

A father's love

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Mel Gottlieb established the Memories of Love Foundation with his late son, Martin, in mind.

When entering the Gottlieb Building on Sunbeam Road, one cannot help but notice a black and white, framed picture of a father and son hanging on the wall. The image is meant to serve as a reminder of the caring nature one man had for his company and his community.

The picture is of Mel Gottlieb and his since-deceased son Martin, who was the CEO and founder of **Martin Gottlieb & Associates**, an emergency room billing company.

"It's just my favorite picture in the world and when I walked into work when I came back, I wanted to make a statement that this is Marty's business, not mine," Mel Gottlieb said. "He was really just a caring and good guy, and he ran a good business."

Martin died at the age of 32 from complications after an elective medical procedure in April 2004. Mel became CEO of his son's company shortly after and started the **Memories of Love Foundation** in his honor in 2005.

"Martin said if he ever died I would be the one to take over his business," Gottlieb said. "I didn't intend to start [Memories of Love] until Martin died, though."

The foundation offers families with parents battling a life-threatening illness a six-day, five-night vacation in Orlando for the entire family in hopes that they can share happier last memories with each other.

"You really remember those last months," Gottlieb said. "I thought this would make for some great memories. It's really amazing to me."

The vacations are made possible through a variety of in-kind donations, including hotel accommodations, theme park admission, complimentary meals and transportation.

Gottlieb co-founded Memories of Love with philanthropist Henri Landwirth, founder of nonprofits **Dignity U Wear Foundation Inc.** and **Give Kids the World.**

Though Landwirth initially had the idea for Memories of Love, he was a little hesitant until Gottlieb offered to help get the foundation started.

"I took it and ran with it," Gottlieb said.

Landwirth needed space for the foundation, and Gottlieb offered 2,000 square feet of his office building. Though it was difficult for him at first, Gottlieb decided to give Martin's office to the foundation's executive director, Helen Werking.

"I couldn't walk in this office for a while," Gottlieb said while in Martin's office.

"I was going to close it up and not go in and not let anyone in here."

Werking said she didn't want to change anything about the office because she wanted to keep the memory of Martin strong in her mind to serve as a reminder

of the foundation's purpose. There are still pictures of Martin and his wife and two children in the office.

Though the foundation has a strong, compassionate purpose driving it, much attention is paid to the business aspect of Memories of Love.

Gottlieb wrote letters to 130 local businesses to solicit support for the foundation. He chose companies whose leaders seemed to be concerned about their employees and philanthropically minded.

"I was quite taken at how Mel wrote the letter to his counterparts," Werking said. "By sending the CEOs the letter, it lets them know the powerful message they can send throughout their organization. If a CEO has a philanthropic focus, it permeates through the entire organization."

Raising money and awareness for a philanthropic organization can be difficult, but having Landwirth as a co-founder made it easier, Gottlieb said.

"Henri's contacts made it easier to get donations," he said.

Through those contacts, Memories of Love received donations from **Disney World, Universal Studios Orlando, Sea World, Holiday Inn** and several other companies. In-kind contributions to the foundation exceed \$140,000, Gottlieb said.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Inc. has provided in-kind donations such as consulting and \$150,000 in funding.

"We've helped them craft the program so they can pass this need to families," said Susan Towler, vice president of community affairs for Blue Cross and executive director of the **Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida Inc.**, Blue

Cross' philanthropic wing. "We'll certainly be supporting them financially in the future. And we've known Henri and his work for a number of years."

The partnership between Gottlieb and Landwirth makes Memories of Love a powerful organization because of the different characteristics of the two, Werking said.

"Mel and I are about the facts and business, but Henri is all about the spiritual side of the organization," she said.

Memories of Love also has received a lot of attention and care from the employees of Martin Gottlieb & Associates. Last year, employees contributed more than \$20,000.

"It's really something when you have a whole staff that is behind something like this," Werking said. "I have an armada downstairs [at MGA]."

With financial and in-kind support, Memories of Love has sent more than 80 families to Orlando since August 2005.

"Most philanthropies wouldn't be able to do what we do," Gottlieb said. "The resources we have make it easier."

Memories of Love wants to acquire its own facility in Orlando to manage the vacations more effectively and offer families more convenience on their vacations. Gottlieb and Werking don't usually interact with families, but every so often there are some encounters that Werking said are heartfelt and emotional.

"Sometimes these people insist on coming here and want to know who's behind this," she said. "When you see a 250-pound construction worker grabbing Mel and saying, 'Thank you for the memories,' it buckles your knees."

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