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Value Proposition

Thomas Lewis knows what's important.

Written by Leah Morrison

The definition of “values” is a funny thing. Everyone hears something different, even though the sound of the word doesn’t change. Some people may think of it as the act of cherishing something. Others define it from a moral standpoint. Whatever the case, people everywhere view the word differently. But there’s one man who can list his top six definitions and explain how he built a successful career and philanthropic philosophy out of them.

Thomas W. Lewis is a man of values. He even created a top home-building company based around a list of the ones he finds most important. He likes to bring value to everything he does, whether it is working out a contract with a client or looking to help a nonprofit in his home state of Kentucky. By being sure of where he stands as a person, Lewis confidently steps forward every day to meet any new challenge and try his best to bring good into the world. And boy, does he ever.

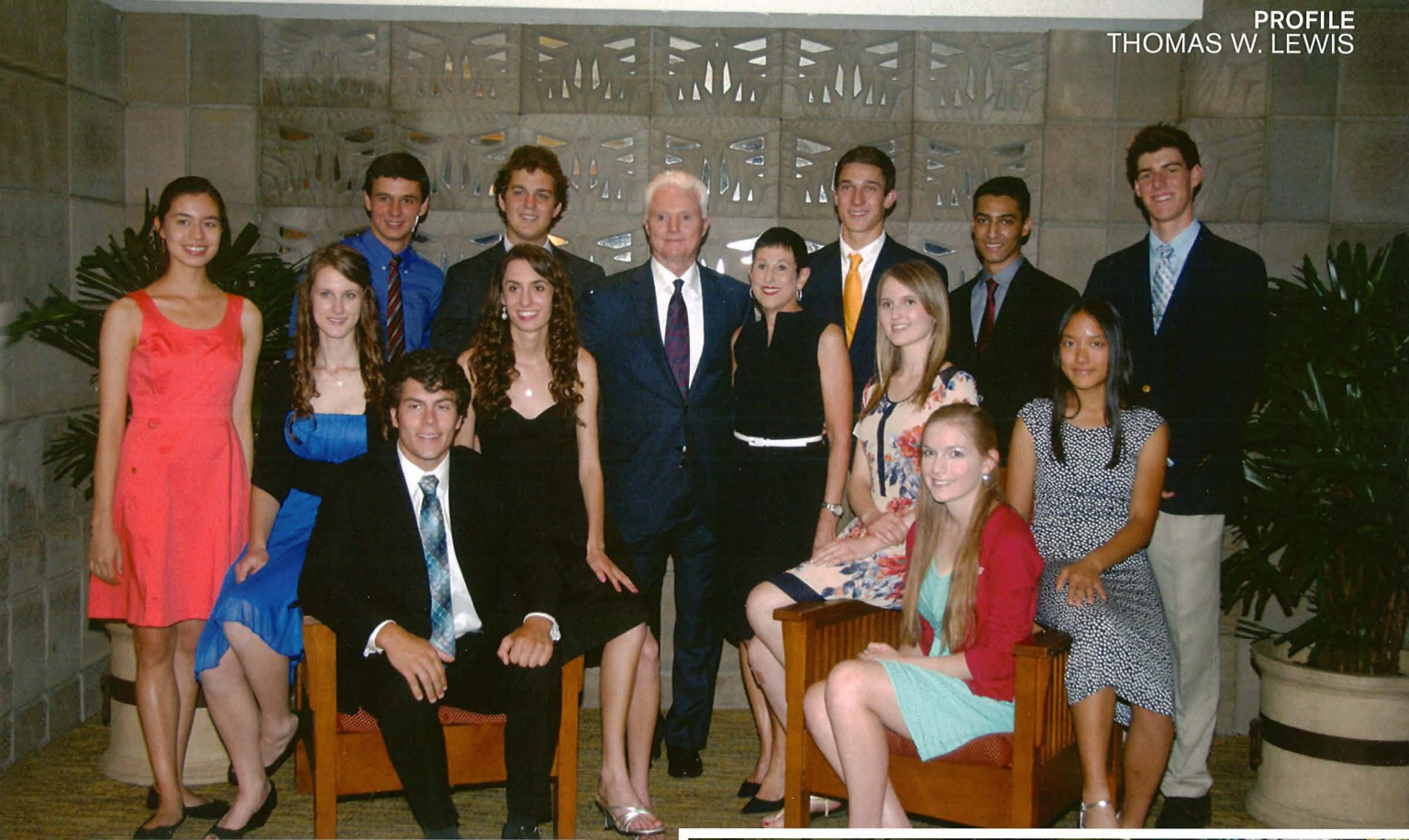
Lewis grew up in a military family, moving around a lot as his father, a naval officer, was stationed in various locations. In second grade alone he attended three different schools. His father retired when Lewis was 12 and the family moved to Lexington, Kentucky. Lewis was happy there, but often saw a different side of the state when he visited his grandparents each summer up in Eastern Kentucky. A rough area, he got to see first-hand how many people aren’t as fortunate as he was. “I was impacted by that,” he says, remembering the people who seemed down-and-out. “I got to know a lot of people up there on a very personal basis and had a lot of respect for them. I think that’s where I would trace my heart’s path in terms of a young child.”

After completing a degree in engineering at the University of Kentucky and earning an MBA at the University of North Carolina, Lewis dove headfirst into the world of homebuilders. It was then that he realized how much importance was placed on the quantity





A TW Lewis creation.



