

RINK BY MARGARET MACPHERSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN LEMPHERS MASTER

IT MIGHT BE HARD TO STAY HUMBLE WHEN YOU'RE HELMING THE BOARD OF AN NHL FRANCHISE OR HEADING AN OIL COMPANY. BUT IN THE CASE OF **CAL NICHOLS**, A DEVOUT SENSE OF COMMUNITY KEEPS HIM GROUNDED.

WHEN CAL NICHOLS WAS A WIND BURNT KID FROM THE sticks with nothing but a few lean ounces of Esso entrepreneurial experience under his belt, he heard something from the pulpit that stuck in his mind forever.

That message, from a French parish priest working the scrub bushland and stretched prairie of Nichols' home territory, became the modus operandi for the rest of his life.

"It was during a lecture," recalls Nichols, gazing out the window of his northwest Edmonton leather and glass corner office, the years falling off his face with memory. "This French fellow, he said, 'My brothers and sisters in France can't help me and I can't help them. But my Polish brothers and sister, my Ukrainian brothers and sisters, my Scottish neighbours, the people that are here, they that can help me now. It is these people who matter.'"

GOOD NEIGHBOUR

Like most Saskatchewan natives, Cal Nichols knows the importance of neighbours. He knows what being a good neighbour means. And, in some ways that simple adage—straight biblical principal—is what prompted his organization of a cabal of small to mid-sized businessmen whose sole intention in the mid-'90s was to keep Edmonton's professional hockey franchise, the Oilers, from sliding south to oil-slick Houston.

"We watched it happen with the Nordiques and the Jets," says Nichols of Quebec City and Winnipeg, cities that watched their NHL teams fold in lean times. "I guess I knew that if we didn't fight for something of value, we'd lose it."

Steel replaces the softness in Nichols eyes, and it's suddenly clear how this man segued a handful of gas stations into the multi-million dollar Gasland operation he helms.

Nichols continues: "Edmonton couldn't afford to lose the Oilers. There was \$80 million on the line, 1,200 full and part-time jobs at stake and a true Edmonton icon, the most recognized brand by a country mile. The way I put it to the others was this: we were investing in a community rather than buying a hockey team."

Enter the Edmonton Investors Group (EIG) comprised of Nichols' figurative neighbours, fellow hockey fans who pooled their cash and tapped a few outside sources to keep the Oilers in Edmonton.

"I remember speaking to the chief financial officer of the Oilers back in '96," reminisce Nichols. "I quickly realized that no one company, no corporation or single person could take that financial risk on their own. So I did what came naturally. I went back to what I learned as a young man; go to the people you know."

SHAKY START

That's not to say in early stage fundraising for the fledging group, Friends of the Oilers (FOTO), Cal Nichols didn't get a lot of doors

slammed in his face. Many large corporations with high visibility in the community including the then-viable Canadian Airlines were approached to shore up the shaky, money-losing franchise. Their reception still troubles him.

"These corporations are sucking millions out of the community and putting nothing back in," says Nichols. "I agonize over this all the time." Momentarily lost for words he continues. "How do you—for lack of a better word—shame these people into giving something back?"

It's as good a question now as it was back then, but the difference is back then, Nichols didn't have time to dwell on tight-fisted corporations. He had a team to buy.

In the end, it was smaller players he approached, guys who he'd done business with years earlier in the heavy oil industry, or folks he'd met on the road in his younger days hustling for Esso, and yes, even a few of the people whom he'd come to know in his days as a town councilor of St. Walburg, just north east of his beloved family farmstead in Paradise Hill.

Investing in a community. Being a good neighbour. These are touchstone phrases for the man touted as single-handedly saving

the Oilers hockey club when Peter Pocklington was brokering a deal that could have potentially seen the Houston Oilers going for Lord Stanley's coveted cup in last year's dramatic play-offs.

Oilers General Manager Kevin Lowe knows all too well Nichols' feelings about community and reciprocity. "Cal probably sees this city of a million people no differently than the town he grew up in," says Lowe. "He has a sense of responsibility to his community and it's so real and so genuine in him, it's a good example to all of us."

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PARADISE HILL REVISITED

Nichols is about to embark on a trip back to Paradise Hill, the mixed farming and heavy oil community where he was born some 63 years ago. He's moving his 86-year-old mom from the family home where she still shovels her own snow and puts in her own garden into an assisted living complex where she'll get the help her two Edmonton-based sons cannot provide.

For Nichols, family is everything. His only son, Ken, "a gadget guy since birth," is developing an entirely new system of cash machines based on the electronic process of collecting fuel. Nichols daughter, Kristine, is a successful occupational therapist, but in her father's eyes, nothing compares with her delivery of a second grandchild this fall. He and his wife Edna, his one and only St. Walburg bride, are, quite simply "very much in our children's lives. It means everything to us."

Nichols credits his own parents for creating the strong principles that govern all aspects of his life, from his decision-making as the Oilers' chairman of the board and NHL governor to being the chief executive officer of Gasland Group of Companies.

"Accountability was forever present in my younger years," says Nichols. "We were business people in our community and high morals were a way of life."

BLUE-COLLAR MILLIONAIRES

It's still so. The Edmonton Investors Group, the 37 self-professed "blue-collar millionaires" who own shares in the Edmonton Oilers, "live and die by the budget process," according to Nichols.

As one of the primary shareholders, he's quick to explain: "We had to create strong and appropriate governance between ourselves and the team. If we keep doing what we're doing, we should be okay."

Modesty prevents Nichols from explaining the precise meaning of "okay." Since going back to his personal connections, cap in hand and reciprocity in his heart, the value of the Oilers has doubled, thanks to the NHL's recent collective bargaining agreement and packed houses at all Oilers' home games.

In fact, Forbes magazine just set the value of the team at \$146 million, if it were for sale. But not unlike modesty, community-mindedness and helping your neighbour, the Oilers are not for sale. Perhaps Kevin Lowe says it best.

"Cal Nichols saw the Edmonton Oilers as an international, world class team. He saw how that would translate from an oil

and gas perspective. You're talking to someone in Kazakhstan or Saudi Arabia and they will know Edmonton. How? Because of the Oilers."


That Cal Nichols loves hockey, is no question. Patrick LaForge, CEO of the team says Nichols is, without doubt, the Oilers' number one fan, but he goes a step further to explain the man who first hired him to Imperial's bulk agency as a wet-behind-the-ears summer student in the mid-'70s.

"It's Cal's pure moral fortitude and intense community commitment that has brought the team to where it is today," says LaForge. "He loves Edmonton."

Over and above being a fan of hockey and a fan of Edmonton, Nichols sees the 23 guys on the ice as fairly regular people, despite their on-average pay of \$1.7 million US.

"The power of the hockey player in society is quite amazing," chuckles Nichols when questioned about the idol status some of his players have attained in this hockey-crazed city. "I'm amused by it, not consumed by it. The thing that strikes me is the younger ones are often just clean cut, respectful, hard working, well-brought up farm boys from outstanding families."

He didn't add the final three words: just like me. He wouldn't. But they're there. And, more remarkably, even in their absence, the words ring very, very true.



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