

# Making a Difference

## 25 Years of Stronger Communities

An Interview with Eric Christophersen,  
Vice President of Strategic Philanthropy and Community Relations, Northwestern Mutual

**EDITORS' NOTE** Eric Christophersen serves as President of the Northwestern Mutual Foundation. He joined Northwestern Mutual in 1984 and has held a variety of positions of increasing responsibility. Christophersen received a B.S. in management information systems in 1983 from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside and his M.B.A. from Marquette University in 1987.



Eric Christophersen

**COMPANY BRIEF** Northwestern Mutual ([northwesternmutual.com](http://northwesternmutual.com)) has been helping families and businesses achieve financial security for 160 years. Their whole-picture approach helps clients grow wealth with personalized investments while protecting what they've already built with insurance. With \$250.4 billion in assets, \$28.2 billion in revenues, and more than \$1.6 trillion worth of life insurance protection in force, Northwestern Mutual delivers financial security to more than 4.4 million people who rely on them for insurance and investment solutions, including life, disability income and long-term care insurance; annuities; trust services; mutual funds; and investment advisory products and services. Northwestern Mutual ranks 100 on the 2016 FORTUNE 500 and is recognized by FORTUNE® as one of the World's Most Admired life insurance companies in 2017.

### How critical is corporate social responsibility to the culture at Northwestern Mutual?

It's part of our DNA, in part because it comes from the top down. In virtually every community we serve, our financial professionals or employees are volunteering their time and talent to vital services and organizations.

Giving back isn't new to Northwestern Mutual. This year, we celebrate the 160th anniversary of the company, the 25th anniversary of our foundation, and the fifth anniversary of our national philanthropic program supporting childhood cancer research and providing crucial support to families whose children are fighting cancer. We are also dedicated and committed to our hometown of Milwaukee, investing in education, neighborhoods, cultural organizations, and events that significantly improve the quality of life for those living here.

Across the organization, we believe it's important that we play a leading role in the community. As a result of our CEO's leadership, we are recognized as a community leader, and the expectations are high. We have a tremendous number of employee

volunteers who have embraced the community, which has in turn embraced them.

### How do you define what "strategic philanthropy" means and how do those efforts help in making an impact?

All major cities have challenging issues. In Milwaukee, we are no different in that we too have many unique challenges. The strategic part comes in terms of figuring out how we can most effectively have the biggest impact in our community for every dollar invested. We

are a mutual company. That means we're spending policy owner dollars for everything we do. Where we choose to invest for impact has to be good for the business as well as the community; they're not mutually exclusive, and they support one another. "Strategic" philanthropy means business outcomes are being achieved at the same time we are making our community a better place to live and work.

### While it's important to do good, is it well understood that this also means doing good for the business?

Yes. We feel we have a responsibility to the communities in which we work. At the same time, if our philanthropic spend doesn't assist in driving business outcomes, it's not very strategic. The future workforce is increasingly coming from the millennial generation, and they have a strong focus on corporate citizenship and philanthropy. We won't attract the best talent for our workforce if we aren't good corporate citizens.

### Has the mission for the foundation remained consistent from the time it was created, and will you talk about how the signature program has developed and the impact it has had?

The foundation's mission over the past 25 years at the highest level remains the same. We exist to improve the lives of children and families in need through financial support and volunteerism in collaboration with community partners. In total, we have given back more than \$300 million since the inception of our foundation.

Today, we focus our efforts where we can have the greatest impact. Since 2012, we've been bringing hope to thousands of children and families through our national philanthropic program to fight childhood cancer. With the help of our employees and financial representatives and advisors, the company has contributed more than \$14 million to fund more than 155,000 hours of research and

provide support to families whose children are fighting cancer.

We chose childhood cancer as our national philanthropic cause because it is grossly underfunded. Only 4 percent of National Institute of Health funds go towards childhood cancer research. We see a future in which children and families can move beyond the fears of cancer and find happiness, because all kids deserve a chance to be kids. Working with our various partners, we're starting to see that we're making an impact.

### Is the key to being effective finding the right partners and building those relationships?

We believe that partnering with best-in-class organizations with the requisite expertise is the most effective approach. We provide funding, and they direct those dollars in partnership with us to where we can make the most impact. For childhood cancer, our national philanthropic partner is Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation. Through that partnership, we fund young investigators, meaning young researchers who are new to the childhood cancer research field who had yet to receive their first grant. This initial funding can help accelerate their careers. Some of these investigators have made material breakthroughs and have saved lives.

In local markets nationwide, we're working in partnership with various children's hospitals. In our hometown of Milwaukee, we partner with and fund Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. In 2015, The Northwestern Mutual Day Hospital for Childhood Cancer opened within the hospital, which hosts treatment rooms, as well as a community room that provides an environment of emotional support while care is provided.

### How critical has it been to have clear understanding with employees about the work being done?

We work very hard to let employees know what we're doing and understand the why behind it. As a result, a high percentage of our employees believe we are a good corporate citizen in our community. In turn, our employees have personally proven to be a force for good, donating their time, talent, and financial support to charities and causes that matter to them and our community. In 2016, more than 1,500 home office employees volunteered more than 36,000 hours in southeastern Wisconsin. Because our employees understand and appreciate the importance of good corporate citizenship, Northwestern Mutual is among the largest corporate donors to the United Way of Milwaukee & Waukesha County and the United Performing Arts Fund. ●