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Lands' End and the Comer Foundation: A Legacy (An overview of Gary Comer, the Founding of Lands' End, and an Interview with Stephanie Comer)

Elizabeth Gingerich
Valparaiso University, elizabeth.gingerich@valpo.edu

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Take care of the CUSTOMER and the rest will take care of itself.— Gary Comer

LANDS' END

GUARANTEED.

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Is it possible that a business can grow to be an international entity and still retain the moral compass of its founders? Or does the sheer size and volume of its assets and transactions necessarily command a loss of integrity?

Lands' End and the Comer Foundation: A Legacy*



The plethora of media attention detailing the failings of a corporation and its leaders neglects to distinguish those companies from organizations built by individuals with ideals and aspirations of conducting business in a manner designed to generate respect and loyalty while benefitting the communities served. Lands' End and its founder, Gary Comer, have achieved this stature. His charitable spirit continues through the work of his family.

“Our basic premise for winning customers is little different today than when we started: sell only things we believe in, ship every order the day it arrives, and unconditionally guarantee everything.”

The idea that a company could operate as a mail-order, retail store originated with Gary Comer. Since his youth, Comer desired to create his own business and ideally combine it with his passion for sailing.¹ Beginning with the design, marketing, and sale of yachting hardware and equipment (and eventually leading to the sale of duffel bags and apparel),

*All photographs courtesy of *The Gary Comer Family Archive*. The editor also expresses her gratitude to the scholarly contributions of Alissa Fiorintino and Sarah Lynn Buelke.

¹ Caminiti, Susan. “Steering his own course to success: Gary Comer.” *Fortune*, 5 Jan. 1987: 95. Retrieved 01-12-12, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1987/01/05/68498/index.htm.



Lands' End Yacht Stores, later shortened to simply *Lands' End*, was formed. Of the name, Comer commented: ***"It had a romantic ring to it, and conjured visions of a point to depart from on a perilous journey."***² Ironically, Gary Comer and his 3 staff members did not realize the misplaced apostrophe until the business had grown significantly.³ The company decided to keep this grammatical error because it would have been cost-prohibitive to change the name.⁴ Instead, the spelling error has simply become a part of the company's legacy.

Lands' End's emphasis on customer satisfaction led it to become one of the first companies to offer a toll-free sales number and its "no questions asked" return policy helped it to become one of the most innovative and largest mail-order businesses in the world. Due to its expanding size and worldwide recognition, Comer decided to take the company public in 1986. Publicly traded for over 15 years, Lands' End, Inc. was sold to Sears, Roebuck, and Co. in 2002 for \$1.9 billion. Comer used a portion of his personal proceeds from the sale to ensure that everyone on the payroll received compensation.⁵



Revere Community (Wes Pope, Photographer)

Despite a change in management, Sears and its Lands' End stores celebrated the opening of the Gary Comer College Prep's new facilities by donating \$30,000 of apparel and pledging monetary incentives through their "School Rewards" program.⁶ Sears also received a platinum ranking for being a "Fit-Friendly Company" in 2010 by the American Heart Association through maintaining a worker-friendly, health-focused workplace environment.⁷ Following Comer's firm belief in promoting environmental awareness, Sears and its Lands' End stores significantly began

greening their operations by reducing catalog paper consumption by 50 percent between 2004 and 2008, increasing the amount of recycled and sustainably-harvested fiber in packaging materials, installing community gardens on company property, and engineering paperless work stations. In 2009, Sears Holding Company earned the Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR program's *Retailer of the Year* designation.⁸

The creation of such a successful business was not Gary Comer's most significant contribution to society. Comer positively impacted people's lives in his community, especially

² Kogan, Rick. Gary Comer — Land End's Founder and NA Champion. *The Chicago Tribune*, 7 Oct. 2006, 11:38. Retrieved 01-12-12, http://www.starclass.org/artman/publish/printer_240.shtml.

