

NOT *Strictly* BUSINESS

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Hardware store owner builds a case for 'voluntourism'

By **Mike Redmond**
Special to IBJ

There's a saying about faith: "Leap, and the net will appear."

Jeff Cardwell took the leap and hit a trampoline.

Seven years ago he was a Realtor, a builder and a member of several service, professional and neighborhood organizations. He owned a successful south-side lumber and hardware company. He volunteered for Habitat for Humanity. He was a regular churchgoer who thought he was doing his part by contributing to the missionary program, donating to the food pantry and feeling appropriately sad when he saw images of human suffering on the TV news.

Then he went as a grudging chaperone on a church trip to El Salvador and saw poverty and despair firsthand. He saw the smog, the brackish water, the disease and hardship—and knew he had to do more.

"It changed my life," he said, in what may accurately be called an understatement. He hasn't stopped bouncing since.

Today Cardwell is the voice and guiding spirit of a network called People Helping People, which does exactly what the name implies. He collects supplies and ships them to where they're needed. He keeps in close touch with a coast-to-coast collection of like-minded people, identifying places where they can help.

He swings a hammer on charity builds. He serves on more boards and committees—from local business organizations to international charity groups—than you can count on both hands. And he spreads the



People Helping People founder Jeff Cardwell loads donated medical supplies onto a truck at his south-side hardware store. The supplies are bound for Central America.

word, hosting the "People Helping People" radio program at 11 a.m. Saturdays on WICR-FM 88.7.

"Everybody's got a role to play," he said in a voice that carries the soft twang of his family's Kentucky background. "I connect the dots."

And Peyton Manning throws footballs.

When Cardwell connects the dots, 54 semi-trailer loads of goods go to the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, and 10 replacement houses are built in five days. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in donated medical supplies wind up stacked around the store, waiting to be shipped to Central America. Medical, construction and outreach teams make plans to visit

Guatemala and El Salvador.

And it all goes back to 2000, when he went along to El Salvador to mind some kids, including his daughter, from Grace Assembly of God in New Whiteland. At the end of a week, he had found a calling.

The experience changed him—and the way people saw him. As the builder of the prototype Do-It-Best Hardware and the owner of what its Web site says is the world's largest online hardware store, he frequently was called upon to give "How I Did It" speeches.

Now his speeches aren't about lumber and nails. They're about service—what he calls "Voluntourism: travel with a purpose." And they usually get him a new vol-

unteer or two.

Cardwell's passion for voluntourism has taken him halfway around the world. In 2005, he was a presenter at a global summit on peace through tourism in Thailand. Which raises a question about charity beginning at home.

"Some people will tell me 'There are needs here,' Cardwell said. 'I say, 'Yeah, there are. Tell me how I can help.'"

"He's so generous and so kind," said Hal Fryar, known to Indianapolis-raised baby boomers as Harlow Hickenlooper, host in the 1960s of "The Three Stooges Show" on what is now WRTV-TV Channel 6. A resident of Franklin, he met Cardwell when he appeared on the radio show to promote a fundraiser for a Johnson County girl who needed a liver transplant.

"At first, he reminded me a little bit of a bookworm, a studious individual," Fryar recalled. "But he's actually very engaging, and he really does have this great enthusiasm for helping people. When I was working on the liver transplant, he gave us all kinds of time. He's a very genuine guy."

Is it good business? Who cares?

"This is not about the bottom line," Cardwell said, his voice rising with excitement. "I've been very blessed, and I'm grateful. This is my way to show my gratitude.

"There's no lack of need, in El Salvador, in Thailand, here in our own yard," he said. "Let's put some service into action. I just want to go where the need is greatest. I wait for the door to open, and I go.

"You've just got to find your role... and step out in faith."*

*Know someone who makes a difference helping others despite the demands of work and family? E-mail "Doing Good" suggestions to doinggood@ibj.com.

A site to satisfy your Super Bowl ring fascination

It seems strange that a piece of jewelry that I won't own and will only see on passing occasions should hold my interest, but it does. And judging by how often I hear other people discussing Super Bowl rings, ("What do you think the design will look like?") "Will everyone in the Colts organization get one?" "How much will they cost?"), I suspect there are many others feeling the same.

Perhaps it's because this victory seems so sweet, so picture perfect. Could there have been a better way to slay all the demons in one compelling, dramatic, roller-coaster ride to the championship?



SURF THIS

Jim Cota

Or perhaps it's the inherent right of a season-ticket holder to have more than a passing interest. After all, we're all financing this purchase to some degree.

The ring has become the symbol of greatness, the talisman of a champion. It's no coincidence that players talk about winning the Super Bowl, often the pinnacle of their lifelong dreams, with references to the ring, not the game. Some players are ultimately judged in terms of "rings won." The game is the means; the ring is the end.

While pondering this recently, I came across a Web site created by ESPN that serves to address these feelings in all of us, tinyurl.com/292z54. This beautiful little site, so simple in design, so pointed in focus and purpose, takes a historical look back at all the Super Bowl rings commemorating every champion. Sure, the up-close-and-personal photos provide a perspective that

few of us will ever have otherwise, but the true jewels of the site are the stories behind the rings and their designs.

Some rings—and some championships—mean more than others. Even a passing fan can understand Jerome Bettis' need to be involved in the ring design after 13 seasons of effort. Says Bettis, "I thought to myself, 'This is my only one. I want to make sure it's done the right way.'" So he sought out owner Dan Rooney in the locker room after the game and asked to be involved. Rooney responded, "Tell you what, it'll be me and you." Just as it is for every player that wears one, that ring occupies a special place in Bettis' heart.

You can also read about Steve Young, who doesn't wear any of his three rings because he feels they're too flamboyant. "You're announcing to everyone in the room that you're there and they have to

deal with it," Young said. But the other (maybe real) reason? He's afraid to lose it.

Consider Walter Payton. He was serving as a volunteer assistant with a high school basketball team in 1996 when he gave the ring to a player to keep for a few days. Players passed it around among themselves and it eventually disappeared. Its return in 2001 is the stuff of legends.

In the end, all the rings are special and all have a tale to tell, but each subsequent ring loses some measure of importance from the first. I think that's why we care so much about this ring, this time. And why I'm looking forward to seeing the story of the Colts' first ring in 30 years added to the site.

And then we can get back to talking about winning the next one.*

*Cota is creative director of Rare Bird Inc., a full-service advertising agency specializing in the use of new technologies. His column appears monthly. He can be reached at jim@rarebirdinc.com.