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GIVING BACK / FIRST IN A SERIES GETTING INVOLVED

By Constance Loizos
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When most people think about retirement, they dream about relaxing, taking long-delayed family trips and otherwise enjoying the fruits of their labors.

Not Richard Levy, chairman and former chief executive of Varian Medical Systems in Palo Alto, a \$1 billion company that sells radiation machines and other devices to treat cancer. When Levy began to think about retirement several years ago, he wasn't imagining sandy beaches or unread books; he was contemplating his next move.

"I like challenges," said the 68-year-old, who retired in February. "I knew I needed to do something I could get passionate about."

That "something" has become philanthropy, and this year alone, Levy and his wife, Sue, have given not only their time and effort to several local organizations but also a sum that he will describe only as "in the seven figures," an amount he reluctantly qualifies as "a substantial percentage of my (past and current) income."

Indeed, the Levys' donations have been meaningful enough that United Way Silicon Valley honored them as its "Philanthropists of the Year" in September, a distinction the private couple would sooner put behind them. Sue Levy suggested people focus on giving rather than the award: "I'd hope there's an imperative for

all people who have more money than they can use, or enough to ruin their kids, to give to the community."

Yet there is not, said United Way Silicon Valley president Mark Walker. "Every study on giving trends on the West Coast and in Silicon Valley shows that we're under-performing the national average."

Walker points to a variety of "valid reasons," including the high cost of housing, the mobility of the local population, and the high level of immigration here from cultures where giving is a family affair. A good portion of wealth is often forwarded to extended family living elsewhere.

Nevertheless, said Walker, "We still feel there's greater capacity for us to create donors like the Levys, and we aren't doing as well as we could be."

Extraordinary work

How the Levys became involved in the 84-year-old San Jose-based organization, which has seen donations drop dramatically in recent years, isn't extraordinary. But their involvement since has been.

Walker still recalls approaching Varian as a corporate donor several years ago and "going with Dick on three or four meetings with employees, where he was really campaigning for us. It was so great to see this CEO and chair of a major company having personal conversations with employee groups, asking them for their help."

The importance of community involvement wasn't new to Levy. The Cincinnati native, whose own father ran a modest shirt factory, has found time in his hectic schedule to umpire Little League Baseball games in Palo Alto for 29 years, beginning when the Levys' two sons were children.

Sue Levy, who first met her husband as a University of Vermont student, just as he was graduating from Dartmouth and moving to California -- she transferred to the University of California-Berkeley to join him -- has also been active for years in the Humane Society Silicon Valley, where she's a board member, and the outreach organization Adolescent Counseling Services in Palo Alto.

Still, Levy found himself increasingly concerned by what he was learning through United Way, including that 400,000 people in Santa Clara County are living below the poverty line. "That's an enormous social problem," he said, "and in a flourishing county like ours, it's just unacceptable."

So much for retiring.

Today, Levy's biggest commitment is to the non-profit health care services provider Sutter Health, on whose board he sits and to which he also contributes financially. One of his favorite initiatives is Sutter Health's ongoing installation of small clinics in drugstores that are connected to Sutter's medical health records system.

The idea behind the initiative: to allow people needing routine procedures to go to the clinics rather than a Sutter facility. The first drugstores to feature the clinics are Rite Aids in Sacramento.

The Levys have also become major contributors to and champions of a toll-free 211 medical information and referral hotline that is launching early next year and being managed by United Way Silicon Valley.

"We live in one of the most prosperous areas in the country," Levy said, "and until now, Silicon Valley hasn't offered people a way to understand which of the 1,400 social services they can turn to when they have troubles or questions."

More involvement

The Levys' interest in improving others' lives isn't fleeting. They plan to commit as much money in 2007 as they did last year, and to become even more involved in certain programs, such as the United Way initiative Women Leading Change, which aims to increase the self-sufficiency of women and children in Santa Clara County.

Meanwhile, their current involvement, which includes the California Health Institute and the Smart Health Initiative of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network -- an organization trying to improve the region's economy and quality of life -- will continue.

``People are comfortable with different things," said Levy with a shrug. ``My philosophy is that everyone should do something for their community. You want to leave the world in a better place."

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