

Max Delsignore: Welcome to this edition of the Northern New York Community podcast. I am your host Max Delsignore. Before we open our conversation it is important to take a moment and thank our partners, WPBS-DT and Northern New York Community Foundation. Because of their support we are able to capture and share these meaningful stories about the importance of giving back in Northern New York. Now let's sit back, relax, and enjoy this next interview with Charlie and Higohhi Owens. This couple has spent their lifetime in St. Lawrence County. They have worked, raised their children, and given back to the area that means a great deal to them. Charlie and Higohhi will share memories growing up in St. Lawrence County, how the communities have evolved, and the lasting personal lessons taught through their community philanthropy. It is our pleasure to have Charlie and Higohhi join us here on our podcast, thank you so much for being here.

Charles Owens: Thank you.

Max Delsignore: Now you are both North County natives. Could you share just a little bit about where you grew up and where you met? Charlie I'll start with you.

Charles Owens: Okay, well I was born in Ogdensburg. I was about 12 when we moved to Massena. I entered the seventh grade in Massena. I always felt that I was a Massena Native. Higohhi and I met there, we became classmates, and we were classmates all through school, and graduated together in 1954. During that period of time, we went our separate ways. It wasn't until after I was in college, between I think my second and third year, or about there, when our relationship developed in the August of '54. After I graduated, we were married.

Max Delsignore: Now Higohhi was, skating was actually the place where the two of you initially met, correct?

Higohhi Owens: Right. At the Alcoa field. Alcoa had a ...

Charles Owens: At the hockey rink at the Alcoa field. Back then, different departments at Alcoa had hockey teams. When the ice was open to the community, that's where we met early on.

Max Delsignore: Now Higohhi, your family settled in Massena, obviously many years before you were born. But their arrival to the states is a pretty fascinating story. Can you share just the journey that your family took? Fleeing the Armenian Genocide between 1915 and 1918? And the stops that they took to be able to finally settle in Massena and northern New York.

Higohhi Owens: Well, my father and my grandmother escaped the genocide. My grandfather on my father's side had a brother and a sister, and his father, were all massacred. My mother lived in a different are of Turkey. She had two sisters. And one died, the other settled in Toronto.

Okay, let's stay in my father's side for this. They took a boat from Syria to Ellis Island, and ended up in Detroit, because my grandmother's brother lived there. And they went. They worked for Ford. My father worked for the Milton plant. But I had an uncle who had dry cleaning in Massena, who had an orphaned daughter that needed care. So, my father and my grandmother moved to Massena to take care of her.

Max Delsignore: Was there any difficulty with the family transitioning to the United States, or finding work, or anything?

Higohhi Owens: Apparently no. They had to learn the language. My father went to night school. And took a course, I don't know how long he took it, but he didn't get along with the teacher, so he quit.

Max Delsignore: He was hoping night school was gonna be the gateway to conquering that barrier in language?

Higohhi Owens: Right. But that's how they got to Massena. No, my mother and her mother went from ... Well, she lived in [inaudible 00:04:51] Turkey. And their father abandoned them, and so they went to Paris, where my great-uncle who was a priest, to stay with him. My mother went to school in Paris up to eight grade. Her sister in Toronto made passage for her to come to the states. And she ended up in Montreal. She'd come over on the Canard. Ow my father and my mother met was through my aunt. They were married in Montreal in 1930, I think.

Max Delsignore: So, given that life experience for your family, and really being a part of such a turbulent time in world history, and coming to the states to try and get acclimated. Hearing about what your family went through, how did that impact you as you grew up, and as you became a mother, and a parent?

Higohhi Owens: As you said, I just appreciated I was able to do what I could. Where they, they weren't able to do much to begin with. You know, they did what they could. And I guess we did too.

Max Delsignore: Charlie, as you noted, you both actually went to college and graduated from the Albany area. Higohhi went to business school, and you're from the pharmacy school. And married shortly thereafter, as you mentioned, in 1954. What brought both of you back to the north country, after college was completed?

Charles Owens: Well, probably my family. My mother and father were still here, my brother. We lived all our life up here. And I found employment as a pharmacist. My father was a pharmacist. As soon as I turned 16, he suggested I get working papers. So I took his suggestion. And I went to work on the fountain, [inaudible 00:07:15] Fountain, when I turned 16.

