

Powered up

Dick Pieper is like the little kid who always asks why. He has spent a lifetime figuring out why some companies are better than others, why communities can't take care of all their members and especially why children of all socioeconomic backgrounds can't succeed in school.

Pieper has a track record of finding answers. Residents of southeastern Wisconsin are accustomed to seeing the Pieper Electric signs on the company's vans and trucks. When Pieper took over his father's business in 1959, "There was no growth and only three to six electricians working at a time." Today, there are more than 1,000

employees. Among their perks is the Pieper Learning Center. With a big grin, Pieper says, "Listen to this," picks up his speaker phone, and dials a corporate number all employees have access to. A phone tree takes them to any number of classes directly related to their work or how to live better, more fulfilling lives.

At a time in his life when he could float on his material success and never show up at the office again, Pieper looked around his home in Mequon, which he shares with his wife, Sue, and thought maybe he could do applied philosophy full time. So, in January of 2006, Pieper stepped away as CEO. He remains chairman of PPC Partners, a holding company, but what really gets his circuits sparking is nothing short of solving the world's problems.

Pieper looks owlish and scholarly with his large, black frame glasses. A voracious, wide-ranging reader, and an astute observer of his fellow man, Pieper has thought for some time that the world was just a little out of whack. He uses words like virtue, moral values, character and responsibility without any hint of embarrassment. A longtime advocate and supporter of the Boy Scouts, where doing a daily good deed is de rigueur, Pieper's extra time is now spent with Character Education Partnership. The national organization is based in Washington, D.C. Pieper helped found it and is now the president.

Organized in 1993, CEP's mission statement reads that it is "... dedicated to developing young people of good character who become responsible and caring citizens." The nonsectarian organization is overseen by a board of directors composed of former and current CEOs from prestigious companies, nonprofits and educators from around the country. Their cornerstone program is in creating the National Schools of Character program.

Private and public K-12 schools can apply to become a part of the program if they try creatively to advocate and practice the 11 principles that CEP has identified as leading to effective character education. "The important thing to note is that character building is not an isolated course — it must be interwoven into everything the school does and that includes the administration, faculty and students' families," Pieper says.

Pieper is adamant: "It works. Every year we give out the National Schools of Character Awards to about 10 schools. We also recognize the many schools that have what we call

'Promising Practices.' You should hear the teachers and faculty talk about how the program has transformed their schools. Children really learn math or history much better in schools like this." He has lots of data and reports to back up that statement. Recent award recipients include Anser Charter School in Boise, Idaho, Jefferson Elementary School in Belleville, Ill., and River School in Napa, Calif.

Pieper still works killer hours from his book-lined office in an industrial section of Milwaukee on North 35th Street. Separating the office from a small reception space is a beautiful glass wall made by local artist Theresa Agnew. It bears the imprints of hands, including Pieper's father's, and myriad other symbols of helping. On one shelf are ancient stone-age tools that would be welcomed by museums. Pieper and Sue, a dedicated docent at the Milwaukee Art Museum, have also been generous to that institution.

From the office or anytime he's with friends, he likes to ponder and discuss the concept of servant leadership, made renowned in business circles by writer Robert Greenleaf. Pieper unabashedly says his role models for servant leadership are Jesus, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma

Gandhi. He has endowed an academic chair in the discipline at the Milwaukee School of Engineering.

Lest the impression be made that Pieper is a somber guy, dash those thoughts. He loves a good joke, a glass of fine vodka on the rocks, his kids, grandkids and sailing on his yacht, which is definitely not a boat. He berths it with a crew in various ports both exotic, like the Canary Islands, and dangerous, like Yemen. With his laptop, he flies in with Sue or friends and sails off to see what he can see. Typical of Pieper's sense of humor, the yacht has a name redolent of Christian meaning, "Agape," but the rubber dinghy that carries them on to a beach or into a town is named "Eros." ❏



The PieperPower Education Center is slated to open this month at the Mequon Nature Preserve on County Line Road. It will be the city's first "green" structure.