³ About Gary Comer. Comer Children's Hospital at the University of Chicago. Retrieved 01-12-12, <http://www.uchicagokidshospital.org/fact/gary-comer.html>.

⁴ History & Heritage: The launching of a dream. *Lands' End home website*. Retrieved 01-12-12, http://www.landsend.com/aboutus/company_info/history_heritage/index.html.

⁵ Lands' End founder remembered his roots, gave millions to needy and rewarded employees – twice (June, 2007). *The Secret of Wealth*. Retrieved 02-05-12. <http://sowabundance.net/Home/LiveAbundantly/RichandGenerous/GaryComer/tabid/93/Default.aspx>.

⁶ Hawkins, M. (16 Sept. 2010). Lands' End donates 600 embroidered jackets... *Lands' End Press Release*. Retrieved 02-05-12. http://www.landsend.com/newsroom/press_releases/press_releases/sept16_comer/Gary_Comer_News_Release.pdf.

⁷ Sears, Roebuck & Co. (28 March 2011). *Responsible Shopper*. Retrieved 02-05-12. <http://www.greenamerica.org/programs/responsibleshopper/company.cfm?id=286>.

⁸ Lands' End feels climate change in its bottom line (10 Nov. 10). *Climate Chronicle*. Retrieved 02-05-12. <http://www.climatechronicle.com/2010/11/lands-end-feels-climate-change-in-its-bottom-line/>.

in his birthplace of Chicago. Comer had always considered himself to be a “child of poverty.”⁹ Regardless, he contributed in ways to positively impact or change people’s lives. Former Chicago Mayor, Richard M. Daley, attested to Gary’s sense of philanthropy: **“Gary’s drive to succeed in business was only surpassed by his deep commitment to Chicago’s children.”**¹⁰



Revere Community (Jasmin Shah, Photographer)

the Grand Crossing neighborhood, donated more than \$80 million to house the Comer Children’s Hospital at the University of Chicago, and contributed \$50 million to the Revere School community for the construction of a youth center and to provide its residents with both educational and neighborhood housing initiatives.¹¹

Comer also championed the preservation and responsible stewardship of the environment. This passion originated during one of his sailing trips to the Arctic Circle in 2001.¹² During this voyage, he was surprised by the lack of surface ice during that time of the year which typically would block most passages. As further research in this region demonstrated the pervasive effects of climate change, he began funding the climate change research efforts of qualified scientists and other leaders in this field. This newfound area of interest, coupled with his work in urban reform, community organization, and health care, became the fundamental objectives of the Comer Science and Education Foundation.¹³



LaRabida (Jasmin Shah, Photographer)

There are many examples of contributions

that Comer made to the Chicago area. He purchased computers, an air conditioning system, and uniforms for his old grammar school as well as promised the 8th grade children that he would pay for their college education if they graduated from high school. Additionally, he constructed numerous homes in



Sailing the Arctic Circle (Comer in red), (Philip Walsh, Photographer)

⁹ Caminiti, Susan (1987). “Steering his own course to success: Gary Comer.” *Fortune*, 5 Jan. 1987: 95. Retrieved 01-12-12, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1987/01/05/68498/index.htm.

¹⁰ Kogan, Rick. Gary Comer — Land End’s Founder and NA Champion. *The Chicago Tribune*, 7 Oct. 2006, 11:38. Retrieved 01-12-12, http://www.starclass.org/artman/publish/printer_240.shtml.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Peterson, Erica M. (Philip Walsh, photography) (Dec., 2008). *Comer Foundation funding supports critical climate change research*. Retrieved 01-12-12, <http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/climatechange/page.aspx?id=108591>.

¹³ *Id.* See, also, *Investing in Children and Communities*. Retrieved 02-17-12 from <http://www.cs-ef.org/health.html>.