I had never been away from New York state, so to speak, growing up. So I was comfortable. Never had any great desire to live anywhere else.

Max Delsignore: A follow-up question to that. What do you appreciate the most about being born, raised, and living in the north country?

Charles Owens: It's a safe environment. I think, socially and so forth, comfortable. I just feel at home in it. As much as I traveled when I worked, and saw the country and so forth, it's hard to beat this area as far as the beauty of it. The simple lifestyles and the opportunities. They're here, if you look for them. Like I say, it's relatively crime-free. I think the public education system is good. We have, probably, all as much of an opportunity here as we would have any other place. So I guess we just became a native.

Max Delsignore: You mentioned, after you graduated college and coming back to the north country, that was a really bustling era for St. Lawrence County in northern New York, and in particular, the St. Lawrence seaway and Alcoa were really thriving at that time. Can you each share just what you remember about being back in this area, living here, in the 1950s, 1960s, what it was like with the seaway and Alcoa, and business really thriving in the county?

Charles Owens: You want me to take that first?

Higohhi Owens: Sure, sure, go ahead.

Charles Owens: Well, Massena was an entirely different community than Ogdensburg was, I think, as I remember. Massena with Alcoa had more, I shouldn't say "educated" people, but they brought in engineers. And they would stay a few years and move on. And there was always ... They were more aggressive, I guess. I don't know if the word "aggressive" is right in Massena. Enthusiastic about their community. They supported their community.

And then, there was a large Armenian community. There was a large Italian community, a large French community, all that area. And everybody got along. The school was good, a lot of spirit there. There just seemed to be an element of enthusiasm in the community that I hadn't experienced anywhere before. I don't know whether that answers your question, or ...

Max Delsignore: It does, it does partly. You mentioned that, with engineers and those of skilled trades coming in to work for two booming industries, and particularly the seaway. In our previous conversation you had mentioned that, seemed like every day in Massena was like the day before Christmas. Just so much activity, and things happening, and the enthusiasm as you mentioned before. Can you talk a little bit, Charlie, just about the seaway and its impact in the area, from what you saw?

Charles Owens:

The seaway really got underway in 1955. And there was some apprehension within the community, just what is going to happen? In the end, really nothing happened, other than the fact that crime didn't go up. It wasn't gonna turn into a mill city, or something like that. Business was good, people working on the seaway blended right into the community. It was a bustling community, I really don't know how to put it much different.

From a business stand, some of the experiences I had in the store and stuff, I'll never forget. [Kinney 00:11:50] had remodeled their old store and expanded it, and we had a brand new store. A lot of the contractors, when they had special needs, would come to us. We supplied some very unique items to them that we couldn't ... For example, we used to sell ether by the gallon in the wintertime to all the contractors. They use it to start their diesel engines.

One time, a company representative come in, and wanted a ton of sulfur. Well, the company handled bulk sulfur, gardeners and stuff use it. But not by the ton. So I called the pharmaceutical buyer, and said, "I need a ton of sulfur." Took a little convincing, but he said, "I'll get back to you." So about ten minutes later, he called back and he says, "It's ordered." So in two or three days, it had come. I think it came from Slack Chemical in Carthage. But it came in 50, 40 pound kraft paper bags, all covered with dust. I'll never forget unloading at the foot of the conveyor, because everything was just full of dust.

The most unique, different prescription I ever filled happened in Massena. Cold winter night. The clerk handed back a prescription to me to be filled. It was written by a local physician. And it was written for a pediatric antibiotic syrup. Teaspoonful, every six hours. I looked at the heading, and there was a lady's name there. But after it was the word "monkey". And that caught my attention. And I looked up, and standing in front of the counter was a lady in a fur coat, and out of the fur coat stuck the head of a monkey. So I went out and I questioned what she was going in Massena, in the middle of the winter with a monkey. And she went on to tell me that her husband was an engineer with one of the companies on the seaway, and he had been stationed in Central America for four years, and she'd acquired this monkey. And it got sick, presumably, probably pneumonia. And not knowing where to go, she'd took it to the local doctor, who had a little clinic there. I never saw her after that, don't remember seeing the monkey after that.

Max Delsignore:

So was that the first and last time you filled out a prescription for a monkey?

Charles Owens:

That's the only one.

