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Corporate Citizenship Summit

Built to last: Suffolk's Fish embodies will to overcome

CEO's push to give back draws on lessons learned growing up

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If it's true that to those who are given a lot, a lot is expected, John Fish is more than exceeding his potential.

As the CEO of **Suffolk Construction Co.**, one of the largest general contractors in the country, Fish has his fingers in just about every notable development project in the area. He has operations in four states and projects touching virtually every segment of the U.S. economy — universities, hospitals, senior housing facilities, hotels, office buildings and retail stores are among his long list of customers.

But growing his business and making money are only parts of Fish's impressive story; it's not all Fish does, and that's not all he is.

Indeed, his construction-industry acumen is matched by a deep commitment to philanthropy and social leadership, particularly when it comes to inner-city youth.

At 48, Fish sets a philanthropic agenda for himself as well as his staff, a policy that affects everyone from Suffolk's chief financial officer to its skilled laborers on the front lines. Suffolk, which is headquartered in Roxbury, may not be the right company for everyone, he acknowledges, and that's just fine with him.

Among Fish's best known philanthropic undertakings was the construction of the Camp Harbor View summer camp on Boston Harbor's Long Island. Suffolk completed the project in less than three months. Other major charitable projects include the renovation of the **Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston's Yawkey Club of Roxbury** in 2006.

He also is one of the leaders of the Archdiocese of Boston's 2010 Initiative to improve the vitality and quality of the region's Catholic schools. As part of that effort, Suffolk has already built a new Catholic school in Brockton and is planning another in Dorchester.

“He has this incredible drive to help. It’s not about the money for him anymore. He has money. It’s about doing good,” said Jack Connors, a philanthropist and the longtime CEO and chairman emeritus of advertising agency Hill Holliday in Boston, who worked with Fish to build Camp Harbor View in 2007.

Fish grew up in Hingham, an ambitious son in a well-to-do family with strong ties to the construction industry and a passion for entrepreneurship. He said he was a South Shore boy who “never went without.”

His comfortable suburban upbringing, however, did not cushion his struggle with dyslexia, a learning disorder that often goes undiagnosed and has sidetracked many a child’s education. For Fish, it just meant he’d have to work harder than everyone else.

“Being young, being vulnerable, knowing I may not be able to live a dream — I’ve never forgotten that,” Fish said during a recent interview. “My story is not one that is in need of any sympathy. But as a young person having a handicap and learning from a different perspective, you can appreciate how people deal with you on a personal level. People reached out to me, and I gained a sense of confidence.”

Fish built on that confidence, and, tough as it was, he credits the challenge he faced with the success he’s achieved. “I’d rather be taught to fish than being given a fish. Your sense of appreciation is greater than people who show up on game day and play the game,” he said.

Among his earliest role models was Dick Duffy, his football coach at **Tabor Academy** in Marion. “He made an impression on me. He told me to never forget where I came from. I guess I’ve taken that to a whole new level.”

Now it’s Fish’s turn to teach the fishing.

“When people first got to Camp Harbor View, they thought, ‘Why are we here?’ It was cold and windy. Nothing had been done on this piece of land,” said Fish. “Then a bulldozer showed up. ... It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to see it happen before your own eyes. Those kids’ faces as they drove up on the busses and saw what was built for them. It was a galvanization of people’s dreams and beliefs.”

The Roxbury youth who frequent the neighborhood’s renovated **Boys & Girls Club of Boston Yawkey Club** will not forget, either. They had been crammed in a small and outdated facility for years.

When the Boys & Girls Club was ready to renovate and expand, Fish was at the table. At the time, he was a member of the organization’s board. But when he took a glance at the previously hired contractor’s bloated budget, Fish opted to step down from his advisory post and do the work himself.

Fish, who has rejoined the Boys & Girls Clubs board, donated \$1 million in cash, in-kind donations and materials to the 44,000-square-foot project.

“I don’t think there was anyone more proud of what his team had achieved or what our institution had achieved than John,” said Linda Whitlock, the former CEO of the Boys and Girls Club.

The Camp Harbor View experience created something of a team in Fish and Connors, and they are working together again on the 2010 Initiative for the Archdiocese of Boston, an effort spearheaded by Cardinal Sean O’Malley. Connors is handling the fundraising; Fish is on construction.

Fish acknowledges that his passion alone will not hammer the nails, lay the floor boards, paint the walls or tack down the shingles at each charitable project. Rather, he also needs — or expects — buy-in from Suffolk’s 900 employees.

To help with that effort, the company is in the process of launching what it calls the **Red and Blue Foundation**, a non-profit organization that will organize and structure Suffolk Construction’s fundraising, employee volunteer programs and charitable partnerships. Last year, Suffolk estimates that its employees donated 3,750 hours to Massachusetts-based nonprofits through a variety of different initiatives.

“We’ve built a culture in our organization, a culture of being respectful and giving back,” Fish said. “I tell people candidly that we’re not the right company for everyone and we’re not willing to allow the culture to be diluted. This is not just about John Fish. It’s embedded in the organization.”