

# Can-do attitude led to 2008 Lindner award

By David Holthaus • [dholthaus@enquirer.com](mailto:dholthaus@enquirer.com) • November 16, 2008

At the age of 72, after a successful business career of nearly 40 years, a time when most would be hanging up their spikes, Mel Fisher started a new venture. It was a lot more than a hobby, even though Fisher had already earned his wealth and had four sons who were successful in their own right.

Galaxy Associates employs 115 making and selling chemicals used by manufacturers worldwide. The Blue Ash-based company is just the latest enterprise started by the head of one of the most entrepreneurial families in Cincinnati.

"I won't ever retire," said Fisher, now 78. "I will keep doing something."

That's the kind of tenacity and energy that Fisher used to build a series of companies in Cincinnati since the 1960s, serve as a major philanthropic force and be named the 2008 winner of the Carl H. Lindner Award for Entrepreneurial & Civic Spirit.

Medicine's loss (a C in a zoology class scotched a major in pre-med) was the region's gain as Fisher landed an appointment to the Naval Academy, served three years at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and then went to work in sales for DuBois Chemical, then run by his father-in-law, Louis Lerner.

When W.R. Grace bought DuBois, Fisher's entrepreneurial streak emerged. Not wanting to work for a multinational conglomerate, he and brother-in-law Jerry Lerner borrowed enough money to buy a struggling chemical maker called Texo Corp. in 1964.

Applying and enforcing basic business fundamentals ("Nothing happens until we sell something," he says), Fisher grew Texo into a \$50 million company, owning it for 35 years before selling it to Illinois-based Nalco Chemical in 1999.

Texo was the first of a string of businesses that Fisher built, led or financed. The roster includes:

The Straus Kielson Co., a wholesale distributor of tobacco and sundry products.

Premier Manufacturing Support Services, which provided labor services to manufacturers.

Ampac, a manufacturer of plastic bags and other packaging for retailers (originally called Amko and a company on the Deloitte Cincinnati USA 100).



West Chester Holdings, a supplier of work gloves and protective clothing (also a Deloitte Cincinnati USA 100 company).

"Through the rich network he developed, he identified or found opportunities, brought in the talent to run them and either served as chairman, or the mentor and cultural compass," said son Michael.

The elder Fisher did it with a simple philosophy he has followed for decades. "I know what I know, and I know what I don't know," he said. "I surround myself with talented people, and I let them do what they're getting paid to do."

One thing Fisher knows is selling. "Mel is the consummate salesperson," said Mark Jahnke, a lawyer with Katz Teller Brant & Hild, who has represented Fisher and his family for 25 years. "He is the guy who provides the incentives - both emotional and financial - to let them be successful."

The other piece of his philosophy is a never-quit attitude. "I don't give up on anything," he said.

That's what friend and neighbor Gary Heiman, CEO of Reading-based Standard Textile, cited as Fisher's key to success: "His enthusiasm, and his incredible attitude and drive to get things done and getting them done in a right way."

Through the years of business-building, Fisher never forgot where he came from.

His charitable and community involvement runs deep. He is the former president and campaign chair of the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati and spearheaded an endowed scholarship fund at the Cincinnati Scholarship Foundation, giving opportunities to dozens of young people. He's volunteered in strategic and fundraising roles at Adath Israel Synagogue; Cedar Village; the Jewish Community Center; his alma mater, Walnut Hills High School; and others.

But the pinnacle of his philanthropic efforts was leading a \$15 million effort to build the first Jewish house of worship on the campus of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. It was a great source of personal satisfaction to Fisher, who remembers as a midshipman there in the 1950s having no synagogue on campus.

The 2005 opening of the Commodore Uriah P. Levy Center and Jewish Chapel, the product of a Fisher-led campaign, fixed that.

Giving back to the community remains a fundamental principle for Fisher. "I'll keep putting something back in the pot," he said.

Fisher and his wife, Roberta, raised four sons, Bobby, Michael, Marc and David. Each continued the family's entrepreneurial streak.

Bobby is former president of Texo and now CEO of Washing Systems Inc. David was an executive with Ampac and is now president of Jones the Florist. Marc was an executive with West Chester Holdings and now manages real estate and other business affairs for the family. Michael was CEO of Premier, and served as president of the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber from 2001 to 2006. He's now an affiliate partner with private equity firm Lindsay Goldberg.

Just as important, they've continued the family's civic and charitable contributions, with all of the sons and their spouses taking leadership roles in a variety of civic and Jewish educational causes.