks for MeetBall, a Doylestown-based



company whose investors include Besecker.

MeetBall helps the hosts of large events (such as auto races or festivals) communicate with attendees via their smartphones and helps attendees find friends and points of interest the same way.

Besecker's son Jeb, a Lancaster Catholic senior, picked nine classmates to join him in the pilot program, which earns them school credit. From starting out a month behind schedule, the group's production now is two months ahead.

Upgrading The E's electrical and technology systems, in part so the center could operate there, cost \$40,000 to \$50,000, Besecker estimated. That accounts for the biggest share of the \$100,000 spent on renovations so far.

"We need to make the building a really nice building, but we prefer to spend money on services than facilities," said Besecker.

Also at The E, several private schools are using its gym for basketball practice at student-friendly times.

In addition, the foundation is exploring using the building's cafe, planting a large garden and installing an audio and video production studio, among other possible initiatives under study, to enrich the lives of students, said Besecker and Cubell.