

# A Story of Thomas Everill – journey of Renewal and Transformation of Northwest Center

From 2008 to 2016

## **1. The Foundation of a conglomerate in 1965 – a business founded on love**

In the 1960's parents of children with developmental conditions such as autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and the catch-all category "mental retardation" were blamed and shamed. Their children were ostracized, segregated, even feared.

But these parents found each other when one of them placed a classified ad in the newspaper seeking "playmates for my retarded daughter." And they created the Northwest Center, nonprofit organization dedicated to "promote the growth, development and independence of people with disabilities through programs of therapy, education and work opportunity".

## **2. The Deterioration – from social change agent to personal playground for "managers" and "social workers".**

With growth and business success, two types of workers emerged:

- a. "Business people", mostly second-tier managers who had not been terribly successful in the for-profit world. But by moving "down-market" to a nonprofit that "helps the less fortunate", they became managers or vice presidents with expense accounts and power in a way they had not been able to achieve in "serious" companies such as Boeing or Pepsi or General Electric.
- b. "Social workers" - idealistic young people for whom the prospect of a career in business or the professions was distasteful. Some told me candidly when I became CEO in 2008 that they had chosen social work because it is easier and less demanding than business or law or engineering or medicine. While the business types wielded their unprecedented titles and power upstairs in the office, the social worker types tended to strum guitars and smoke joints on the lawn while supervising their adult charges.

## **3. Tom is on board – start of the search of the lost moral compass**

To fix issues described under previous bullet point, several actions were undertaken. However, unintended dualism emerged more clearly:

1. Business unit managers tasked with making money chose not to hire employees with disabilities, thinking of them more trouble than it was worth
2. while business unit managers tasked with creating jobs for people with disabilities could produce operating losses because they were "creating jobs" for people who couldn't really be expected to produce much.

To remind you again – the whole point of creating Northwest Center was to ensure Full membership in society, Respect and dignity. But this was not clearly happening, not even in Northwest Center itself! There was business, and there was "charity" (profits from "healthy" were given to those of "less fortunate").

## **4. Mindset turnaround from "either profits OR social good" to "profits AND social good" – and nobody had any idea on how to do it.**

What emerged from months of dialogue about our "either/or" model – businesses either make money or create jobs for people with disabilities, but never both – was a growing commitment at the leadership

level to a new type of “both/and” thinking. Our commitment was to work harder and figure out how to achieve our intention. To tacitly admit that society is right to ostracize people with developmental disabilities was no longer acceptable.

### **5. The REALLY HARD part**

People often ask “How did you do it?” We harnessed the power of *paradox* to help us think in new and larger ways. Fighting back the urge to “make things happen” we learned to *wait actively* and to hold open the state of not knowing. For me personally, I learned when to listen to my fear, procrastination, and intuition as *disowned ways of knowing* rather than mere weakness. My biggest challenge in all this was to *cultivate inner strength* so I would have the courage to be vulnerable and not know all the answers.

### **6. First signs of success – profits AND social good is possible**

Work flows were adapted to the way our employees experience the world, to what *they* can do rather than to what the boss can do.

As a result, in 2013 we assembled 1.1 million holiday gift packs for Starbucks, each pack composed of over twenty components staged in our warehouse and assembled by the most inclusive team of employees anyone had ever seen – people of all abilities working shoulder to shoulder (in hair nets!), including people with severe developmental disabilities who a few short months before when they weren’t dozing off at their tables or acting out had been kept busy sorting buckets of screws brought to them by well-meaning social workers.

*Every last one of the 1.1 million gift packs was perfect; there were no returns from any Starbucks store in North America.*

### **7. Question from Starbucks: “How did you do it? We’ve never had a contractor deliver perfect quality before.”**

We had begun to realize the extraordinary potential of “because” thinking (beyond either / or) – that businesses could become profitable and successful not *in spite* of employing people with disabilities, but *because* businesses are smart and strategic enough to embrace the unique ability in everyone and deploy it creatively to produce value for their customers. Soon many other examples arose across the company.

### **8. Amazon – maybe the most data driven company in the world – has spoken**

The job candidates Northwest Center provides to Amazon are better qualified than the non-disabled candidates offered by our competitors. Northwest Center candidates excel in productivity, retention, attendance, safety, and attitude. Today, Northwest Center acts as preferred staffing vendor offering Amazon hiring managers candidates uniquely qualified to deliver excellence – not in spite of who they are and how they are made, but because of it – while charging Amazon a premium placement fee commensurate with the value it receives.

### **The Summary.**

Reflection of board members of Northwest Center at Amazon campus:

“For 50 years of disability advocates begging employers to hire people with disabilities as a way to “give back” out of pity for the less fortunate. And I’m standing here at the Amazon, what is arguably ground zero of global innovation, and they pay Northwest Center a premium finders fee to recruit job candidates like my daughter because of the **value** they produce. I can’t believe I’m standing here!”

**And the very last summary:**

To our Founders, pity was unwelcome and disgusting and demeaning. They dreamed of a world that would value their sons and daughters as human beings, as full members of society – the world as it was meant to be. Northwest Center itself had to learn to value people of all abilities properly before it could begin to teach the rest of the world, including Starbucks and Amazon. But it did. And it is this aspect of the turnaround that makes me most proud.