

# Hobby Lobby executive describes company's legacy of faith

January 16, 2009

SHAWNEE, Okla. (BP)—Steve Green's father, David, started his retail career in high school through the DECA business education program. Never the model student, but with an affinity for math, David Green embraced the opportunity provided by the work program, starting an art-supplies store in a 300-square-foot space in 1972.

More than three and a half decades later, the Hobby Lobby retail chain operates 407 stores, reaching sales of about \$1.8 billion dollars in 2007. The company operates in a 33-state area, with headquarters in Oklahoma City.

The family built the company not only on sound financial and business plans, but also on a legacy of faith that guides company-wide decisions. Hobby Lobby President Steve Green was invited to speak about how the company's success yields opportunities for eternal significance by Oklahoma Baptist University's Students in Free Enterprise group.

Steve Green

Green and his wife, Jackie, and their six children are members of Council Road Baptist Church in Bethany, Okla.

Green described his grandmother, Marie, as instrumental in shaping his family's religious commitment. She was a preacher's kid and a preacher's wife. She and her husband, Walter, lived with six children—three boys and three girls—in a one-bedroom house. The girls slept in the bedroom, boys

bunked in the kitchen, and the parents slept in the living room.

At times, the children had to go to school without shoes, and generous teachers met that need. If the girls invited friends over to play, they put empty containers in the refrigerator so their friends wouldn't see the bare shelves and realize the depth of their poverty.

Even so, Marie Green had a deep faith, trusting in God to provide and praying for her family. She also had a heart for missions, crocheting doilies to raise money for ministries. Her children caught hold of her faith; five of the six either became licensed ministers or married ministers. The sixth began a retail business he called Hobby Lobby.

Green recapped the expansion of Hobby Lobby. In 1974, sales at the first store were \$150,000; the next year, sales jumped to \$750,000, and the company added a second store.

"We've always been in a growth pattern," Green said. "We've always grown as quickly and as well as we could."

But in 1985, David Green called a family meeting and said he did not see how the business could survive. The oil boom had busted, directly affecting the Oklahoma economy. The company decided to simplify its merchandise, abandoning high-end products such as gallery art prints, luggage and ceiling fans.

### **"This isn't your company"**

David Green also recalled a sense that God was telling him, "This isn't your company." He chose to rely on God's guidance. And in 1986, the company tallied record profits.

Steve Green calls those first 24 years of the company's history "economic sustainability"—building a company that could survive the present and

make a profit to survive the future. Success was built one day at a time, he stressed.

“That is what Hobby Lobby was doing—struggling, decision by decision, action by action, making Hobby Lobby the success it is today,” Green said. “It was that endurance, that determination, that brought success.”

Green referred to the past 12 years of the company’s history as years of ministry. But he noted that ministry opportunities were a direct outgrowth of the company’s financial foundation and continued success in retail business. Today, anchored in the sound business plans of their retail chain—and with Marie Green’s legacy of faith to guide them—the family supports missions and ministries around the world, Green said.

“I don’t want you to think ministry became the focus. It didn’t, because we’re retailers,” he told the OBU students. “But success allowed us to begin a season of ministry.”

In 1996, while looking at newspaper advertisements, David Green felt troubled that too many ads touted “Season’s Greetings” and “Happy Holidays,” with too little focusing on Christmas and the religious significance of the annual observance.

### **Sharing a gospel message**

Starting with a quarter-page ad, then a half-page ad, and finally full-page ads, Hobby Lobby became known for sharing a gospel message through newspaper ads during Christmas, Easter and other holidays.

Today, the ads run in 290 newspapers with an estimated readership of 44 million people, with Green describing the public’s response to the ads as overwhelmingly positive.

In 1997, the company chose to contribute to the ministry of “Book of

Hope”—a booklet that harmonizes the four Gospels into one message, addressing life issues from a scriptural standpoint. Children and students in more than 100 countries receive the booklets, with Hobby Lobby having funded production of 380 million Book of Hope copies.

In 1998, the company made the radical choice to close their stores on Sundays, their busiest day of the week, joining the practice set by Christian-owned Chick-fil-A.

“It helps our employees by allowing them to spend time with their families and worship,” Green said. “That would be our desire.”

Also in 1998, the company bought its first retail property to donate to ministry: a veterans’ hospital in Little Rock, Ark.

### **Donated 43 properties**

So far, Hobby Lobby has purchased 43 properties valued at \$200 million, donating them to churches, para-church ministries and other charitable causes.

That same year, they funded the movie project, *End of the Spear*, about the martyrdom of five American missionaries in Ecuador by Woadani tribesmen in the 1950s. They also funded the related documentary, *Through Gates of Splendor*.

As the company continued to grow, and ministry opportunities began to arise, the Greens set a criteria for giving: They chose to give significantly to a few causes rather than give a little to many causes.

“We have to say, ‘no,’ a whole lot more than we say, ‘yes,’ which goes back to the policy to support a few ministries well,” Green said. “That means we have to be very good at saying, ‘no.’”

In the past decade, Hobby Lobby has added a full-time chaplain to meet

employees' needs. They engaged in "Every Home for Christ," an effort to take the gospel into every home in the world, with a goal of funding the message into 400 million homes; they've funded nearly 200 million already.