

# CHARITY *Champion*

Story by **JUDY HORAN**  
Photos by **JACQUELINE LORINCE**

**Through his work with nonprofits, Paul Strawhecker has become the face of fund raising in Omaha and beyond**

**P**aul Strawhecker's 35 years of fundraising for nonprofit groups has taken many turns, perhaps none more surprising than what happened when he worked for Lutheran Hospitals and Homes in Fargo, N.D., in the mid 1980s.

"A hospital we were operating in Montana needed \$1 million to keep its doors open," Strawhecker says. "The hospital administrator and I went to see a donor, a rancher who owned a lot of land."

They were ready with their scripted presentation, but the rancher was more interested in watching his new satellite TV set, Strawhecker says. Discouraged, the two headed back to the hospital.

As they drove, a helicopter flew above them, also headed for the hospital. Unknown to them, it was carrying the donor, who had a heart attack after they left.

The next day, Strawhecker received a phone call from the rancher's attorney offering a quarter million dollars for the fundraising effort that would save the hospital. They had planned to ask for only \$100,000. They soon learned why the rancher had a change of heart.

"The small rural hospital had saved his life," Strawhecker says.

It rarely takes such a drastic turn of events to coax financial support, but Strawhecker's story shows, among other things, that a personal connection to the cause is often a strong motivation.

Strawhecker shares his experience about giving and receiving in the nonprofit world, especially since opening his own consulting firm, Paul J. Strawhecker Inc., 10 years ago.

In that time, he's worked with many nonprofit organizations in Omaha as well as become one of the few to consult nonprofits on a national basis.

Todd Simpson, director of development for the Omaha Home for Boys, says that the impact of Strawhecker's work can't be underestimated.

"Paul has for years been a driving force for what we're doing in the state," says Simpson.

"Everybody thinks they know how to raise money, but the fact is it's not cookies and bake sales. It's sitting down with other professionals and talking about the needs of the organization.

"It's a professionalism that has come

to fundraising, and Paul has been in the forefront."

A decade after starting his firm in an office at 49th and Dodge streets provided by his former boss when he worked at Boys Town, Bill Ramsey, Strawhecker is as passionate as ever about the role of charitable organizations.

"I feel strongly about the roles of nonprofit organizations in our society and about maintaining their soul to support and being able to support individuals within society that need help," he says. "Nonprofits are sometimes at the vanguard, and government can't react as quickly or efficiently."

Strawhecker didn't set out to make a career in nonprofit fundraising. While he was a Creighton University student, he pursued a career in government.

"The Vietnam War was going on when I graduated in 1970, and students were interested in government and society," Strawhecker says.

His degree was in political science and sociology. He started his career in the office of Mayor Gene Leahy as a college intern, handling social service programs for the City of Omaha.

After four years in the mayor's office, he moved on to spend eight years with Boys Town.

He traveled the country while raising money for Boys Town's planned giving program. The wide-eyed Nebraska boy visited lush Beverly Hills homes and swank Fifth Avenue apartments.

Those experiences helped Strawhecker find something he could be



passionate about – raising funds for nonprofit organizations.

A wealth of experiences prior to starting his own firm helped him gain expertise.

He worked in the health care field at Lutheran Hospitals and Homes (now

called Lutheran Health System) in Fargo, which managed 75 hospitals and nursing homes in 14 states.

His experience in education was gained at Northwood University, which had campuses in Michigan (where he was stationed), Florida and Texas.

When he began his firm in 1996, Strawhecker, a former seminary student, was working part-time for the Omaha Archdiocese. His first client was the Notre Dame Sisters in Omaha.

"A Sister who took one of my classes at UNO signed me up," says Strawhecker, who is an adjunct professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

He has worked with nonprofits of all sizes, from grass-roots groups such as the Kearney Area Children's Museum to the Boys and Girls Club of Metropolitan Phoenix, where the goal was \$26 million. He attracts clients from outside Omaha because he is one of the region's few full-service firms.

Strawhecker's company helps nonprofits develop plans, search for and coach executive directors, handle public relations and marketing, develop and consult on fundraising campaigns, planned giving, direct mail, capital campaigns and other studies.

"We have people with 20 years of experience or more," says Strawhecker, who primarily works in Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota. "We are organized like a university advancement department. We have professionals with expertise in all areas of development."

Half of his business is consulting and half is hands-on fundraising. As examples, he has assisted the Institute for Priestly Formation in establishing fundraising practices and expanding their programs.

He has aided fundraising for Uta Halee Girls Village and Madonna School.

His firm has carried out studies for Alegent Health Mercy Care Center, the Omaha Community Playhouse, Grace University and the Central High School Foundation. He has consulted with Metropolitan Community College, Mount Michael Benedictine High and Eastern Nebraska Alzheimer's Chapter. These are just a few examples from a lengthy client and campaign list.

His passion for the field has motivated him to serve as president for three chapters – Nebraska, mid-Michigan and North Dakota – of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP). Strawhecker now serves as chair-elect of the national AFP Foundation.

And he is one of a handful of fundraising practitioners nationwide who is certified as an ACFRE (Advanced Certified Fundraising Executive).

"There are probably 1,000 people certified. I have an advanced certification, and there are only 80 in the country," he says.

Strawhecker's years of nonprofit experience and love for the business moved him to write and publish two books five years ago: "Capital Campaign Implementation: Are You Ready?" and "Development Planning Implementation: Are You Ready?"

Strawhecker and his wife, Peggy, have two children, Risa, 27, who lives in



Paul Strawhecker with some of the many brochures and pamphlets his company produces for projects it works on with non-profit agencies.

Louisville, Ky., and Ryan, 24, who is in graduate school at Creighton and works for his father part-time.

When he's not working or spending time with his family, Strawhecker teaches a course about nonprofits at UNO. He also directs a certificate and fundraising program for the university that involves six two-day classes.

"It's really an opportunity for young people managing nonprofits to understand the role of fundraising," says Strawhecker, who sees the field of nonprofit careers growing.

For all the expertise Strawhecker has to share, though, he jokingly makes his students wait until the last day of class to learn the real secret of fundraising.

"Establish and maintain relationships with groups and individuals," he says. Simpson says Strawhecker is the person he turns to for advice.

"In terms of someone who is driving the profession to a new level, Paul is one of the key individuals in the state, maybe in the United States."

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