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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## BUSINESS

# Saluting A Generous Spirit

By Michelle Singletary

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A Higher Value:

First in an occasional series.

When Bob Thompson sold his Michigan-based asphalt and paving business last month, he could have pocketed all of the \$422 million he made on the deal.

Instead, he decided to share nearly \$130 million of the proceeds with his 550 employees. Some of the workers became instant millionaires.

Thompson's decision was news in Michigan because it doesn't usually happen this way. If Thompson had kept all the money from the sale, nobody would have blinked an eye. It's the American way. Take the money and run. Nobody would have faulted him. It was his business. His money.

But Thompson and his wife, Ellen--who had to agree on this--exemplify a higher, greater value.

I write about money all the time. I quote experts advising people how to make money, how to invest, save or spend money, or how to keep what little money they've got. What the Thompsons did humbles me.

Thompson, founder of Thompson-McCully Co., said he wanted to take some of the \$422 million he received for his Belleville, Mich., business and reward his workers for working hard for the company he and his wife started more than 40 years ago.

"What was I going to do with all that money anyway?" said Thompson, 67. "Besides, I'm in a business where my employees have to work all day and half the night. They have to work in tough weather like the 90-degree days we've been having lately. This is hard work. It's not like I invented some software that made me a lot of money. My people are really dedicated, and I know I couldn't be successful without them."

Thompson sold his business to the U.S. arm of CRH PLC, an Ireland-based building-materials firm, and made sure none of the employees would be laid off because of the sale. Two weeks ago, he told his employees he would be dividing \$128 million among them.

Every hourly employee got \$2,000 for every year they'd been with the company. One single mother, who earns \$7 an hour waving flags for the road crew, received more than \$20,000. Senior, salaried workers got the same kind of check plus a bonus retirement payment of between \$1 million and \$2 million. Retirees and widows of workers also got checks. Thompson even adjusted payments to guarantee that employees due for a million would get just that--even after taxes.

"I wanted them to net a million dollars," Thompson said. "That was important to me. Psychologically, I understand that a million dollars is a magic number. I wanted to hand people a check with a 1 and all those zeros."

It's because of Thompson and others like him that I've decided to start a new feature, "A Higher Value," to call attention to these people. From time to time I'll salute people who don't take the money and run.

It doesn't even have to involve a lot of money. When my husband and I offered my 21-year-old nephew \$10 recently for helping to pick up our kids from day care, he turned us down and did it for nothing. I knew he could have used the money.

And who can forget the baseball fans who graciously handed Mark McGwire back several of his record-breaking balls after he smashed them into the stands? I especially remember Michael Davidson, a fan who said he would rather give McGwire his 61st home-run ball back than to take the millions he might have gotten for it.

McGwire's 70th home-run ball was sold for \$3 million.

"It would mean more to Mark McGwire and baseball than a million dollars or whatever would to me," Davidson said after grabbing ball No. 61, which McGwire hit into the stands at St. Louis's Busch Stadium last year to tie Roger Maris's single-season home-run record.

It would have been so easy, and even understandable, if Davidson had cashed in on his luck. Frankly, I'm not all too sure I would have returned the baseball to McGwire, the prospect of a million bucks just for snagging a \$10 ball being mighty tempting.

It would have been just as easy for Thompson to retire and keep all of his millions from the sale of his business. In fact, Thompson says he's not through giving away his money. He and his wife plan to set up a charity foundation to give away more.

And this wasn't some publicity stunt. I believe Thompson when he said he did this not for adoration but to inspire others.

"There is need and then there is greed," Thompson said. "We all need certain basic comforts, and beyond that it becomes ridiculous.

"We have a lot of folks that take a lot of money and spend it on themselves, and that's okay. That's the system. That's fine. But if we can maybe embarrass them or influence them, that's fine too."

So if you know someone who answered to a higher value than the color of money, send me a letter or e-mail. After all, taking the money and running isn't the only American way.

Michelle Singletary's column appears in this section every Sunday. While she welcomes comments and column ideas, she cannot offer specific personal financial advice or answer detailed questions about individual situations. She will be talking about this column on the "Insight" program with Herman Washington tomorrow at 6:40 p.m. on WHUR (96.3-FM). Her e-mail address is [singletarym@washpost.com](mailto:singletarym@washpost.com). Readers can write to her at The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.