Gary and Francie Comer had two children, Stephanie and Guy Comer. Stephanie, a noted photographer and author, sailed with her father to the Arctic Circle. When Gary Comer died in 2006, his children carried forth his legacy: Guy, primarily in urban educational reform and community development and Stephanie in environmental research and health care — although they share reciprocal interests.¹⁴

The following interview was conducted with Stephanie Comer in 2011. She currently serves as the president of the Comer Foundation and is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Medical Home Network (which she co-founded). Additionally, she is a member of the Chicago Climate Action Plan's Green Ribbon Committee, the Board of Trustees of the University of Chicago Medical Center, and the Gary Comer Youth Center.



Gary Comer Youth Center (Steve Hall, Photographer)



¹⁴ *Id.*



Interview with Stephanie Comer — February 25, 2011, Chicago, Illinois

Q: What is the extent of your involvement with both Lands' End and the Comer Family Foundation?

Let me give you a little background. After, my father passed away, my brother and I split on what he was working on, recognizing that we had an opportunity to continue some of the good work that he was doing. My brother focused largely on community development while I ventured into environmental and health reform. Although at that time I was not well versed in health care, I began to connect with experts in the field. As my father had done a lot of work on the South Side where he grew up, I started talking to different providers, organizations, and doctors within this region to educate myself on some of the issues. Access to care kept coming up again and again and especially *specialty* access to care and at some point I realized that I needed more expertise. That is when I hooked up with Pat Terrell of Health Management Associates in Chicago. We commissioned them to do a report about the delivery system of health care services on the South Side. We conferred that there was a poor delivery of services and that this was a very serious issue throughout the United States. But we wanted to do this in our backyard.

Q: When you say that you received the climate change and health care work started by your father, can you identify any aspects of his own upbringing that led him to becoming so impassioned about these two topics? Was there something about your family in terms of relationships, religion, or perhaps an epiphanal experience, that changed his outlook?

Are you talking about climate change or general philanthropy?

Q: Everything. I understand that he was the son of a railroad worker and a housewife. Did you know your grandparents well?

I didn't know them at all; they died before I was born.

Q: And he grew up on the South Side of Chicago?

Yes.



Stephanie Cromer
(Rob Craigie, Photographer)

Q: And how did your parents meet?

They met in a public restaurant or tavern by happenstance in downtown Chicago.

Q: Was that at a time when he had already started the business?

They were married and I think that it was about 6 months into their marriage. He quit his job and started this new business.

Q: Did either one receive formal education?

My mom went to college.

Q: And your father?

No, he graduated from high school. He did go to night school.



Q: Wasn't he in advertising during the first years of his business?

He worked for Young and Rubicam and I think that — as he told it to us — he really met a core group of friends at Young and Rubicam and mentors there and people that recognized that he was an incredibly hard worker and very talented. He brought in a lot of those people into Lands' End later on. And I think he considered them among his closest friends throughout his life.



Gary Cromer,
Young and Rubicam

Q: Is it true that he started Lands' End with several partners?

He started Lands' End with two or three associates but over time, bought them out. I think that the other people were not interested and that it was actually my dad who really had the drive.

Q: Where did he develop his affinity for sailing?

My dad boated on Lake Michigan during the summers. I think that he was just intrigued by it and he just started hanging out in the Yacht Club. He started to meet various people and from there began to work on peoples' boats. One thing led to another. This was all happening during the summers when he was growing up.

Q: So he saw a market need, or at least an opportunity, for selling sailboat and yacht hardware?

I don't know if he saw a market need necessarily. I think that he knew that he

always wanted to work for himself and that he always wanted to start a business and that this was a subject that he knew how to advertise. He also acknowledged that supplying boating equipment was a seasonal operation and that greater potential existed in the marketing and sale of luggage and apparel. That's when they made the shift.

Q: Do you think that this was intrinsic to his personality, wanting to be his own boss and to work so hard?

