

PUTTING YOUR VALUES TO WORK

By Skip Sturman, Director of Career Services
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I didn't know Lester J. Heath, III. '68 but I wish I had. Heath, who died recently of a brain tumor, was the Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Board of the Albany Ladder Company and First Chairman of the Vision of a Better World Foundation. Although Heath's untimely passing was tragic, it is his life that is worth remembering and celebrating. Had he lived, Les Heath would have been high on our list to invite as a participant in Career Services' "Putting Your Values To Work" series (co-sponsored with the Tucker Foundation).

Construction sales and leasing may not be the first field you equate with values-driven work but Albany Ladder, the highly profitable company which Heath headed, has become renowned for its 'values-based management'. Heath's philosophy, as captured in several Albany newspaper accounts, was "to empower employees to make decisions at work based on their knowledge of their jobs and their own personal values." In doing so, he hoped to create a company that reflected the need of employees to contribute to something larger than themselves.

So successful was Heath in creating a participatory corporate culture, while boosting sales from \$3 million in 1981 to \$33 million today, that he was named 1993 Entrepreneur of the Year, winning in the "socially responsible" category in a competition sponsored by *Inc.* magazine. Heath's company was cited for instituting companywide training programs to foster employee involvement.

What makes Les Heath's example so compelling for current undergraduates is that he broke the mold. In a tradition-bound industry, he defied the tradition of hierarchical management. In doing so, he joined a growing number of other caring capitalists like Ben & Jerry's Ben Cohen who fervently believe it is a "myth that a business cannot afford to care about the community and be profitable at the same time."

Cohen continues, "Saying that the idea when we go into business is to leave our values at the door and spend our business day making money and then, when we go home, in our spare time do volunteer work here or make contributions there, is kind of like ... saying that when we are our most powerful, when we are most able to deal with a situation, let's not deal with it. And when we are at our least powerful, that's when we want to address the situation."

Today's students struggle more than ever with the challenge of contributing to society and eating, too. All too often they are told that their choice is Mother Teresa or mammon. Even a sage such as William Sloane Coffin recently reminded students (*The Dartmouth*, Nov. 13): "There are a lot of good things to do but it's hard to get paid for them.... There are those who want to make money and those who want to make a difference," Coffin added.

My perspective is slightly different from Coffin's . I truly believe that Dartmouth students desperately want the opportunity to both make money *and* to make a difference; they just aren't at all certain that the two can go together or be done simultaneously. With escalating student loans and pressing parental/peer expectations to do something worthy of a Dartmouth degree, the quest to seek values-driven work appears to be a luxury that few can afford.

But then, along comes a Lester Heath to remind us that life isn't all about forced choices or even thinking that only certain categories of work (e.g. teaching, social work) can incorporate values. In fact, the real question to pose is, "What values can I bring to my work?" ANY WORK!!

Apparently, the annual dilemma which vexes Dartmouth students confronted Heath when he took over the family business. In his own words, "I had a view of the construction industry as negative. I didn't see how I could make a contribution to anything- I wondered what I was doing here." Heath's epiphany came when he was recovering from alcoholism and determined to change both himself and his company. According to a printed retrospect of his life, Heath's motto became: "Business is part of life, and I have a real interest in restoring spirit to the workplace and meaning to work."

Finding work with meaning is always challenging. But finding meaning in your work is crucial. That is the true legacy of Lester Heath.