Another interesting time was, one of the big three television companies wanted to do a documentary on the seaway. And they wanted to do it on a Sunday afternoon in the summer, and so forth. They wanted to do a segment on the local input, and they wanted to do it in our store. Ed Moses was our store manager at the time. He was the head of the Chamber of Commerce, or the

Downtown Businessman's Association. So we agreed, and Ed got the Mayor and the Chief of Police and various dignitaries and so forth together.

The day before they were going to broadcast nationwide, they wanted to do a run-through. I think it was either Friday or Saturday before that, they made arrangements. And they come with a crew, and back then, there was no taped television. What you saw on your screen was happening somewhere. So in come the crew. The camera was just a huge camera, standing at eye-level on a tripod with wheels. A couple with lights, floodlights, to light the area. And the announcer who would be doing the interviewing and the announcing and so forth. And a director who was on the telephone to New York.

So they got it all set up, and the director got the go-ahead. And so he turned the camera on, they turned the lights on, and blew the whole circuit. Everything went dark. Cash register went down. What to do? Well, Ed knew the electrician that had wired the area about three or four years before that. Rounded him up, got him there, and I don't know what he did, but that Sunday afternoon in the summer, Kinney's was on television coast to coast for about, oh, five, ten minutes.

Max Delsignore:

Wow.

Charles Owens:

It was interesting.

Max Delsignore:

Good exposure for the local brand.

Charles Owens:

We had a fellow there that could make a nice sign, freehand. So we made a little sign, that said, "Kinney Drugs welcomes you to Massena, New York". Or something like that. He hung it on the front of the cash register. Plan was that they'd focus the camera on the register, and then back away and swing it around through the store, and then come to this group and do the interviews. Well, the director saw that sign, and he said, "That's gotta go." He said, "We're not advertising Kinney Drug coast to coast." So that was interesting.

Max Delsignore:

Charlie, what was it like to continue the family legacy that you had? Your father worked at Kinney's, you kinda followed a little bit in his footsteps, and even became Vice President for Kinney's at one time. What does that mean to you, the family ties to a local business for a long time?

Charles Owens:

Well, my father worked for an independent drug man in Ogdensburg. And there were three other drug stores in Ogdensburg at the time. In 1943, they were pretty tough years, and he went out of business. So my father was out of work. The local pharmacies approached him, and then Harold Kinney approached him. So my father and mother decided they'd make a change, and go to Massena.

As it worked out, I remember sitting at the dinner table, I guess it was the fall of my senior year. And he said, "What are you gonna do?" It was a foregone

conclusion that I'd go to college, probably. I said, "Oh, I don't know," hadn't really thought too much. But I'd worked on the fountain, and I'd worked with him. I said, "Well, maybe I'll go to pharmacy school." He said, "Well if you do, you'll never get rich, but you'll always have food on the table." I thought that sounded pretty good, I like to eat.

So, away I went. And the Kinney company, not personally, but I knew the Kinney family and I knew a lot of the employees. At that time, the Kinneys only had I think seven stores, when I started. And so it was kind of a family affair. They're the only ones that ever gave me a paycheck. As it was, I started as a staff pharmacist in Massena, and then in 1958, things were beginning to wind down in Massena. The seaway was winding down.

But to go back just a bit, right at that period in time, from about '56 to maybe the beginning of the 60s. In '56, Alcoa had a big layoff. But the construction was there, a lot of those people went to construction. Also at the same time, they were building General Motors and Reynolds Metal. So everything worked very well, and that maintained that period of prosperity for a while. But then, when I went to Malone in '58, I opened Kinney's number 12 store.

Managed that for fifteen years, then was promoted to a store supervisor. Moved to Gouverneur in 1973, and they had 21 stores at that time. And then in 1979, I was made a Vice President, and was in charge of purchasing pharmaceuticals, and was head of the pharmacy warehouse. By that time we had, probably about 40, 50 stores.

Max Delsignore: Significant growth by then.

Charles Owens: Yeah. And probably around the mid-eighties, I kinda lost track now, pharmacy warehouse was moved up to the main warehouse that you see on Route 11. I was in charge of all purchasing. Then, the warehouse manager reported to me, and I got involved in advertising and so forth at the same time. And then in 1994, I retired. I was on the Board of Directors at the time. I stayed on the Board until I was 72, and then I went off the Board because of age and so forth.

