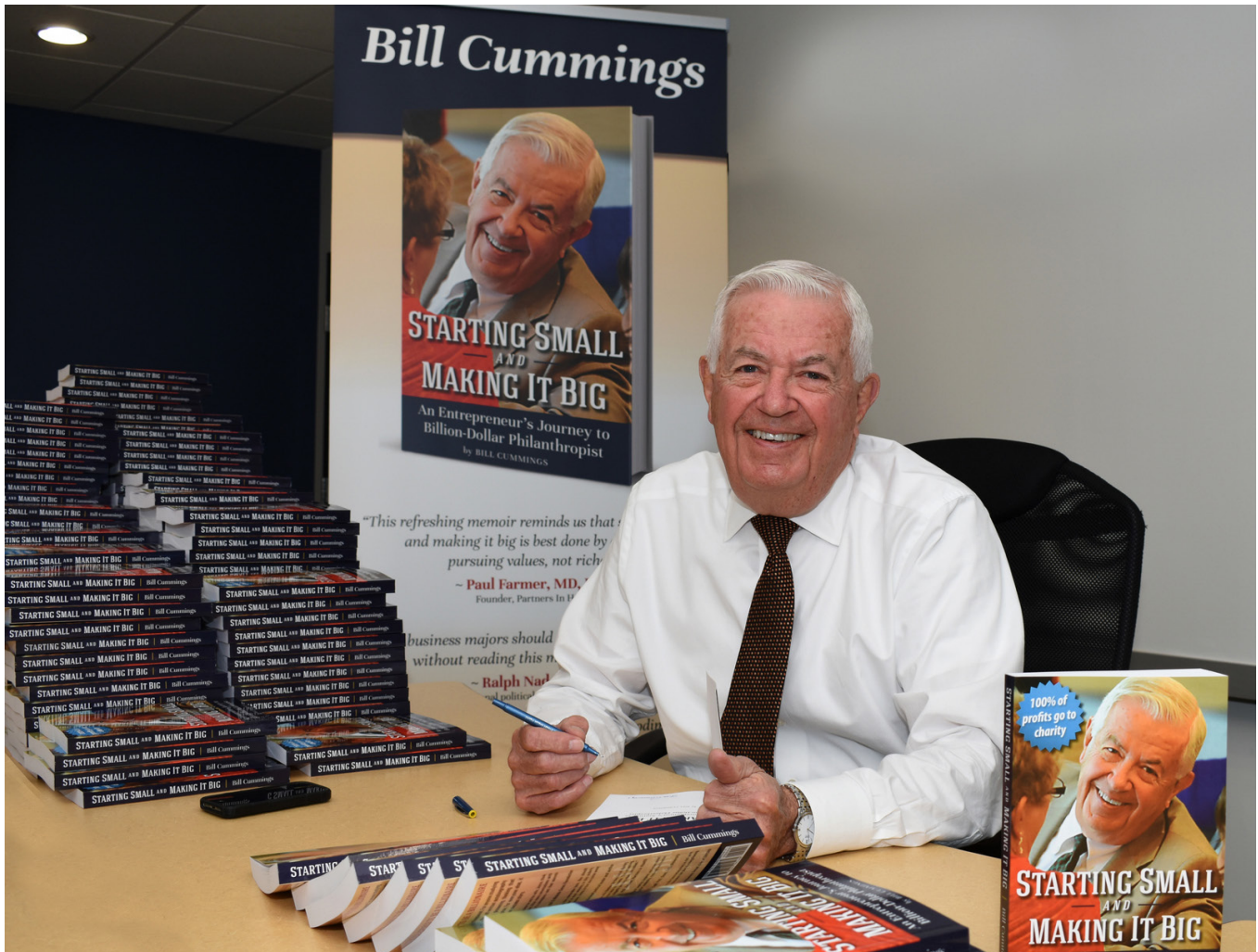


THE SALEM NEWS

Book tells story of Cummings' remarkable rise

By Paul Leighton Staff Writer



Courtesy photo Bill Cummings' self-published auto-biography, "Starting Small and Making It Big: An Entrepreneur's Journey to Billion-Dollar Philanthropist," includes a section on his redevelopment of the former United Shoe Machinery Corporation factory in Beverly.

BEVERLY — When Bill Cummings decided to self-publish his autobiography, he figured 1,000 copies would be more than enough.

"I knew I didn't have 1,000 friends," he said.

As it turned out, the book is living up to its title. "Starting Small and Making It Big: An Entrepreneur's Journey to Billion-Dollar Philanthropist" has sold 11,800 copies since it was published in March, according to Cummings, and he has put in an order for 10,000 more.