Lewis surrounded by recipients of the 12th T.W. Lewis Foundation scholarship awards.

of homes a company could produce, rather than the quality of them. In the 1970s he worked at a company where he was the head of customer care. “They [customers] would call me when they had a problem,” he says. “And there were hundreds and hundreds of problems.”

He remembers how men thought their wives would leave them because the state of their home was so bad. “If you really want to see a bad side of a person, mess with their home. A home is your castle. If you’ve had a problem with your house and somebody’s jacking you around on that, it gets real personal, real fast.”

He explains that there was no quality control. Homebuilders bragged about their business, not in terms of pleasing their client, but about how many homes they were able to construct in a year. Lewis thought that this was no way to do business. He continued working in the industry, finally settling in Phoenix, Arizona in 1979 to begin a job with UDC homes, before starting with Trammell Crow Co. in the late 1980s. When the opportunity arose to buy the company, he jumped on it, creating T.W. Lewis Company in 1991. It was then that he put all he had learned to create what was to become one of the most successful home-builder businesses in the state.

“I think I was one of the first homebuilders that decided to focus on quality,” he says. He set to work making a name for himself in customer care, rather than high numbers. Over the years he brought in consultants to help improve service and construction quality, instigating routine methodology in regards to caring for clients. “The reason homebuilders didn’t focus on the quality is that it was hard,” explains Lewis. “It took us at least 15 years to where we could really say we



Jan & Tom Lewis talking with University of Kentucky students.

OUTSIDE GROUP PHOTO BY MARK CORNELIUSON



L-R:
Jan & Tom
Lewis with UK
President Eli
Capilouto and
his wife Dr.
Mary Lynne
Capilouto

were a quality company. We just had to keep trying things. Some things worked and some things didn't."

Not only was he determined to embrace the concept of quality over quantity, but Lewis also decided to create a business built on what he believed were some of the most important values to live by: hard work, honesty, integrity, reliability, achievement, and compassion. Calling them his "motivating values," Lewis wanted to have a clear purpose for his new company and believed that values explain action and control behavior. Over the past 24 years, he thought about swapping these tenants out for new ones that may be more relevant. "Every few years I go back and question those values. I go, 'Are those still the big six?' I've done that many times and I can't replace any of them."

By the time Lewis turned 50, he felt he was at a crossroads. He had a thriving business, but nothing seemed to thrill him anymore. "I was kind of getting bored with it," he says. "It wasn't totally satisfying." Instead of become a cliché and buying a motorcycle to settle his uneasiness, Lewis became inspired by the most unusual of things: a shoebox. He recalls a moment when he was reading the side of one and there was a phrase about the manufacturer that caught his attention. "It said that this company donates ten percent of its revenue to charity," he says. "And I thought, 'Well, what if I just donated ten percent of our profits to create a private foundation and begin a charitable endowment?'"

He did just that. He and his wife, Jan, launched the T.W. Lewis Foundation in 2000 and began donating to a wide array of causes, including universities, community youth groups, environmental organizations, and children and family nonprof-

its. When asked why he insists on donating to a variety of organizations, instead of just a certain group, he thinks carefully before answering. "There are a lot of problems out there," he begins. "I got my first look at that in Eastern Kentucky when I spent the summers up there."

He goes on to explain that his foundation does more than just pledge money. "We try to work with organizations that we think are effective with what they do and are willing to grow." In fact, the foundation tries to take more of an entrepreneurial approach when it comes to helping organizations. If a nonprofit is looking to expand their services and wanting to reach more people, the T.W. Lewis Foundation works with them to become a partner, helping them get more private donors and offering to match gifts made by other people. They pay close attention to staffing, budgets and fundraising, and work intimately with them to grow their operation to be the best that they can be, and to bring services to people in need.

Of all the causes his foundation donates to, Lewis seems to have a soft spot for the ones with educational benefits. Selected high school seniors are awarded scholarships to attend university, something Lewis believes can shape the next generation. "That [the scholarship program] is evolving more into creating

Thomas W. Lewis



leaders and entrepreneurs; that's the real idea there," he says. "We're trying to help develop the young people in college that have the tools to become great, impactful leaders and entrepreneurs."

When asked if there was one specific donation he was most proud of, Lewis doesn't miss a beat: it is the \$23 million his foundation just gave to the University of Kentucky. "That was just an easy decision for me to make," he says. "It's creating an Honors College at a state university that I went to and loved, a state that I really care about." He is excited about the snowball effect he hopes the donation will have on the small school. "Now they've got a rallying point around academic excellence. Not that they didn't have that before," he laughs, "but this will really become the focal point of their academic reputation. So they're going to attract a lot of new donors to this."

When told that, on top of everything else, it was the largest donation ever received by the school, Lewis responds humbly. "I'm proud of that. I guess it's kind of fun to have a record."

Humble and hard working seem to sum Lewis up. He runs a highly successful homebuilders business in Arizona, but loves to follow college sports. He changes lives every day through his philanthropy, but looks forward to attending university football games with his sons.

And as for his values? "Show up. Have a plan. Be committed," he says simply. "When I say 'show up,' I mean work. Go to work, get there early, work hard, stay late. Put in a lot of time and keep getting better. Have a plan: How are you going to get there? What's the first step? If you want to accomplish something, you need a plan and you need to be self-directed. Be committed: When I started my homebuilding company, I had to be a thousand percent committed. You can't just stick your toe in the water, you have to jump in. If you really want to accomplish something, you can't be looking over your shoulder. There's no way out but forward." **LM**