Bend up Close: Mike Schmidt

by K_Guice

At age 60, Mike Schmidt has accomplished a lot in his life. He has owned two businesses, fought in the Vietnam War, run a political campaign, worked his way through the ranks of corporate America to serve as VP for a major banking company, raised a family and retired only to come out of retirement again.

That is just the beginning of the story for the Oklahoma native come president & CEO of The Bend Chamber Of Commerce.

Mike Schmidt, President & CEO of The Bend Chamber of Commerce Schmidt, who moved to Central Oregon last April, is now hoping to bring his experience, wisdom and guidance to other business in Bend through his work with the chamber.

â€œThe value of the chamber is the camaraderie,â€• he said. â€œYou build business relationships and you are always with people who share your passion.â€•

He is also seeking to grow it as an ongoing resource for businesses in Bend. From networking to professional development, he wants to build upon the great foundation that was laid 80 years ago.

Schmidt realized the importance of being involved in a cityâ€™s business chamber when he was a VP for Bank of America. â€œWhen I made VP they had a policy that you had to be heavily involved in the community,â€• he said.

So, he joined a chamber of commerce in San Francisco in 1982. It was then he discovered the many benefits a chamber of commerce could offer.

As he moved around for work, he always connected to the community and like-minded business people from San Jose to Santa Cruz.

In 1997, Schmidt retired from Bank of America. â€œA week later, I was CEO of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce,â€• he said.

At only 52 years of age, the young retiree had grown bored with banking. â€œThe banking industry to me was just no fun anymore,â€• he said.

â€œYou were calling the same 800 number as your customers were,â€• he added. â€œIt wasnâ€™t banking as I grew up; it was a good time to get out.â€•

Mind you, Schmidt was always one up for a change of scenery and banking was a far cry from where he had started as an architect major.

â€œI ended up with a BS in psychology with a minor in business and sociology,â€• Schmidt said.

Along the way he was side tracked. At the age of 23 he was drafted into the Army. During his 18 month stint in the service he spent 14 months in Vietnam.

â€œIt certainly gave me an appreciation for life,â€• he said. â€œI saw a lot of deathâ€¦ it changed my whole life.â€•

â€œI learned to survive though almost anything,â€• he added. While he joked that he wouldnâ€™t recommend it as a career choice, it actually led him down a new path in his life.

Schmidt had been in the anti-war movement prior to enlisting. After fighting in the war it solidified his feelings. â€œI became a regional director for the Vietnam Veterans Against the War,â€• he said.

He looked closer at politics and at the age of 25 decided to get more involved. â€œWhen I came back from Vietnam, I was running a guyâ€™s political campaign for the senate in Oklahoma,â€• he said.

Little did he know that it would lead him down the path of being a small business owner, again. His first round with owning a business was three small self-car washes that he and a friend had bought and sold for a profit at the age of 21.

So when the politician couldnâ€™t pay Schmidt for his campaign work, he offered him a bar. â€œHe gave it to me and I opened Mikeâ€™s Family Tavern,â€• he said.

â€œThe bar was a fun thing and I was going to college at the same time,â€• Schmidt said.

It was a great learning experience. He learned about how to create a business with a niche that is a good fit for the community.

For example, Oklahoma City, home of the tavern, needed a place where a family could come relax and even bring the kids.

â€œYou learn the basics of business,â€• Schmidt said. From payroll to market research, being a small businessman requires that you learn and do everything.

â€œYou are a jack-of-all-trades and hopefully a master of one or two,â€• he laughed.

One he clearly mastered was the art of customer service. When he told one of his regular patrons, R.W. Moore, that he had sold the bar, Moore immediately offered him a job.

â€œHe was one of my customers at the bar. I had no idea who he was,â€• Schmidt said. â€œWhen he heard I was looking for a job he said, â€˜Why donâ€™t you come work for me?â€™â€•

That was the beginning of a 25 year career for Schmidt in the banking industry. â€œI started working for Liberty National Bank as a manager in the credit card department,â€• he said.