Such rapid growth is nothing new for Cummings, the founder of Cummings Properties. North Shore residents know him best for his namesake Cummings Center business park in Beverly, the largest of his company's sprawling commercial real estate empire.

The self-published book tells the story of Cummings' working-class upbringing in Medford, where his house-painter father earned extra money by hustling bets from pool and bowling, and his astonishing rise as a real estate tycoon. Cummings Properties now owns more than 11 million square feet of commercial real estate in the northern suburbs of Boston — “debt free,” as the book notes.

In 2011, Bill and his wife, Joyce, joined the Giving Pledge, the philanthropic organization founded by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett for people with at least a billion dollars in net worth. Its members pledge to donate at least half of their assets to charitable causes. The Cummingses have pledged to give it all away.

“People say you should give until it hurts, but I've not always liked that,” Cummings said. “Joyce and I have taken the approach that people should give until it feels good. It feels great to do these things.”

Cummings, 81, attributes much of his success to his Depression-era upbringing. As a boy he sold ice cream from a box on the back of his bike. After graduating from Tufts University, he traveled the country selling Vicks VapoRub and plant fertilizer. In 1964, he bought a local fruit punch business for \$4,000 that he eventually sold for nearly \$1 million.

Cummings used that \$1 million to start buying real estate. His philosophy was to buy under-developed property with as little debt as possible and develop them with his own in-house staff, avoiding the cost and delays associated with bank loans and consultants.

“My whole lifestyle has always been not to waste money,” Cummings said. “You watch the pennies. It's the simple little things, like reminding people not to keep a delivery truck waiting. If you're having lunch, take a break and go get the darn truck unloaded.”

Cummings Center

The development of the Cummings Center in Beverly was a prime example of the company's approach. Cummings paid \$500,000 for the dilapidated former United Shoe Machinery Corporation property in 1996 — a fraction of the original \$78 million asking price. With tax incentives from the city, the company agreed to invest \$13 million in the property. It ended up spending \$73 million.

“It was runaway expenses but it was all very good increases because we had such an abundance of people who wanted to come there,” Cummings said. “The first two clients were the two banks, Beverly National and Danvers Savings. Once they came, that sent a big signal throughout the city.”

Cummings Properties made its second big investment in Beverly in 2011, paying \$2.3 million in

what Cummings described as a “sweetheart deal” for the former Parker Brothers headquarters on 54 wooded acres on Dunham Road. Three buildings are under construction or will be soon, and two other parcels are for sale.

“Starting Small and Making It Big” includes a couple of inside stories regarding the company’s dealings in Beverly. Cummings was not pleased with the city’s decision to close the McKeown Elementary School in 2008, only 10 years after it had opened. The school, built on land donated by Cummings Properties, was named in memory of Cummings president James McKeown, the man who was in line to succeed Cummings but died of a heart attack at the age of 41.

In the book, Cummings called the decision to close the school “somewhat inexplicable.”

Cummings also criticized city officials for holding up development at Dunham Ridge over environmental concerns. He said the company plans to sell the remaining parcels of land rather than build themselves.

“Once it became obvious that key members of Beverly’s municipal leadership might be intent on throwing up roadblocks...the time had come to reduce our efforts in Beverly,” he wrote.

Cummings now spends most of his time working on the Cummings Foundation, which he said donates \$25 million per year to nonprofits in Essex, Suffolk and Middlesex counties. The foundation has also committed \$15 million toward building a university in Rwanda to train doctors and other health care providers. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has also committed \$15 million toward the project.

Cummings said he’s still not used to meeting people with enormous wealth.

“Unlike us, they own their own planes and they own their own yachts,” he said. “I don’t want anything like that. We could, but it’s so much more fun giving it away.”

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Excerpt from “Starting Small and Making It Big” by Bill Cummings, on buying the former United Shoe property, now Cummings Center, in Beverly:

“Jamie and I had not known much about it, but the mammoth Beverly property had been on and off the market since 1980. Jamie first described the building as ‘vacant’ and certainly, with all the smashed glass on its vast expanses of window line, it did look the part. The property was so massive, so run-down, and so broken, that all efforts to make something worthwhile of it quickly failed. Meanwhile, the asking price had gradually dropped from \$78 million in 1980 all the way down to \$10 million in 1995. Broker Bob Cronin told Jamie that he would be willing to present the seller an offer ‘even as low as \$5 million, just to get you guys talking.’ Jamie convinced me to return to Beverly with him a week or so later.”