



David Forsell: Dedicated to Keep(ing) Indianapolis Beautiful

By Tom Schuman

There are a lot of numbers one can cite when talking about Keep Indianapolis Beautiful (KIB) and its impact. But they don't tell come close to telling the story. In discussing the new headquarters that opened on the near east side of downtown just over two years ago, KIB President David Forsell says, "A green building project was a stretch for us (financially), but we thought if Keep Indianapolis Beautiful was not going to do it, who would. We're a sustainable story in every way we turn (inside and outside the building)."

There were nine full-time and two part-time employees when Forsell became president a little more than six years ago. Today, the full-timers have nearly doubled and there are 50 part-time/seasonal employees engaged in making Indianapolis a better place.

Forsell describes his passion and the organization's charge to make a difference.

BizVoice®: What drives you? Why do you enjoy what you do?

David Forsell: "For a long time, I tried to figure out if I was a workaholic or was I extremely motivated by my work. There's probably a little bit of both there. What's really compelling for me is that the work mission here and my personal mission, there's very little in terms of stuff that does not overlap.

"When you're helping a city be more vibrant, when you're helping the environment and you're helping people, you better be waking up with a smile on your face most mornings. The work is incredibly motivating, the differences that we make are tangible and it's not just about putting flowers in a pot or planting a tree; it's about what happens around those projects."

BV: Is part of the key to increase the number of people with the attitude of wanting to make a difference (45,000 people did volunteer with KIB in some form in 2009)?

DF: "Well, some people you are never going to move. What is important is leadership. One of the programs we have been doing for about 10 years is called Adopt a Block (which started as an anti-litter activity). Litter is still a big deal, still fundamental to what we are doing out there, but now we have 300 and 400 people doing it; we started with 30 or 40. And while they're picking up litter, what we are also doing is engaging them in leadership capacity building, skill building. These people are natural leaders and they tend to motivate others around them. So where

leadership is needed the most, it's starting to bud."

BV: Youth programs are at the core of KIB's mission. How long have you been doing some of those and what are the tangible results you see?

DF: "We had a desire and a need to plant trees to make sure that they live. We also saw in our community a great need to give young people an opportunity for work. A lot of these kids we are working with are making important contributions to their family incomes. We wanted to marry those two needs and, hence, came forth the Youth Tree Team effort. We started with one team of eight four years ago. ... Today, we have 40 teenagers and 10 young adults managing those teens.

"Again, we're looking at triple bottom line: environment, economy and society in everything that we are doing. We've had many kids come back year after year. What's really neat is looking at the trees up Meridian Street, or up College Avenue. Now, we're seeing trees flourishing; we're seeing young people flourishing and we're adding vibrancy and strength to our neighborhoods.

"There's one young man, who started with us as a freshman at Manual High School, who had family circumstances that were less than ideal. He was struggling in school. We weren't sure he was going to work out, but he kept at it and came back day after day, day after day. He came back the next year and the next. This year, he is leading young people; he is off to Purdue studying landscape architecture."

BV: As you look at the needs out there, do you ever get frustrated by not being able to do more, being limited by the resources you have?



Keep Indianapolis Beautiful staff and volunteers plant trees along Washington Street in Indianapolis. KIB President David Forsell mans a wheelbarrow in the distance.

DF: "Oh my gosh, yes. Absolutely. The Youth Tree Team is a great example. This spring we had 400 teenagers express interest in being part of the Youth Tree Team, and we had 15 spots to fill because 25 of our 40 from last year wanted to come back – and we wanted them to come back. There are only so many resources out there. We felt good, particularly in the economic environment we're working in, that we got back to the numbers from last year. We had to say goodbye to probably 90 kids who we would have loved to have given an opportunity, but just didn't have the resources to do it. While it's exciting that we have developed a reputation among young people, we felt really bad that we couldn't do more – and that was frustrating."

BV: When you have these projects, these thousands of volunteers, what emotion does that bring out in you?

DF: (After briefly describing a chronic illness he must contend with, he says) "I live rather urgently, which is both a blessing and curse. That sort of animates my professional life quite a bit. It's right in front of my face, about how life is short and one has to grab opportunity, whatever that is, and live life in a



Youth Tree Team members, with their staff leader, spread mulch – and learn responsibility while on the job.



