

# **Civic Entrepreneur of the Month**

## **Larry Comer, Entrepreneur and Volunteer Mentor**

**Home:** Americus, Georgia  
**Family:** Married to Jane since 1960; three children and three grandchildren  
**Education:** Bachelor's in 1954 and Master's in Management in 1957, Georgia Institute of Technology  
**Businesses:** Founder, Chairman and President, Metalux Lighting, Inc. – 1965-1985  
Founder, Chairman and President, Caravelle Power Boats – 1987-1998  
**Current Position:** Retired; Private Consultant and Entrepreneurial Mentor  
**E-mail:** comerl@bellsouth.net  
**Phone:** (229) 924-2993

*Right now, in your community, at this very moment, there is someone who is dreaming about doing something to improve his/her lot. If we could learn how to help that person transform the dream into meaningful work, we would be halfway to changing the economic fortunes of the entire community.*

-Ernesto Sirolli, *Ripples from the Zambezi*

## **Retired Entrepreneur Shares Knowledge to Build Local Economies**

As a child growing up in Americus, Georgia, Larry Comer liked to play Monopoly.

In this small farming community, he dreamed of running his own business. He admired his uncle, working long hours in a pipe fitting firm then starting a sprinkler company in the 1930s.

"I saw my uncle as a role model," Comer said. "I liked the idea of hard work and independence – of owning your own business."

After graduating from a high school class of 69 at age 16, Comer attended Georgia Institute of Technology. He then served two years as a naval officer and returned to Georgia Tech to complete his master's degree in management.

After college, Comer interviewed with several large firms but went to work for a small company making light fixtures. He'd hoped to become a partner, but the company went public. Comer decided he wanted to stay with smaller organizations, and he left to pursue his own business dreams.

Comer's entrepreneurial spirit not only carried him through successful businesses of his own, but it also inspired him to help facilitate business dreams of others.

### **The Career of an Entrepreneur**

In 1964, back in Americus, Comer secured Small Business Administration and bank loans to start Metalux – a commercial and industrial lighting manufacturer.

In the mid-1950s, the growth of cities, suburbs and the freeway system sparked a related growth in the lighting industry of 4.5 percent per year.

Business boomed for decades, with 400 lighting companies in 1965, Comer said.

"(Metalux) grew fast because the industry was growing," he added.

In 1965, his business was selling \$800,000 annually. That number jumped to \$26 million in 1977, when Comer earned a national small businessman of the year award, which he received from President Jimmy Carter in the Rose Garden. In 1980, sales at Metalux continued to climb to \$60 million, and Comer built a second plant.

Employees grew from one in 1964 to more than 1,100 in 1985, with plants in four separate locations and sales in all 50 states and several other countries.

But in 1985, Comer decided to sell the business because he couldn't raise enough capital for necessary improvements.

His entrepreneurial career, however, was far from over. He bought the Caravelle Power Boats name in 1987. Caravelle had been in business for 10 years but bankrupt for six. Comer revived the ailing company and resold it to a management team in 1998.

And if that's not enough to fill a budding businessman's resume, Comer also started and sold four banks in the Atlanta area; partnered with others in a company that sold products to telephone companies; and served on a variety of boards, including the Georgia State Chamber of Commerce and the Georgia Department of Industry and Trade.

How did a small town boy turn into a business powerhouse?

"Georgia Tech did not teach me to be an entrepreneur," Comer said, adding that he learned many other skills while in college, but most of his knowledge came from early work experiences.

"The hardest thing for me to learn was to be a salesman," Comer said. "My personality type is to want to make decisions now – to get the facts and act on them. I thought if I built the best light fixtures in the world, I would go to my mailbox the next day and get a pile of orders. As it happened, I built the fixtures and went to my mailbox to find a pile of bills."

Comer committed himself to picking up sales techniques and, more importantly, surrounding himself with good sales people whom he treated like customers and compensated well.

Since his days of leading businesses, Comer has re-dedicated himself to another entrepreneurial cause: mentoring other potential entrepreneurs.

## **A Form of Enterprise Facilitation**

"One of the best ways to get entrepreneurs going is to have mentors," Comer said, adding that the book *Ripples from the Zambezi – Passions, entrepreneurship and the rebirth of local economies* partly inspired him to help others.

Written by Ernesto Sirolli, *Ripples from the Zambezi* chronicles Sirolli's unique approach to local economic development, which he's termed Enterprise Facilitation. Sirolli has developed Enterprise Facilitation as a person-centered approach to community and economic development. Enterprise Facilitators work with a community-based board to provide free, confidential, business management and networking advice to aspiring entrepreneurs and existing businesses.

Comer himself is not an official Enterprise Facilitator, but he models his mentoring on many of Sirolli's tenets for start-up businesses.

"I don't go out (to businesses) and say that I have all of the answers," Comer said, adding that he usually takes on the philosophical side of the mentoring role. "Rather than bringing them answers, I try to bring them questions for themselves as they develop their plans."

Usually recommended by a third party, Comer visits businesses throughout Georgia. In Americus, he's helped local farmers package and sell green beans. In Plains, Ga., Comer assisted a company called Windham Casting, which makes aluminum for patio furniture. Starting in the back of a barn with a furnace, Windham now sells their products to large companies such as Home Depot.

Comer has also helped a now-prospering electrical supply company in Atlanta.

“I suggested that they focus on their customers,” he added. “They also needed to figure out where the money was coming from and do some simple financial projections.

“Nine out of 10 times, small companies need some help with their accounting abilities.”

Other key Comer advice is to identify and know your customers and to hire smart people.

“If your IQ is 120, hire people with an IQ of 130 – and keep them around you,” Comer said.

Comer also tells his mentees to think through their vision, have a solid business plan, invest time and energy in annual budgeting and have a strong capital plan in place.

And the fundamental value that gave Comer’s own businesses a strategic advantage was quality. He has carried this lesson from the business world into his many other service-oriented work.

“Quality is not an abstract term,” Comer said. “It is a simple, measurable term. Quality simply means meeting your customer-driven specifications. You can have quality in a \$5 fluorescent light fixture to the same degree that you can have quality in a \$1,000 chandelier.

“Also, you just simply have to know what you are doing, believe in what you are doing and like what you are doing,” Comer said.

### **Small Business is Beautiful**

“In small towns like Americus, it’s time to start realizing that recruiting industries is not always going to boost our economic condition,” Comer said. “We need to start relying on local knowledge and help people create their own businesses.”

In his book, Sirolli also extols the power of individual business owners over large corporations. Often, these individuals need the help of a mentor or facilitator to kick-start ideas and learn business skills. This is where folks like Comer come in.

Comer receives no compensation for his time with entrepreneurs; his pay is the satisfaction he feels seeing the success of small enterprises.

“I don’t view any of this as work,” he added. “I view this as a hobby.”

Comer’s most valuable lesson learned in business and inspiration for helping others?

“Free enterprise is alive and well. It’s each generation’s responsibly to keep it going.”

*-by Lisa Bauer, 10/03*

### **For more information on ...**

... the Sirolli Institute, go to [www.sirolli.com](http://www.sirolli.com)