

## Opinion

### Southwestern Illinois, St. Louis maintains reputation for giving to needy, even in tough times

Gary Dollar, chief executive officer and president of the United Way of Greater St. Louis, said it so well during my recent interview with him: There are - and will always be - many people in need throughout our community, but the dire economic circumstances of 2009 and beyond brought those needs to the fore in more personal ways than many of us had ever seen before.



Beiser

Only our parents and grandparents - those who had lived through the Great Depression - had any perspective for what it truly meant to experience foreclosure, unemployment and financial turmoil to the degree and duration our country

experienced the latter part of 2008, 2009 and in 2010. But Gary's perspective also provides us with an encouraging glimpse into the generous spirit of individual and corporate givers throughout the bi-state region. Although the United Way of Greater St. Louis did establish its overall campaign goal only slightly lower last year given economic conditions, companies rallied to meet that modified goal - despite a tough year when their own bottom lines were no doubt threatened. Gary will tell you that although he, the United Way staff and its dedicated network of campaign volunteers are grateful, they're not surprised: it's who this region is. It's the heart of the Gateway City and of Southwestern Illinois. But in 2009, it was also something more. To those who gave to the United Way - and in doing so helped one

million people via nearly 200 health and human service agencies - they may well have been reminded to do so when they literally saw the need in the flesh. Beyond the customary public service announcements on television, radio and in newspaper, givers saw real need in the face of a neighbor on their street whose home went into foreclosure last year. They saw the need when one of their children's friend's parents lost his job but was able to tap into a United Way agency for short-term emergency assistance. They may have given because they themselves had been recipients of the United Way's resources during a tough time in their own lives - maybe even during this recession as well. Gary mentioned that one of their contributors in the '09 campaign had recently lost his job but decided he still wasn't in as bad of a situation as many others, and he made the decision to continue giving despite his

own personal uncertainty. On pages 7-18 of this July edition, we tried something a little bit different this time around. In all the economic downturn craziness, we thought it was pretty exceptional to find a number of companies in our region who continue to pledge a portion of their time, service and dollars outside the office to help nonprofit organizations in need of assistance. In tough times like these, it would be all too easy just to "mind our own stores" and focus inward; but we're all called to do more, and these companies are shining examples of that. We hope you've enjoyed reading about them. We're proud to live and work in a region that has a big heart, in good times and in tough ones. Kerry L. Beiser is president and chief executive officer of the Illinois Business Journal. She can be reached at [kbeiser@ibjonline.com](mailto:kbeiser@ibjonline.com).

for the excellent St. Louis workforce. They boasted of the productivity of the construction labor force and how numerous large projects - Busch Stadium, I-64, etc. - were delivered on time and on budget. They derided Nelson's comments as blasphemy. How interesting is it, then, that essentially the same message as Nelson's was delivered by Edwin Hill, president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, to all of his members across North America fully five years ago? Here are some of the points that Hill urgently tried to convey to his electrical brotherhood. "We're not the only game in town anymore, and we haven't been in quite some time. Our customers have a choice - and far too many of them are choosing our non-union competitors. We have to do better. "What we need is change. A change in our own attitude. Because right now, our customers think we care more about ourselves than about them. And in today's world, where the customer's always right, that's a recipe for disaster. The customer is the one who gives us our jobs. The customer is the one who signs our checks. Listening to the customer isn't a sign of weakness. It's just good business. "If we don't collectively elevate our game, we could become insignificant in

### Labor needs to stop the Emperor's New Clothes routine and adopt Business 101

In the tale of The Emperor's New Clothes, the monarch parades through town naked while onlookers pretend to see a beautiful new suit. It's not until a boy calls out, "The Emperor is naked!" that the ruse is up. I did an Emperor's New Clothes story in the May edition and my, was there a backlash about the boy who spoke the truth.



Ortals

In this case, it wasn't a set of clothes but the productivity of local construction labor unions. Terry Nelson, the executive secretary-treasurer of the Carpenters' District Council, was the boy who had the gall to speak the truth. Nelson had said in the article that the lack of productivity of St. Louis area labor unions resulted in higher building costs here than elsewhere. He said that outdated work rules and inflexibility made some local unions difficult to deal with and caused development to go where the hassles were less. The story was later picked up by one of the local radio talk shows that spent two hours taking calls from listeners. Several labor leaders called in to deny Nelson's accusations and to vouch

man and I believe that the high standard of living that we enjoy in this country is due in large part to the achievements of organized labor. The fact of the matter is that business has changed - but too many unions haven't changed with it. In 1965, 90 percent of the construction done in this country was done by union labor. Today it's just 10 percent. Labor needs to change. If organized labor wants to turn that deplorable curve around, it needs to adopt Nelson's Business 101 approach. The carpenters can take pride in the fact that a large percentage of residential construction in this area is done with union carpenters - much higher than anywhere else in the country. It's because Nelson delivers a high-quality, professional workforce that is the best that money can buy. He understands the business professional's needs and brings his workforce in to help make the project succeed. Rather than complaining and criticizing Nelson for what he said, union officials should take a good long look in the mirror and realize that it's time to stop praising the Emperor's New Clothes. The first step in correcting any problem is admitting that one exists. Alan J. Ortals is vice president and chief operating officer of the Illinois Business Journal. He can be reached at [aortals@ibjonline.com](mailto:aortals@ibjonline.com).

our own industry. "We're at a crossroads. We can continue on with business as usual and have a front row seat to our own demise. Or, we can put the IBEW back on the path to success." Hill referred to a survey of decision makers in the construction industry that had just been completed. The survey revealed both good news and bad news. The good news, Hill said, was that union craftsmen were perceived to be trained, experienced and knowledgeable. The bad news, however, was that they were also considered to be expensive, arrogant, entitled, inflexible, protected and not customer oriented. The bottom line was that decision makers in the construction industry found no advantage to using union labor. "If contractors could knowingly build into their bids an additional hour a day of productive work, it would have a significant impact on our ability to gain back market share," Hill said. "We can be the choice again if we can go out and prove that we're the best deal for the customer." Does any of this sound familiar? Hill's video is not hidden away in a secret vault someplace. Google his name and it's the first thing that pops up. Why, then, the Emperor's New Clothes routine by local union leaders? This is not an indictment of organized labor. My father was a staunch union

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## Letters

### Dear Editor:

With reference to your recent article, "Lack of productivity puts St. Louis region in the backseat for economic development," I was asked by a number of our affiliates to send you the enclosed articles that directly refute the assertions made by Mr. Nelson.

You need to know both sides of an issue. It's clear that there was no effort to find out if his assertions were accurate. I understand that you are reporting on his assertions, but an article like this without balance can do a great deal of harm. And it has.

Rest assured communities competing against the St. Louis/Southern Illinois Metro Area for industry will use your article to try and disparage our highly skilled, productive workforce in an effort to encourage industry to locate in their community.

Mr. Nelson has his own personal agenda and his comments reflect that, even though the facts state otherwise.

**Gerald T. Feldhaus**  
Executive Secretary-Treasurer  
Building and Construction Trades  
Council, St. Louis

*Write to us... We'd like to hear your opinion*

In 300 words or less, write to us on a topic relevant to Southwestern Illinois business readers.

Sign and mail your letters to:  
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