

# Direct Selling *News*

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Industry with Heart

Univera

## Serving the World with Univera's Serve First

by Rebecca Larson



Univera's name reflects its commitment to bettering humankind—*uni*, meaning one, and *vera*, truth. The Univera vision—to extract the best of nature and bring its benefits to the world—is being realized in communities around the globe. From Thailand to Ruleville, Miss., Univera's Serve First effort is making a difference, relieving hunger and providing essential nutrition to thousands. Inspired by the lives and example of founder Bill Lee and his late father, Serve First actively seeks to do exactly what its name implies: to first, serve.

### Providing the Essentials

"I once asked this fellow, 'What would be the perfect famine relief?' Surprisingly, he said, 'Something we could drop from the sky. Something that would not require utensils, water, a stove or any tools,'" says Stephen Cherniske, Univera's Chief Scientific Officer. "When we finished the Essentials project, which took about a year, we realized that's exactly what we had created."

Essentials provides a sure and simple way for everyone of every age to take in the essential raw materials needed to maintain and support health. It combines the right kind of carbohydrates—those naturally inherent in fruit—with protein, fiber, and essential fats in specially formulated molecules. The complete, time-released formula acts as an energy system to fuel your body when you need it most.

Constructed around the Essentials product, Serve First brings nutrition to the impoverished and malnourished of the world. "We created a product simply designed to which there would be no objections, no questions, no cautions, no warnings—a product for everyone, from age 2 to 102," Cherniske says.

### Sharing the Gift

Serve First's initial opportunity to share Essentials occurred by chance at an orphanage in northern Thailand. On the point of starvation and without medical attention, young refugees from Laos and Cambodia took shelter at the orphanage. "It was one of those wonderful coincidences where somebody talked to somebody else, who called me," says Cherniske. "We had just gotten our first shipment of Essentials, so we diverted it to Thailand."

### Ruleville

Encouraged by the success in Thailand, Serve First soon heard of an extremely impoverished area right here in the United States. The largest Serve First effort takes place in Ruleville, Miss. The Ruleville Project started in March of 2006. In this rural community where unemployment rates are high, and the principal even jokes that half the people are incarcerated and the other half guard them, Serve First provides Essentials to elementary school children twice a day.

Moved to action by the poverty he witnessed, Cherniske began working closely with school administrators to better provide for the children's dietary needs. "We worked out a program where we would donate 3.3-oz. bottles; it's the perfect size for a kid," he says. "So we decided that we would give the kids a couple of these every day. The principal noticed that a lot of the kids come to school hungry on Monday because they hadn't eaten over the weekend. So, we gave every child two a day, plus four for the weekend."

In terms of sheer numbers, the outcome has been nothing less than phenomenal. Only one year after launch, absenteeism became a fraction of what it once was, scholastic scores rose, and the number of child hospitalizations dropped dramatically. When Cherniske went back to Ruleville one year after the program began, he was amazed. "When you are hungry, you can't pay attention," he says. "The growling in your stomach pretty much drowns out the voice of the teacher." As the children became better nourished, they paid better attention in class. Their scores improved, as did their hopes for a better life.

### Serving Every Summer

July is hailed as Univera's Serve First month, in which employees and Associates team up to give back to the community. Between 20 and 50 groups around the country donate time, effort and energy to various local charitable organizations, including Habitat for Humanity and Ruleville, among others. Teams take photos and videos, then send them to corporate headquarters, with the compiled images shown yearly at the national convention.

"The first time we showed the Ruleville video at our national convention in order to launch the donation project, we exceeded our projections threefold," Cherniske says. "Our Associates came up with donations that were way beyond what we expected."

In 2006, Univera created a system so Associates could make a donation of whatever amount they wanted to give. "Associates could pledge what they could afford as part of their monthly order—\$5, \$10, \$25. And the company would match that, dollar for dollar," Cherniske says. That year, Serve First's efforts amounted to more than \$1 million in products alone; 2007 saw a reduction in production costs, which allowed the same amount of product to be sent to Ruleville for less than \$350,000.