But, December 24th, 1955, my Christmas gift from the company was one share of stock, Kinney's. The Kinney family always felt that people in areas of responsibility, pharmacists perhaps, department heads, key people should own stock in the company. And they promoted that. And at Christmastime, when I was the store manager, I got two shares. From time to time, the Kinney family would make some of their own stock available. And I bought when I could, so over the years, I acquired a substantial investment in the company.

Max Delsignore: And your investment together, as a couple, obviously went beyond the profession. You guys were very involved in your community in myriad ways, whether it be Rotary or your church. Can you talk a little bit about where some

of those key values of philanthropy, where they came from? Hi, I'll start with you first on that question.

Higohhi Owens: I think, from family, first. I guess from my parents. It was always drummed into us that, if we could, we would. You know? They were refugees, and so my father sponsored a refugee, and brought him over here, and added them to our family. My dad had a dry cleaning store, so brought him over to teach him the trade. But unfortunately, he was not very appreciative. He thought that the streets were gonna be paved with gold, and he was gonna marry the daughter of the one that's sponsoring him. And he got surprised.

I mean, I felt ... You know, my dad did this for him to help him, and he was not very appreciative.

Max Delsignore: How old were you at the time, Hi?

Higohhi Owens: What's that?

Max Delsignore: How old were you at the time?

Higohhi Owens: Well I had just got home from Albany, from college. So, my father was not very appreciative of his wanting to marry his daughter. And he eventually left Massena, because it wasn't a big enough place for him. And eventually he went to the city, I don't know where he went. All I knew was, good riddance.

Max Delsignore: Didn't quite fit the vision he was looking for.

Higohhi Owens: But, here he was. We were trying to help him. My dad didn't have, you know, wasn't rich from the dry cleaning business. And we fitted a room for him in the house.

But as far as my church. I guess churches are philanthropists. I tried to help, as I told you before. I played the organ in church and didn't charge them, and I helped put on fall bazaars and made soup for them. I said, Charles, to be philanthropy, it just has to be money or your services.

Max Delsignore: No, that's a good point because one of the things that we try to convey as a community foundation, as the Northern New York Community Foundation does, in terms of inclusiveness in philanthropy. Because it is more than just your means financially. It's your means with your talents and service, as you said, Hi. I think that's just equally as important when it comes to understanding philanthropy. The dollar plays a part in that equation, but your time and volunteering is equally important if not more so, depending on the cause.

Higohhi Owens: Right. And we tried helping them, both churches, we don't go to the same church. You know, money-wise, also. Whenever something comes up, like the roof.

Max Delsignore: What's it like to be able to do all this giving back together as a couple? What does that mean to you?

Charles Owens: Well, I think it kind of brings us closer together. If we are focused on the same charity, or share a common interest in it. I think about using the scholarship as an example of that.

When the company in 2008 bought back all the stock of former employees, at that time, I knew we would have more than we needed. We were living comfortably, our needs were being met. The family was pretty much on their own. We got together and said, "What are we gonna do with this?" You know, to benefit somebody, something. You could give it to the church, you could give it to a hospital, you could give it here or there. But as we talked about it, I think the STEM program was in the media, in the newspapers and stuff. And that caught my eye. I've always felt very strongly about education.

With four good colleges, top-rate colleges, two private, two a party of the SUNY system in St. Lawrence County, and 17 high schools I believe in St. Lawrence County. Put all that together, and you've got a large student base right here in St. Lawrence County. We kind of gravitated towards a scholarship, a STEM scholarship. I'm a firm believer in the sciences. I think that's probably what's made this country the country it is today. And I think two things. The form of government, we're a constitutional republic, which gives the individual rights that aren't available to many others around the world. In that environment, this country has produced Alexander Graham Bell, the telephone, Bill Gates and Microsoft. Steve Jobs, and the iPod, the I-telephone. Look at where the telephone has developed from Alexander Graham Bell's day to a smartphone. Thomas Watson, I think his name was, that tinkered on automation and the technology of automation and stuff. Now today's IBM.

So, education I've come to appreciate more and more, the older I get.

Max Delsignore: Is there a hope too, that a scholarship like this can inspire the students who are fortunate enough to receive it, to maybe stay locally as well, and maybe invest whatever they receive from their education from a STEM field, to maybe come back to the north country and contribute as they can?