Definitely. That was him from the very beginning. Even after he had started Lands' End, he was an "idea guy." He would always come up with different ideas about how he can do this or how he could do that and come up with drawings and reports — that was his core.

Q: And what was your mother like in terms of balancing his characteristics or matching them?

That's an interesting question. Well they both were very intuitive and he was probably much more of a risk-taker and she was a bit more cautious. She certainly supported him with respect to everything that he did throughout his entire lifetime. Like any couple, they discussed and traded ideas.

Q: Did she ever work for Lands' End?

No. She was very busy as a stay-at-home mother and additionally participated in many community projects. She originally worked in public relations before she had us (Stephanie and Guy).

Q: Is Guy older or younger than you?

Guy is four years younger.

Q: So by the time that you were born, was Lands' End a going business?

It was.

Q: Would you call your father a workaholic?

Yes.

Q: But isn't there a fine line between someone with a great work ethic and someone who is a workaholic?

I would not describe his work ethic as necessarily *addictive* in the negative sense of that term. His dedication to his work never adversely affected any of us nor did it impact any parts of our lives in a negative way. I never felt that he was not there for us and I never felt that his obsession with his work interfered with his parenting.

Q: So he knew how to balance?

He balanced his business activities, his community and reform work, and his commitment to his family extraordinarily well. We always used to go to Wisconsin on the weekends. That became a type of get-away and I think that that exclusive time was key for us as a family. There were the four of us and he could still work and contemplate but he was also getting away from everything. He saw the importance of shutting it down.

Q: Did he have a sense of humor?

Very much so. He especially loved puns.

Q: Certain resources describe him as very quiet with mild eccentricities. Would you agree with this description?

My father had a lot of those, but I would never describe him as being eccentric.

When I think of an eccentric personality, I would never equate that image with my dad. I also think that he lived a certain life



**Gary Comer in Alaska
(Philip Walsh, Photographer)**

in which he was able to accomplish many things and I believe some people would believe that that appeared to be somewhat eccentric. We were able to travel to distant places. And when Lands' End really started gaining market strength – especially when it branched off into the apparel line – his fundamental traits and beliefs were never compromised. He always put the employees first, he put the customers first, and everything was guaranteed, same day shipping.

Q: Were these objectives achieved? Was he able to put the employees first? Did anything suffer with respect to these lofty objectives, sometimes seemingly impossible goals?

I think that when you are first starting out, you can shape your business the way that you want and he started with those core values.

Q: How would you describe those core values?

He knew that he was in a service industry and recognized the importance of the customer. I believe that he always treated



everybody who worked with him or for him with a great deal of respect. And I think that the people who he hired had an enormous trust in him and so he was never a micro-manager. He always told them to do the best that they could do although he recognized that obviously was not always going to work. But when you start out with that culture, it becomes self-sustaining. As people were hired to work for him, there was something about his character which made you want to do the best you could.

Q: He has been described as a quiet man who, through his actions, was inspirational as opposed to somebody who could make eloquent speeches but be empty of content.

He was very kind and he cared enormously about people, whether it was someone who was working with him or someone who he was sending a luggage order to. This trait defined him throughout his entire life.

Q: Did his workers ever unionize or express any desire for collective bargaining?

At one point — I hope that I am factually correct — in the 70s he had moved the luggage portion to a town called Boscobel, and that was 45 minutes from Dodgeville, Wisconsin. It was there that a couple of workers, husband and wife, expressed a desire to explore possible union representation. He never foreclosed that possibility but his close relationship to his workers and his attentiveness to their needs obviated the necessity of a union. And at this time, the business was expanding very quickly so he worked really hard with everybody there to build relationships and tried to offer them more than what a union could offer so that

when the vote was called, it did not pass. He was already treating them as co-equals, with dignity, and understanding their concerns.

Q: You have already said that he was an “ideas-man.” Did he also accept ideas from his employees?

