

Building Stronger Communities

An Interview with John Kordsmeier,
Vice President, Strategic Philanthropy and Community Relations, Northwestern Mutual

EDITORS' NOTE John Kordsmeier has held his current post since November 2011. In this role, he also serves as President of the Northwestern Mutual Foundation. Kordsmeier has served in various leadership positions since he joined Northwestern Mutual 35 years ago. Previously, he served as Northwestern Mutual's Vice President of Disability Income. Prior to that, he was vice president of enterprise solutions and also held leadership positions in the company's new business and underwriting standards departments.



John Kordsmeier

Kordsmeier also serves on Northwestern Mutual's corporate diversity and human resources committees.

COMPANY BRIEF Northwestern Mutual (northwesternmutual.com) has helped clients achieve financial security for nearly 160 years. Northwestern Mutual and its subsidiaries offer a distinctive approach to financial security solutions including life insurance, long-term care insurance, disability income insurance, annuities, investment products, and advisory products and services. With more than \$217 billion in assets, \$26 billion in revenues, and more than \$1.5 trillion worth of life insurance protection in force, Northwestern Mutual delivers financial security to more than 4.2 million people.

Would you talk about how the Northwestern Mutual Foundation has evolved over the years?

Throughout our history as a company, we have been involved with charitable causes, especially in local markets where our employees and financial representatives live and work. Our foundation was founded in 1992, but our generosity to charity predates its inception by many decades.

We really value employee-led campaigns, which combine raising significant sums of money for nonprofits while empowering our employees to volunteer in leadership roles. Our employees have gotten behind two rather large community campaigns in the Milwaukee area: one is the United Performing Arts Fund and the other is United Way. We have participated in both for decades and we're among their leading corporate funders.

Our work in the foundation ties in with our corporate mission, which is to provide financial security for families. This is the bottom line in terms of our foundation philosophy. By strengthening families, we also strengthen communities, and by strengthening communities, we help increase our impact nationally.

The biggest change in focus for our foundation came in 2012, when we announced our first national philanthropic initiative aligned with childhood cancer. This effort built upon the company's legacy of helping children and families. We're funding research to find better treatments for childhood cancers and alleviate some of the residual effects that come from treatments that currently exist. In addition to research, our other goal is to provide support to children who are suffering from cancer and to their families.

Is there close coordination between the foundation and the company?

Absolutely, I joined this department in November of 2011 with the sole intent to integrate what we're trying to accomplish as a company and as a foundation. It transcends everything we do.

One of the best examples ties to our childhood cancer program. We have engaged our financial representatives and their staffs across the country in this cause, along with our employees, by implementing a range of community events and programs to raise awareness and money for dealing with childhood cancer.

Locally, it's very important to us that Milwaukee remains a community where the quality of life is high. We engage our employees by providing support for organizations that they care about, while also making Milwaukee a quality place for all residents.

How do you find the organizations with the right expertise to partner with?

On a broader basis, our foundation strategy is built around finding best-in-class partners that can collaborate with each other and with us to deliver a deep and sustainable impact.

For our Childhood Cancer Program, we needed to find an organization with a strong reputation for research. We had a specific strategy for finding one that funds innovative research.

We have 10 employees within our foundation who work with 77 Northwestern Mutual offices across the country, so we wanted to find partners that could work with us nationally. Plus, we wanted to find an organization where our commitment would substantially increase the likelihood that the organization would be successful going forward.

We went through a two-year process of evaluating what our cause would be and we selected Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation based in Philadelphia as our partner. It's an

organization that took only a little over 10 years to cross the \$100-million-raised threshold, which is significant.

With the work you're doing in Milwaukee, are you also partnering?

Absolutely, but there it's more disparate.

In Milwaukee, we have three key focus areas – improving education, revitalizing neighborhoods, and enhancing our hometown through cultural attractions. For our education area, we're looking at both in-school partners and out-of-school partners that have a track record of delivering on the outcomes and the measures that we seek to move.

One of the most important areas within this focus is advancing third-grade reading throughout Milwaukee, independent of what type of school it is. We want every child in the Milwaukee community to succeed.

The other two elements of our education strategy are advancing higher education, and providing strong mentoring and tutoring. By advancing higher education we're making it more available for first-generation students and people of color to attend college. We have tied that to our neighborhoods focus area by offering scholarships to attend local institutions to people who might not otherwise have the resources to attend college since they come from some of the more distressed neighborhoods within Milwaukee.

Our mentoring and tutoring programs ensure that those students with potential make a successful jump into post-secondary education and then stay in school and graduate.

Our neighborhoods focus area works to improve the quality of life for residents. We're working to help people in specific neighborhoods to organize themselves and to create a strategy for how they can improve the quality of life within their neighborhoods. We partner with them from a funding standpoint or assist them in finding funding partners to meet their goals.

The third element of our strategy involves Milwaukee as a destination. Through our foundation, we are investing in cultural organizations and events that significantly improve the quality of life for those living here and attract visitors to Milwaukee. We have always taken pride in calling Milwaukee and southeastern Wisconsin our home. As a company, we're backing up this belief with the construction and development of the Northwestern Mutual Tower and Commons, a 32-story office tower and common space that will serve as a symbol of our growth as a company and long-standing commitment to the Milwaukee community. ●