On the Outside (and Inside)

A sampling of the key features of the Keep Indianapolis Beautiful headquarters (which occupies a former industrial lot that was once home to two different gas stations, a dry cleaner and a manufacturing operation):

- Pervious pavement and two rain gardens allow rainwater to filter into the soil
- Cistern that collects rainwater for reuse in watering trees and plants
- Preserving of 250,000 gallons of rainwater on the property saves taxpayers \$2,000 a year in stormwater treatment costs
- White roof reflects the sun's heat, rays and radiation
- Green fence allows vining plants to grow and provides additional building insulation
- Carpool parking spaces and bike racks (with shower and storage facilities for bikers)
- A central atrium that captures natural daylight
- Fluorescent lighting and energy efficient windows throughout the building
- A carpet assembled with unused scraps
- Total energy savings that approach \$10,000 a year

meaningful way and to somehow have made a difference. That is an urgency that I feel just about every day.

“When it’s that in front of your face, I just ask myself, ‘What will I do while I’m here?’ I want to live my life in a way that at the end of the day it was a life that mattered. When you see the kid who may not know where his next meal is coming from working next to a vice president of a bank or a utility executive, and you give people an opportunity to meet others and to have joy in a relationship that might not otherwise have happened, and you’re making a tangible difference that you hope would last for 30, 40 or 100 years in our tree planting efforts, for instance, I go to bed feeling pretty satisfied that I’m working on the right things.”

BV: What shaped some of your personal feelings?

DF: “Good old mom was a big influence on me. She had this sort of crazy urge to make a difference. My mother had this disease as well and spent a lot of time in Chicago getting medical care. She developed this relationship with this Puerto Rican low-income family on the near west side of Chicago, and brought us kids along for that ride. It wasn’t about charity; it wasn’t about ‘poor them’; it was truly about relationships. My mom was a big influence in terms of diversity and caring for people.

“Greg Fennig from Indianapolis Power & Light was a wonderful

influence for me. I learned a lot from him about family first, personal life first and operating from a level of trust in a work environment.”

BV: How has this building helped you realize your mission?

DF: “This building and these grounds embody our mission. It is the concrete example of our work. It is one thing to hear about our work or talk about our work or volunteer on a project, but when you can bring someone here and literally show them how we’ve walked the walk and not just talked the talk, that’s powerful.

“The 5% extra we spent on our green stuff, I don’t have any doubt that I’ve had more than that in return in terms of visibility and the value in the relationships in bringing people here to learn more about the work.”

BV: What is your one favorite thing about the building and grounds?

DF: “I think it’s this atrium behind me. That’s because literally what we’re doing is inviting the environment into the built experience. And that’s what we are doing every single day with our work. We love the natural light. We’re really proud of the culture here at Keep Indianapolis Beautiful and this was truly a statement of valuing people. This building had five windows, five, when we bought it. And they were those little industrial size kind.

“So one of our board members said, ‘You know what, we’ve budgeted for a cold, dark cave; you guys are going to have a cold, dark cave.’ I was like, ‘Maybe we can do just a little better than that.’ This was about valuing people who are doing hard work here and to create a place that was inviting and warm and motivating and pleasant.”

BV: Your web site identifies 10 things people can do to help out. Talk about that focus.

DF: “There is a valuable role that environmental advocates play. But it’s not ours. We decided a long time ago that we wanted to lead and be on the edge with a smile. We wanted to be a place that is welcoming and ... that we wouldn’t focus on difference; we would focus on commonality. What we have figured out is that we can move lots of people with lots of different ideas on lots of different subjects in common purpose around some of these things. That’s where we find our success.

“We do want to encourage people to do something. If I were to encourage someone to do one thing, it would be plant a tree, particularly in an urban context. Research is there that beyond air and water, trees contribute to economic vitality. ... And this one usually peaks an eyebrow. The University of Illinois did some research that suggests that green places are safer places. People tend to congregate more, know one another more and are less tense in places that have a view of nature, a place where they can go out and sort of decompress.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Keep Indianapolis Beautiful at www.kibi.org