

## Franchise dealers open their wallets and their hearts to assist their local communities

Arlena Sawyers



*Image courtesy of Rick Case Automotive Group »*

For Rita and Rick Case, the philanthropic seed was planted in 1980 when they were moved by the number of children who came into their northeastern Ohio motorsports and bicycle stores wishing for a bike.

So the Cases, through public service announcements, asked the community to donate bicycles they or their children no longer needed, to youngsters who wanted bicycles and may not have been able to get one otherwise. Donors were asked to drop off their bicycles at any Case store so they could be refurbished, if necessary, before they were distributed.

The recipients attended the Boys and Girls Clubs of America in Cleveland, Ohio.

"We started 'Rick Case Bikes for Kids' in 1982, so this is our 42nd year," said Rita Case, who became CEO and president of Rick Case Automotive Group after her husband, Rick, died in September 2020.

"That's how we got started in philanthropy," she said. "We were in Cleveland, Akron, Cincinnati, Dayton, Columbus."

The Cases' generosity is but one example of franchise dealers and dealership groups opening their wallets and their hearts to assist their local communities and causes.



*Image courtesy of Rick Case Automotive Group »*

## **Rick Case Habitat Community**

The Cases, together with donations from the community, built a large Habitat for Humanity community -- 76 homes on 10 acres of land, in Pompano Beach, Fla., called the Rick Case Habitat Community. The ground breaking was in 2017 and the project was completed in 2024.

In 2023 alone, Rita Case's philanthropic donations exceeded \$3 million. She is also actively involved in fund-raising and chairing causes she is passionate about.

The Cases moved from Ohio to Fort Lauderdale in 1985 when they opened the first Acura store and the first Hyundai store in the United States.

The group has 12 new car dealerships and a Honda PowerHouse store in south Florida and Atlanta.

*“When you have a healthy community — not just a positive attitude, but physically healthy — then you’re going to have a more stable foundation to build your community on.” – Rita Case, Rick Case Automotive Group*

### **Education, health and safety**

Case said her three philanthropic priorities are education, health and safety for the community.

“When you have a healthy community — not just a positive attitude, but physically healthy — then you’re going to have a more stable foundation to build your community on,” she said.

The dealership group donated money to remodel the Broward Medical Health Center’s cafeteria. So, the Monday before Thanksgiving Case was at the health center doing a ribbon cutting for what is now the Rita and Rick Case Automotive Food Court.

Case also pitched in \$125,000 and raised another \$375,000 from other donors, to provide 7,200 children identified as homeless by the Broward County Public School System with two pair of athletic shoes with brand names such as Reebok, Champion, Adidas and Nike, per year for five years, Case said. The program is in its third year.

Children need to feel a sense of belonging and shoes matter, Case said.

“I believe shoes are the key to a child’s self-esteem and confidence,” she said. “With self-esteem and confidence, you’re going to do better in school.”





*Image courtesy of Rick Case Automotive Group »*

## **'Everybody was struggling, but we weren't'**

By many measures, 2009 wasn't a great year.

The economy plunged into the worst recession since the Great Depression, new vehicle sales tanked and two Big 3 automakers, Chrysler and General Motors, filed for bankruptcy protection.

But that year, "we looked around and it looked like everybody was struggling but we weren't," recalls Tom Hunter, president and CEO of Hunter Automotive Group, in Fletcher, N.C., which operates, Subaru, Hyundai, Volvo new vehicle franchises, and Hunter Powersports. "We were doing really well, so we decided to give back to the community."

So the group set aside "a certain amount of money" and used it to build a Habitat for Humanity house, Hunter said.

"That was our first big project; it was the House that Hunter Built and it was the first home built by a corporate sponsor in Henderson County, N.C.," Hunter said.

"That led us to really appreciate what we're capable of. We surprised ourselves that we could raise that much money and all the employees got involved to help build the home."



The success of the project led to the dealership group establishing the Hunter Hometown Foundation to formalize its philanthropic efforts and to create a process for people to submit requests for grants.



*Image courtesy of Rick Case Automotive Group »*

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## **\$2 million donated over past six years**

"We all agreed that from every car — new and used and every power sport vehicle — we sell, we'd kick \$50 into the foundation," he said. "Right now, we're going to sell about 5,000 vehicles (in 2024)."

"We gave about \$2 million back to the local community over the past six years."

He said the foundation seeks to benefit three main groups: youth and education; organizations that support the environment; and animal welfare organizations and shelters.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene which devastated parts of North Carolina in September, "we just approved several grants for local non-profits in our community to help rebuild from the flood," he said, in mid- November. "We'll do another round of funding probably within the next couple of weeks."

## **Foundation supports employees, too**

Hunter's dealerships didn't go unscathed during the hurricane.

"We got three feet of water in all the buildings, the lot was covered, we lost 75 cars to the flood," he said.

He said about 100 people including his employees helped clean mud from inside the buildings, removed wet drywall and he brought in generators and Starlink satellite internet service.

The storm hit on a Friday and Hunter's stores were open for business the following Thursday.

Unfortunately, seven of Hunter's employees lost their homes to the storm and the dealership foundation is providing financial assistance for those employees as well, he said.

## **Fighting cancer is part of AutoNation's culture**

AutoNation in 2015, committed to supporting breast cancer treatment, awareness and research with its Drive Pink or "DRV PNK" initiative and license plate holders.

Seeing the passion its employees expressed for fighting other forms of cancer, the company broadened its support to include cancer treatment and research of all kinds and has donated and raised more than \$40 million for that effort over more than a decade, said Ashley Shea, AutoNation director of corporate affairs.

"Throughout the years, organically that commitment has grown beyond breast cancer," Shea said. "When our associates began to share their passion for this, what started as a campaign has grown into part of our culture.

"They voiced concerns about pediatric cancers, prostate cancer, blood disorders," and "we said yes to it all."

That has led to AutoNation financially supporting a number of cancer-related programs such as: Zero Prostate Cancer; National Pediatric Cancer Foundation; and Phoenix Children's Hospital, which has a center for cancer and blood disorders, Shea said.

"We continue to support the Breast Cancer Research Foundation," she added.