**Barbara Leslie, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries of South Central Wisconsin, is retiring at the end of this year, after serving Goodwill for nearly 45 years.**

You’ve worked for Goodwill for nearly 45 years and now you are retiring. What is it that you will miss the most?

More than anything, I’ll miss the people connected to our organization. From board members to our business partners, staff, volunteers and program participants, Goodwill has put me in touch with such a diverse group of interesting and talented people who really care about our community and the people who live here. The significant impact Goodwill has had on our community is because of the tremendous people who have contributed so much to our success over the years.

What has it been like working for Goodwill all these years?

It’s been amazing! I’ve had the rare and wonderful opportunity to be part of an organization that truly is in the business of changing people’s lives.

When I started at Goodwill in 1971, there were just eight employees working here. Last year, our Goodwill provided employment for 530 area residents (earning over $9.5 million in wages and benefits) working in 22 locations! When I was hired, Goodwill was serving maybe 15 to 20 people throughout the year, compared to last year when we provided services to 2,368 people, of which 257 received services *on a daily basis.*

I was hired to create a business training program for patients leaving the Mendota Mental Health Institute in order to prepare them for jobs in the community. I have since held the positions of case management supervisor, director of rehabilitation, program development coordinator, human resources director, vice president of human resources, vice president of retail and operations, and interim president, and have served as president and CEO for the past 22 years. I wish I could do it all over again!

What do you want people to know about the worldwide Goodwill enterprise?

Since Goodwill is a large organization with great brand recognition throughout the world, I want people to have a better understanding of how Goodwill is structured. I want them to know that each Goodwill organization operates independently so that we can make decisions in response to local needs, which are consistent with our local culture. While this great brand recognition is usually positive, it may hurt us when a Goodwill in another community does something wrong or something people in our area don’t agree with. The issue more than likely has nothing to do with our organization and I would not want the public to assume that we are doing the same thing. Decisions affecting our organization are made by the local residents who comprise our board of directors and executive staff and I am proud that they have been and continue to be committed to high standards, integrity and honesty.

Is there anything else about Goodwill that you would like to clarify?

Yes. While I think most people understand that we receive donated goods “free” from the public and sell these goods in our stores to raise money, they don’t necessarily understand the reason we are in the retail business to begin with. The single purpose of being in this business is to raise revenue for our services for individuals with disabilities or other challenges. We do everything we can to manage the costs associated with collecting and selling donations – the cost of transporting donations and the cost of operating our donation centers and stores – so that there will be money left over for our services. Services like our career center which provides job search assistance to individuals with or without disabilities, free of charge, as well as our services that help individuals with significant disabilities find and maintain employment in the community and our housing services for individuals with chronic mental illness.

Besides generating revenue for your services, what are the other benefits of Goodwill’s involvement in the retail business?

Another benefit of being in the retail business is our stores provide jobs for area residents, which in turn helps our local economies. And of course, we’re also providing people with the chance to find great values every day in our stores while reducing the need for unwanted items to be sent to a landfill.

Tell us more about the recycling aspect of Goodwill’s business …

Recycling is an important part of our contribution to the communities we serve and a proud part of our heritage. Over 105 years ago in Boston, Massachusetts, Goodwill’s founder, Reverend Edgar Helms, collected used household goods and clothing in wealthier areas of the city, then trained and hired those who were poor to mend and repair the used goods. The goods were then resold or were given to the people who repaired them. The system worked, and the Goodwill philosophy of “a hand up, not a hand out” was born. In 2014, our Goodwill organization diverted over 15 million pounds of material from area landfills and over 550,000 pounds of donated computer equipment were sold either to the public or an environmentally conscious recycler.

What are your plans for retirement?

The first thing I’m going to do is throw away my alarm clock! ’ll be taking a trip to a warmer climate during the winter, where I hope to refresh and reflect as I make plans for this new life of retirement. I want to spend quality time with family and friends and get more exercise, which I hope to do by walking, golfing, and biking. I look forward to having more time for gardening and reading.