



Gary Niebur considers himself 'the luckiest man' for his experiences at the Y

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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This is the final part in a series of Gary Niebur, the CEO/president of the Edwardsville YMCA, who is retiring.

EDWARDSVILLE - During CEO/President Gary Niebur's tenure, the Edwardsville YMCA has grown to a great heights.

The second YMCA facility - the Meyer Center - opened in August 2005. The Meyer Center has 116,000 square feet and is one of the largest in the Midwest.

"I remember when talking about adding another facility and remember the one on Esic was packed and couldn't expand it. A critical part of this decision was we felt it wasn't right to duplicate what we already had," Niebur said. "We would be just moving people if we did that. The two facilities are very different. The skate center at Meyer brought in a whole new group of people, especially young people who may not as connected to the pool.

"We also added a climbing wall and other features are the tennis courts and gymnastics. We have a fabulous gymnastics area. We also have the indoor track and the Mannie Jackson basketball court at Meyer. Mannie donated \$250,000 to help us out with the court. The whole point behind the Meyer Center was to do something to bring new people to the Y."

Edwardsville YMCA Board President Mark Motley said during Gary's tenure, the YMCA raised over \$10 million in donations.

"This collaboration between the Y and our generous community made it possible for the organization to grow from one facility of 15,000 square feet to three facilities totaling over 140,000 square feet," he said. "Membership numbers multiplied from less than 1,000 memberships with 2,000 members, to 6,600 memberships with 19,200 members. The budget climbed from \$163,000 when Gary began his employment to over \$6,000,000 in 2016."

Motley pointed out in 2007, the Edwardsville YMCA was honored by the YMCA of the USA with an "Excellence in Facilities Award." "Only a select number of YMCAs have been honored with this award, designating our Y as one of the most successful in the country," Motley said. "In January 2013, another facility was added with the highly regarded Allison Cassens Early Childhood Development Center in Glen Carbon. Recently, it was awarded the Bronze Circle of Quality designation by ExceleRate Illinois."

“In addition to the new facilities, our outstanding Y employees have created and driven the excellent programs and services that make daily positive impact in the lives of kids, families, seniors and people of all ages.

“Bolstered by our Financial Assistance/Scholarship programs, the Y makes it possible for everyone to participate, regardless of economic condition. For over 30 years, Gary has made that work paramount as a leader.”

Gary said of all the programs the Y offers, the ones for adults with special needs probably mean more to him than any.

“When we say the Y is a special place for all, we meant it,” Gary said. “My thought has always been this is who we are and what we are supposed to do. We didn’t go out and pat ourselves on the back about it, it was what we are supposed to do.”

A couple instances where the YMCA stepped in and helped adults have carried with Gary through his years as president/CEO.

“After we raised \$6 million and had 600 donors, about four or five years later, a lady said, ‘Gary can I see you a minute.’ ‘I wanted to tell you something, you aren’t going to be see our family here and we don’t want you to think we don’t like the Y, we love the Y. My husband has lost his job and we have been very fortunate all these years, but we are struggling, but we will come back.’

“I remembered this couple had given a sizable amount to help build the Meyer Center,” Gary said. “I said no, you are not leaving. Your membership continues, don’t worry about that. The girls are involved in gymnastics and they are still involved in gymnastics. When you get back on your feet fine, but until then until then we are here to take care of you and the girls. Those are the things I wanted to do myself.”

The other story Gary vividly remembers was a conversation with an elderly woman where he saw her sitting in the lobby nearly every day after she would swim.

Gary said to her you must really love to swim.

“She literally started to whisper and said: ‘Don’t tell anybody, but I really don’t like to swim.’ “I said, if you don’t like swimming, why do you do it. She said, ‘Gary this is really my home away from home. I don’t have any family in he area and I am not really very close to my neighbors. If I can’t come to the Y and swim and sit in the lobby, what am I going to do. I really don’t like to swim, but I like to see these folks I call my friends.’

“That incident helped me realize, it’s not just the facilities, but it is the social part of it for a lot of the people, especially the elderly.”

Gary closed by saying he always identified with what Lou Gehrig said: “t was on July 4, 1939, Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day, when the longtime Yankee first baseman uttered the famous words at a home plate ceremony at Yankee Stadium: “Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

“I have been very fortunate,” Gary said. “Lou Gehrig said I am the luckiest man in the earth, I will do a takeoff of Lou Gehrig, and say I am the luckiest man in Edwardsville. I never had to drive more than 3 or 4 miles to work. I got to meet some of the most marvelous people possible. I met people at a young age who helped me along the way and were mentors for me and I try now to do the same today for younger people. Edwardsville is a great place, this Y is a great place and I will always be thankful for my experiences.”