

Inasmuch director finds satisfaction from service

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Bob Ross, 35, is the guy who gets to make dreams come true. And his office is currently serving as home to a Lego re-creation of the downtown Oklahoma City skyline.



Robert J. Ross, president and chief executive of Inasmuch Foundation, stands by buildings made of Lego bricks Thursday inside the Inasmuch Foundation office in Oklahoma City. The buildings will be part of OK CityScape, an attraction that will raise funds for OKC Educare. PHOTO BY BRYAN TERRY, THE OKLAHOMAN

The president and chief executive officer of the Inasmuch Foundation and the Ethics & Excellence in Journalism Foundation oversees the distribution of millions of dollars each year to causes that include museums, health and human services, women's shelters, and schools.

The giant Lego models of the Skirvin Hilton, Chase Tower, First National Tower and more were designed by Kurt Zimmerle, a certified master Lego builder from Wolverine, Mich. The fund-raiser for OKC Educare, a school being built in south Oklahoma City for at-risk children, started like many for Ross — with a pitch.

David Matthews, man-aging partner of Trailblazer Capital, previously helped create an annual "Trains at Northpark" fundraiser in Dallas and approached Ross about creating a similar event in Oklahoma City that would feature giant Lego models.

Matthews told Ross he was the first to be approached, but was planning to approach other area organizations, as well, with his idea.

"I told him to go no further and not talk to anybody else," said Ross, who instantly saw it as a way to close the funding gap for Educare. The display is scheduled to go up for public tours during the Christmas holidays.

"This is a lot of fun — I have a great job," Ross said. "We have a lot of projects like Educare. Inasmuch gives to education, health and human services and arts, historic preservation — pretty much the whole gamut."

And as CEO of the journalism foundation, Ross said he is excited to find ways to partner with non-profit journalism organizations attempting to fill gaps created by changes in the industry.

About his background

Ross originally pursued a degree in law, attending Washington and Lee University in Virginia and then returning home to attend the University of Oklahoma College of Law.

After graduation, he worked at McAfee & Taft while his father was a partner at Rainey, Ross, Rice and Binns.

"He worked with (foundation founder) Edith (Gaylord) until she passed away in January 2001," Ross said. "It took two years for the estate to settle."

When Ross left McAfee & Taft in 2003 to run the foundations his first task was to meet with various business and civic leaders to find out where they felt needs were going unmet.

"Edith Gaylord did not hamstring us in any sense," Ross said. "She wanted us to be doing innovative and unique projects. She knew her foundations would last long past her life and she gave us the freedom to support as many projects as we saw fit and to grow with the times and not become stagnant."

Ross credits the late American Fidelity Assurance Co. President John Rex with interesting his foundation in early education. As a result of Rex's efforts, the Inasmuch Foundation has invested millions to promote the creation of full-time kindergarten and pre-k programs in Oklahoma City.

One of Ross' toughest tasks is saying "no."

"We have to say no a lot," Ross said. "It's hard, especially with being able to support so many different areas. You have to have a focus."

Ross said he relies on his legal background to analyze various proposals and also spends about half of his time overseeing endowment operations — a task complicated in recent months by the downturn in the stock markets.

Taught to give back

Ross said he and his sisters were raised to believe in giving back to the community and in civic service. That, he said, is key to leading a foundation.

He said a foundation leader also has to have patience to listen to those who might approach them at a restaurant or grocery with an idea.

"It's easy to operate in a vacuum and think you have the answers to everything," Ross said. "But you don't. I look for community buy-in for all of our projects and for people to say, 'This is important and here's why.'"