Not only is Serve First dedicated to bringing Essentials to Ruleville Elementary, it is also involved in a number of projects that impact people's lives. For the past three years, Serve First worked with Left Foot Organics, a group in Olympia, Wash., that employs special-needs individuals who would otherwise have difficulty finding work. "Left Foot Organics employs them for simple things, like planting, weeding and tending the gardens. The produce later appears in local stores," Cherniske says. And to Univera's leaders, service isn't only about donating money. "We've gone down to Left Foot Organics and tilled new beds, weeded, pruned, or whatever had to be done."

In March 2008, corporate employees got their hands dirty once again when they worked to clean up 40 acres of land less than 2 miles from the local landfill in Thurston County, Wash. "Where we live is one of the best landfill

operations going in terms of ease of operation and yet, wherever you go, it seems as soon as you drive off the road in any forest in the area, you've got washing machines, junk cars, and bags of garbage," Cherniske says. So the company execs turned out to help clean up. No project is too small to tackle—or too large.

The company, and especially Bill Lee, supports all efforts on the part of the Associates. "And so we are really able to combine the generosity and concern of the Associates with the generosity of my boss, who is the closest thing to a living saint that I've ever encountered," Cherniske says.



**Stephen Cherniske, Chief Scientific Officer, Univera**

## Attendance for Ruleville

**The numbers speak for themselves at Ruleville Elementary School. Despite beginning in the middle of a regular school year, the children's attendance skyrocketed.**

**Days absent in 2005:**

**Boys: 1027      Girls: 965**

**Days absent in 2006:**

**Boys: 346      Girls: 283**

**Days absent in 2007:**

**Boys: 69      Girls: 23**

**Univera intends to continue to provide for these children, further enhancing their lives and their futures through proper nutrition.**

### Discovering the Gift

Univera visionary YunHo Lee (Bill Lee's father) had long suffered from poor health. When conventional medicine offered no relief, a friend gave him aloe vera juice. Lee tried the juice and the result was, in his words, "a miraculous recovery." Independently wealthy, Lee's recovery prompted him to invest in researching the medicinal properties of aloe and other plants. This investment included employing leading scientists and equipping them with innovative, state-of-the-art instrumentation.

Cherniske, a widely recognized expert on nutrition and human performance, was begging for grants when he and Bill Lee first met. Cherniske was amazed and awed by Lee, who offered progressive facilities and staff to study medicinal plants and the aging process. With more than 35 years of clinical research and teaching experience, Cherniske quickly recognized the global impact this project could have and tried to ensure Lee understood what he was undertaking. "This is an ongoing effort that will take many years," Cherniske told Lee at their initial meeting. Lee's response: "Well, I'm patient."

As Univera's Chief Scientific Officer, Cherniske ensures scientific method and validation, an essential part of Univera's culture, are followed throughout the research process. Patience and persistence combined with both men's drive to serve the community at large led to the creation of Essentials. "Made with nanotechnology, it turned out to be a meal in a bottle," Cherniske says.

Lee's goal was to discover more about the connection between the medicinal power of ethnobotanicals and the body's incredible power of renewal and to bring that power to the world. Through Univera and Serve First, he is achieving his goal with remarkable success and intends to keep serving the community and the world, and fulfilling his father's vision to make the world a better place.

### Continuing to Serve

Although known as unwilling to talk much about his charitable efforts, Bill Lee and his staff intend to continue using the loudest voice possible to speak for the impoverished—action. Serve First is already on track for 2008, with more than \$100,000 in donations. "We're just in the United States and Canada now, but we plan to expand to New Zealand, followed by Australia in 2009 and probably Japan in 2010," Cherniske notes. "As we expand, we will certainly bring Serve First into those countries." 🍌