Charles Owens: Yeah. It'd be nice if that happened. But quite frankly --

Higohhi Owens: That's wishful thinking.

Charles Owens: I don't really see it happening to the degree that we'd like to see it happen. Because this area, I think its biggest future lives in the area of agriculture and tourism. We've witnessed what's happened to Massena, even with the power and everything there. With Alcoa and General Motors, and Reynolds. Even with all that going for them, today we've lost General Motors and Reynolds. And Alcoa is very tenuous. So it would be nice.

Higohhi Owens: To go back to doing things as a couple. I think we were both fortunate to have parents who set fine examples for both of us.

Max Delsignore: Hi, what are some of those same values that your parents taught you, that you've been able to share with your children?

Higohhi Owens: Right. I don't know, just being loving parents, I guess. Learning to appreciate what you have, because we didn't have that much. My kids always wondered why they couldn't have something. I think that's the biggest value, appreciate what you have.

Charles Owens: You made church a big part of their life. We both, to a degree, but Higohhi did most of the leadership in that area. My excuse, and it's probably no more of an excuse, is that early in my career, I worked every other Sunday, and so she kind of got the kids that way. But from my own experience, growing up I was president, or treasurer of the Sunday school. And my parents were very strong in the church. We both share that background.

Max Delsignore: When you think about the future of the north country, and St. Lawrence county, Charlie you touched a little bit on the industries that you think maybe have an opportunity to maybe shine in this area. What kind of role can philanthropy play in the future success of where we live here in the north country?

Charles Owens: This may be one thing. It's already happened, to a great degree. That's the Adirondack Park. A lot of that land in the park has been donated and set aside for the use of whoever, the natives as well as tourists. You can think of the Trudeau Institute and the Saranac Lake. Well, that has been here for years and years, and it's the Trudeau family originally. And it's stayed with us. I don't know that we'll ever see another General Electric or General Motors, or anything in the north country.

Max Delsignore: What's the catalyst? If philanthropy can help, not reinvent a region, but make it stronger, make it better, and evolve to those changing needs, what can residents here do to give back? To make the community thrive a little bit better? Even if those industries are gone. What role can the people play?

Higohhi Owens: I don't know what's here to bring them here, really. I mean, they brought the colleges, of course, but I don't know. They come and live in Gouverneur and they said there's nothing in Gouverneur. But we're a couple hours, I don't know how long it takes to go to Montreal. You've got Clarkson and St. Lawrence and so forth. Now we have United Helpers based outside of Canton, hopefully bringing doctors and so forth. If you haven't got any industry, maybe we have to look at the education and healthcare. If we haven't got that ...

Max Delsignore: Well I think something you both touched on makes ... are good points. There are destinations nearby, and there are natural resources that, as far as quality of life and beautification of the area, there's plenty of that. And there's plenty of

people who have invested their time and their energy and resources to kind of make those sustainable, so that folks can have access to these great quality-of-life elements that we do get to enjoy.

In thinking about that younger generation that you talked about, and what we can do to inspire them to give back as you have. Whether it be with a financial gift of their own, or maybe more importantly just to volunteer their time. What do you think is most important for us, or for your generation to do to inspire that next generation coming up? What would it take to inspire them to give back as you have?

Higohhi Owens: Put us on TV.

Charles Owens: That would inspire. I'd like to think that maybe some of the people that are gonna benefit from this scholarship, will not forget it. And, at some point down the road, share some of their success with this area. Obviously if they're graduating from our schools here, they've lived here and benefited from life here. And if this scholarship helps them get to where they are going to be in another 30 years, hopefully they'll support the area.

I don't know, maybe that's wishful thinking. A few years ago families didn't stray as much as they do today. Families probably lived within a radius of maybe 50 miles. Like in my own lifetime my grandfather had a farm. More people lived on farms and lived in villages. And when all that changed and now our children are farther away than we were ever farther away from our parents.

Max Delsignore: Yeah, the connectedness between families isn't what it used to be.

Charles Owens: No, I don't think so really. That's a sad thing to say. I think the memories are there and so forth but they don't celebrate the holidays together and it's because they've scattered so far away.

