

COMMENTARY

The heart business



rogerWILLIAMS

rwilliams@floridaweekly.com

These old terms seem as lifeless now as dead cows: philanthropist, humanitarian, altruist, volunteer, community organizer, community leader, Good Samaritan, benefactor, patron, sponsor, supporter or financial provider.

They just lay there without breath, like something that won't move unless it's zapped with a cattle prod, at least to my ear.

By comparison, a term like sugar daddy doesn't have to beg for blood. It gets up and dances, even if it's dressed like a moll at a Viennese waltz and completely inappropriate in meaning (besides being a cliché nowadays, to boot).

Wish I could use it, but I can't. None of those words do any good anymore when they get attached to real people, because they don't give you the full Monty, the big meaning.

I suppose they're necessary, but they convey nothing of the passion and determination some people have for getting something done that will help other people, without immediate profit to themselves.

Or even at great cost to themselves.

So what could we really call them?

I was reminded of this after my conversations last week with the people you'll meet on the front page of the business section in this issue of *Florida Weekly*.

Every so often the stereotype of a driven, successful business owner willing to climb

over the bodies and careers of the less greedy is thrown up like a clay pigeon, and blown apart by the other kind — someone as far from the stereotype as it's possible to be.

Take the case of John Remington, a Neapolitan builder. When you go to his Web site, www.avernonallenbuilders.com, you see photographs of sumptuous and spectacular houses for the well-to-do — homes the likes of which most Americans can only dream of living in or owning, and places the rest of the world maybe can't even imagine (especially if they don't have a computer).

Mr. Remington's company builds those houses. Must be another fat cat making his way on the backs of other people, according to the law of some fellow named Monty Burns: "Family, religion, friends... these are the three demons you must slay if you wish to succeed in business."

A to-hell-with-everybody-else kind of guy, right?

Absolutely dead wrong.

For more than two decades, Mr. Remington has quietly and personally funded boatloads (literally) of Collier County students and teachers who do an Outward Bound course in the Florida Keys every spring (Neapolitan philanthropist Lavern Gaynor helps, too — there's that dead word, again, philanthropist).

There's nothing in it for Mr. Remington except helping somebody else — oh, and he sits on the national board of Outward Bound, too.

Or take Raimond Aulen and David Yates in the City of Palms. Successful men. Downtowners. Owners, respectively,

of a destination nightspot in the historic district (the Indigo Room) and a busy firm that manages computer networks for business and government (Geeks-R-US, a name that betrays some of Mr. Yates's irrepressible, sometimes droll humor).

Due to their two-year personal effort to rescue, clean and restore the bricks that had lain for decades under asphalt downtown, the historic district is now much more beautiful. First, though, they had to convince skeptical and ponderous Fort Myers city officials that we could forever benefit from the resurrection and use of those bricks one more time.

Now, the rest of us can literally walk where Thomas Edison and Henry Ford once walked, the echoes of their history mixing with ours.

What distinguishes these men and women from other successful business people who don't put themselves out for the greater good?

I don't know. Good mothers and fathers, maybe? Anti-me genetics? A bad knock on the head earlier in life? A fatal lack of greed brought on by toxic water supplies? Too much love and not enough suffering in the early years? A hard-nosed elementary school teacher who forced them to memorize the Golden Rule, whether they liked it or not?

It's anybody's guess.

Their experiences and habits are noteworthy, though.

Mr. Remington is a veteran of several Outward Bound courses himself, and those tend to be rustic at a minimum, and fairly rugged on occasion. I spoke to him the first time as he helped a nephew learn to water ski on a lake in New Hampshire.

Mr. Aulen, whom I met in the midday sun at Centennial Park in Fort Myers, was

crouched under bleachers and oblivious of the heat — about 190 degrees in the shade, with no wind — while he tried to set up his own sound equipment, which he'd donated to a July 4 downtown party at the park.

He used to walk five or 10 miles through woods in his bare feet along the river, and may still when time allows.

And Mr. Yates, who studied urban planning at Florida State University before coming back home to Fort Myers to become a computer wiz, doesn't look like he could put in half of even one day in the sun. But he did eight months of work, beginning at 7 a.m. every single weekend, before he could convince the city to recycle the old bricks.

He learned to drive a front-end loader — a donation to the brick project on downtown streets from their friend, Rick Simpson — and he also hurt his right shoulder picking up and tossing thousands of broken bricks for all those months. There's not a molecule of complaint in him about that, either.

You'll get a lot of these details in the story, but they bear repeating here.

What's extraordinary about all this is that those men have never asked for or sought a single penny, and each spent thousands of dollars unasked (Mr. Aulen hired laborers every weekend for months to help clean bricks).

In each case, these men are both generous and determined.

If they didn't seek money, they weren't looking for thanks, either.

So maybe we call them Heartists, or Make-rights, or Do-gooders, or Get-betters, or Wingmen or Wingwomen. Or maybe not.

But whatever we call them, let's thank them, and mean it.

Here's to the Heartists. ■

"You can expect a friendly smile from a familiar face."

— John Ammons, Vice President (pictured with Willy Ocasio, Customer Service Representative, left and Pat Shelton, Teller, right)

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