The 27-year-old went from managing four people in a small bar to managing 60 people in a business in which he had never worked.

Schmidt didnâ€™t let that hold him back. â€œYou always have to be willing to take a chance on yourself,â€• he said. â€œBe a risk taker.â€•

He said, often times the only thing holding a person back is their own attitude. â€œIf you have an attitude you canâ€™t do something, you wonâ€™t,â€• he said. â€œIf you have an attitude it can be done, it will.â€•

It was that gung ho attitude that led Schmidt to successfully juggle going to school and his new position. In fact, he did his job so well he won a trip to San Francisco.

â€œThatâ€™s when I ran into people from Bank of America and they offered me a job,â€• he said.

â€œI told them I had to finish school first,â€• Schmidt said. â€œSo when I graduated, I packed up my pickup truck and drove to San Francisco.â€•

There he worked his way up over the years. He started out in the bank card division. From there he was trained to be an industrial engineer.

â€œThey said, if you are going to keep bugging us to improve things we are going to train you and let you do it,â€• he laughed.

He worked in methods research as a senior project manager, as an administrative assistant for an executive vice president, in corporate real estate, and ultimately became a statewide manager and VP for retail location planning with offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Not bad, he pointed out, â€œfor a kid from Oklahoma with a psychology degree. And here I was on the executive floor,â€• he laughed.

â€œI am trying to get that across, never be willing to not try,â€• he said. â€œI was always successful in every job they gave me, so they kept giving other jobs.â€•

â€œThere may be people that hold you back from time to time, but I think if you have the tenacity and the willingness to try, it is going to happen more often than not,â€• Schmidt said.

Working with Bank of America offered him many opportunities, from traveling to meeting the love of his life, Diane.

â€œShe worked for me at Bank of America,â€• he said. â€œShe was actually my best friend.â€•

It wasnâ€™t until another co-worker pointed out the obvious that Schmidt realized how special their relationship had become.

â€œA guy in my car pool said, â€˜I think she likes you. I think you should ask her out.â€™ So, I did and that relationship has been going strong for 31 years,â€• he said proudly.

He boasts that she is wonderful and truly supportive of all of his endeavors. â€œGoes to show what they say is true, behind every successful man is an even more successful woman,â€• Schmidt said.

His other pride and joys are his three grown children.

Angela, from his first marriage, is 39 and lives in Oklahoma. â€œShe is home with four of my grandkids. She is a great young lady,â€• he said.

Then there is his 35-year-old daughter, Kim. â€œShe is another great kid, a stay at home mom with seven kids from 14 to two years old,â€• Schmidt said. â€œHer husband owns his own small business,â€• he added.

The baby of the bunch is Jessica. â€œShe is 26 and recently graduated from UC Davis,â€• he said. â€œShe teaches Pilates and loves it.â€•

One day he believes she will own a dance studio of her own. Schmidt jokes that he will be there to offer all the small business advice she could ever want.

In the meantime, he is focusing on Bend and helping area business people succeed. â€œI kind of think that every life experience I have had set me up for the job,â€• Schmidt said.

He has done what most people in the business world are setting out to do.

From the little guy getting started to larger business owners looking to expand, he serves as a much-needed mentor to many in the community.

Since becoming the president and CEO in May of last year, Schmidt is working to expand the chamber in

hopes of helping the members be successful.

â€œWe have added a number of new committeesâ€¦ and we have a great leadership program,â€• Schmidt said.

The Bend Leadership Program is a special nine-month course to help give people a better understanding of the community and great leadership skills they can use in business or to help them pursue an elected office.

â€œGives good exposure to people who want to be future leaders,â€• he said. Exposure is what the Bend Chamber of Commerce is all about.

Schmidt enjoys helping people network, learn, grow and serve as an advocate for businesses in the area. When brought together, they help create the big picture.

â€œIf we are doing our job, we are helping to create a strong local economy,â€• Schmidt said. â€œThat feeds into the larger economic equation.â€•

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