Max Delsignore: You know, a group that stayed very connected, and I think it's one of the first times we've delved into it on this podcast is, people who give in St. Lawrence County. We really haven't touched on this region yet and we're taking the opportunity to do it. But there is a really strong connectedness of individuals and couples and families that have made a point to give back and re-invest in St. Lawrence County, just as you have. As you look back and you see folks made an invest of their time and talent or financially to St. Lawrence County, what kind of impact can that have on a community?

Higohhi Owens: It brings them together, I think.

Charles Owens: I think of the United Helpers home. And people being scattered. They get a lot of support from people who have scattered. Sons and daughters maybe of former moms and dads that benefited from United Helpers. A lot of them support that financially, not so much maybe by being physically or active there.

The same is true with the Remington Museum, that's supported by people all over the country, to a degree. But they're supported very well by people within the county or in the surrounding area.

Max Delsignore: So each of those non-profit organizations or community causes as we talked about had such strong support, donors, volunteers. Certainly leads to, or at least gives you the thinking that at least the future will be bright for philanthropy in St. Lawrence County, the two of you have certainly demonstrated that across your life in many ways. The Evergreen STEM Scholarship is a really good example at the community foundation where you hope you'll be able to impact the lives of these students forever in many ways, by supporting their education.

At the end of the day for everything that you have done together, if somebody is to ask you what is the legacy of Charlie and Higohhi Owens, what would you hope that to be?

Charles Owens: That we were good citizens, I guess. We were willing to share what we accumulated in life with the people of St. Lawrence County.

Higohhi Owens: I guess I feel about the same, that we're responsible citizens of the community. Yeah, responsible citizens. Get along with your neighbor.

Max Delsignore: Well it's easy to say that this area, and especially St. Lawrence County, is grateful for your thoughtful philanthropy, and your willingness to find ways to make our community special. It is an important example to share with others, and we believe the next generation will hopefully follow your lead. You had some good words to impart as part of the interview.

Thanks again for coming on the podcast to share your story, and your reflections on what philanthropy has really meant to both of you.

Charles Owens: You know, what I think of, Max ... We began to contribute to the Northern New York Community Foundation, maybe as far back as seven, eight, ten years ago. Just the existence of the Northern New York Community Foundation here makes it easy for people like us to practice philanthropy. I don't know who I would ever have turned to, to administer it.

I work with a fella in Rochester who would have liked to have had a hand in it. But that's always there for individuals. But here's an organization that welcomes the participants who want to practice philanthropy. It's a real valuable service to the area.

Max Delsignore: We certainly appreciate those kind words, and are certainly honored to be a part, to have the STEM scholarship be a part of what we administer. And for us to play a small role in your legacy, and being able to help these students position themselves for future success. It means a great deal to us.

Charles Owens: Looking back, these kids are 18, 19 years old now. What are they gonna experience in their lifetime? It just boggles the mind, what they can accomplish, given the freedom to do it and the desire to do it.

Max Delsignore: Well and it's amazing what's available to them, on top of that. I mean, as far as accessibility and resources available, and scholarships certainly, to help them do that. As far as their education is concerned.

Charles Owens: Take an area of medicine. Doctor Sabin. One man discovered the polio vaccine. Now it's two or three drops on the baby's tongue. There's no more polio. There's no polio in North and South America. There's a little bit, very little, in Pakistan and in some areas of Africa. What a difference that one man made.

Max Delsignore: It's amazing. Well, and the mission of Rotary, right? I mean Rotary was the one that really took that on.

Charles Owens: Rotary started it. They started it in '80 ... gotta say about '81, '82. And now Bill Gates and Melinda Gates are supporting it. Probably the one that may crack cancer, who knows. They may be amongst us right now.

Max Delsignore: I was gonna say, maybe it'll be some of these students that receive a scholarship, or like you said are living today. Maybe we'll see it, maybe we won't, I don't know. Time will tell.

Charlie and Hi, thanks again for your kind words, and many thanks again to all of you for tuning in. Remember, you can listen to other episodes of the Northern New York Community Podcast anytime on your smartphone or any mobile device, and it is always free. Find the podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, and Google Play, or check out our website: www.NNYCPodcast.com. Thanks again to PBS, and the Northern New York Community Foundation for their support of this production. We will catch you next time on the Northern New York Community Podcast.