Certainly. I remember that there were frequent meetings that he would initiate with the employees of each department. Their input was so important to him and was always appreciated. But this was a time when I was still very young.

Q: Which time frame are you referencing?

The mid-sixties.

Q: So about twenty years later, in 1986, Lands’ End went public. At any time during this period did you start working for the business?

Not as a full-time employee. But I worked there from time to time, usually in the summers, as somewhat of an unpaid intern. I think I modeled a sweater one or twice for a catalog.

Q: So you weren’t there to see the interaction or become part of the decision-making process?

No, I think that he always wanted my brother and me to do what we wanted to do. Follow our hearts rather than follow him.

Q: There’s a particular theory that as a business grows, it becomes more difficult to manage and less personal. That the bottom-line becomes the sole *raison d’être*. Did you ever feel or did he ever communicate to any of his family members that because of the quick

expansion of the business, internal communications were becoming more and more difficult or that running the business was getting out of control?

I wouldn't necessarily say out of control; these would not be the words that I would use. I think for him what was really exciting was that he was able to bring this company to an area in Wisconsin where there was a 19% unemployment rate before Lands' End came in and offered so many people living there jobs. And good jobs. And he did this purposefully. He felt strongly about being in Wisconsin and I think that he loved the town, the whole area. There was no doubt that he really supported the local community and that he admired the people. He felt they had an incredible work ethic and if there was a way that he could help, he wanted to. More than the profit, he wanted to create jobs.

Q: Were you raised basically in a four-person, nuclear family, or were there members of a larger, extended family?

My mother's parents were alive at the time and she has a brother. And we are close. My father did not stay in touch; he was very close with his brother who died when my dad was 36 and he did not stay in touch with his sister. So, no, we did not have an extended family on his side.

Q: So when you were growing up and your father was perpetuating this idea that he wanted his children to follow their hearts and minds and not necessarily perpetuate the business, what did you decide to do?

He had introduced me to photography. He loved taking pictures. I remember getting my first camera for Christmas one year.

Q: How old were you?

Maybe 12. I believe that is the sixth grade. So that is something that we always shared in common. Then I kind of went back to it again in college and recognized that was something I really wanted to do.

Q: Where did you go to college?

I went to Vassar College, in New York. I majored in English.

Q: So when you graduated with a degree in English, did you think, "now what?"

Certainly. You're panicked. But studying English was great. It teaches you how to think about things in different ways and how to write well and read. And at the same time, I was taking pictures. So then I worked for a photographer for a year and then I went to a photography school for two years.

Q: And you produced two books – *The Moment of Seeing* in 2006 and *Ichthyo: The Architecture of Fish* in 2008. What was the subject of the first one?

It was about Minor White's photography department at the then California School of Fine Arts (today the San Francisco Art Institute) during the 40s and 50s.

Q: And there was a co-author?

It was actually my former boss. She was the executive director at a museum in San Francisco where I once worked and so when the museum closed, we got together and collaborated on a couple of books.

Q: For what period of time did you work in San Francisco?

From 1990 until my father got sick.



Q: And that is when you moved back to Chicago? Because of his illness?

Yes.

Q: Looking at the influences that make the company a unique business – was there any link to a faith, a religion, or spirituality?

Nothing concrete, however the empathetic values that a person might associate with a spiritual philosophy or sense of altruism were certainly present.

Q: So there was no church-going or any formal religious instruction?

No.

Q: Where your parents raised in a particular faith?

My father was not but my mother was raised a Catholic.

Q: Is she a practicing Catholic?

No.

Q: So there was no spiritual connection for what your father did?

No religious connection.

Q: From where did his altruism emanate – was it in-bred or did it evolve with the growth of his business?

In-bred. I think that my parents were very empathetic people.

Q: Do you know what influences may have shaped their outlooks and actions?

I don't. That is a good question. They raised us to be empathetic. I also think that when we were growing up, my father made sure that he was successful but

hadn't sold his company at that point and I feel like we grew up with our feet on the ground and they *really* made sure that that was the case.

Q: With those empathetic values, did they expose you early on to the plight and needs of the less fortunate – not just to address areas of unemployment? With the sense of empathy that seems to be in-bred, what else were you exposed to that helped create this trait?

I think that happened at an early age. Certainly growing up in the city, you were exposed to everything that happens. I grew up on the Near North side of Chicago and it was not necessarily that we spent so much of our early years roaming the entire city. But I don't think that that sheltered us from anything. Also, during our frequent trips to Wisconsin, we became well aware that that particular region was an impoverished area; it was hard hit for sure. People were farming and trying to make a living from farming. And we knew a lot of people around there and their circumstances.

Q: Were you and Guy educated in the public school system of Chicago?

No. We were in private schools. In some ways, I knew that we were incredibly privileged. It definitely makes you think about what you have been given and for me, I always thought that I had a responsibility to venture beyond my own personal needs and desires to help others. That's how we were raised. We were encouraged to think about ourselves *and* think about others.

Q: So when you came back in 1992 after your father's diagnosis....

I came back in 2005. I went to San Francisco in 1992.

Q: And when did he receive his diagnosis?

In 1994.

Q: So was it in 2001 that the two of you took a trip to the Arctic Circle?

Yes. He had a boat and whenever I could go with him, I would. And this was always such a wonderful experience — traveling to places very different from what we were used to.

Q: Did you mother and brother also go?

Sometimes. At that time, everybody was doing different things when he was traveling a lot. I had stopped working at the museum and I was doing contract work and so my schedule was much more flexible. So I tried to go with him as much as possible. And that was his idea — to study the ice flows, masses, and charts.



The Arctic (Gary Comer, Photographer)

Q: And this was shortly before they sold Lands' End to Sears or right after?

It was after.

Q: Do you recall when he created the family foundation?

I was in high school when he started the *Comer Foundation*. It was in the mid-80s when he started it. We would all get together around the holidays and decide which cause was a good one to give to. We



Cromer Children's Hospital, (Jasmin Shah, Photographer)

were giving away small amounts then and it was directed to places that we liked, we grew up with.

Q: I am intrigued by your undertaking of the health and climate elements of the Comer family legacy. You mentioned that the visit to the Arctic Circle was somewhat of a directional awakening for your father — so much so that he reached out to individual scientists and contributed liberally to climate change studies. Would you describe this as somewhat of an awakening in this area for you as well?

Both of us were well aware of climate change at that point but it certainly makes a difference to see the actual melting in person. For both of us growing up, the Arctic was a frozen place, locked in ice. When we traveled through the Northwest Passage, we encountered some ice but we had a clear pathway moving forward. I



think it allowed us (particularly him) to speak from a place of conviction.

Q: Did your father's involvement with his former school and ultimately the onset of his illness also propel you into the areas of children's health and education?

After my dad died, we continued his work. He always wanted to build a high school in Grand Crossing and my brother took that responsibility on. They just received



permission to open a middle school too. As far as health care goes, I think he and my mom made a great contribution with the Children's Hospital at University of Chicago. I felt that we could do more especially when I began to learn more about the health issues facing children on the South Side.

Q: What roles do you, your brother, and your mother currently have with the ongoing philanthropic endeavors of the *Comer Foundation*?

My brother is President of *Comer Science and Education Foundation* and I am President of *The Comer Foundation*. My



mom is responsible for our Chicago area giving from *The Comer Foundation*. I believe she is VP. We are not concerned with formal titles as you may have discerned.

Q: Do you believe that a true values-based leader is one who can not only build a successful business, but serve the community in ways that surpass offering employment in underserved areas as well as producing quality products for the consumer base? Should philanthropy be part and parcel of true commercial as well as personal success?

Absolutely. I do believe that the Dodgeville community has benefitted in many ways from Lands' End.

