

A Lesson in Love: The Ilitch Family

By: Mia Moede

Nearly everyone who has graced the streets of Metro Detroit has seen evidence of the Ilitch family's impact, from Comerica Park which brings thousands of fans to Detroit every game to Little Caesars Pizza which keeps countless supply businesses afloat. However, their positive impact on the economic standing of Metro Detroit is nothing compared to their philanthropic impact made possible by their entrepreneurial wisdom and golden hearts.

Humble beginnings

In 1954 Marian Bayoff and Michael Ilitch met on a blind date. They quickly fell head over heels for one another and were soon married, their family destined to become an entrepreneurial and philanthropic powerhouse.

Mike and Marian started off in a modest home in Detroit, Michigan. Mike worked a series of odd jobs including working as a door to door awning salesman to pay their bills (Weird History). The pair pinched every penny they could to save up for their dream: to open their very own pizza shop.

In 1959, the pair invested all \$10,000 of their savings into opening up a pizza shop in Garden City, half an hour from Bloomfield Hills, which they named 'Little Caesars' after Marian's nickname for Mike. Though the term was sometimes used as an insult at the time, to Marian, the name seemed catchy and clever (Weird History). Calling the business 'caesar' would be like calling it 'king'. The name was fitting as their small business quickly rose to the top of the pizza hierarchy. On their first day, they sold 40 pizzas. Within three days, they were selling over 200 pizzas a day.

In 1962 the Ilitchs opened their second chain and Little Caesars became the “fastest growing pizza chain in the U.S. (based on the net number of restaurants added each year)” according to Little Caesars’ website where they describe the business’ success. Just seven years later, the couple opened their 50th restaurant.

Today, Little Caesars has over 4,000 locations, with restaurants “in all 50 states and 18 international markets” (Weird History). Marian once said "I consider Little Caesars my eighth child” (Little Caesars: Our History).

Sportsmanship

It wasn’t only business that the Ilitchs excelled in. Before a devastating knee injury, Mike had a contract with the Detroit Tigers’s minor league team, according to a documentary by Weird History.

Many of the couple’s children received this same athletic drive as Mike, participating in several sports, including hockey. According to Ilitch Holdings inc.’s tribue page for Mike Ilitch, “as the parents of children who played hockey, the couple wanted to provide other children the opportunity to play the sport as well,” so the Little Caesars Amateur Hockey League was born. Hundreds of the leagues’ participants have “gone on to play at colleges, universities and in the National Hockey League” (Ilitch Holdings inc.).

Their love of sports and the community also drove the Ilitchs to buy the Detroit Red Wings in 1982 (Ilitch Holdings Inc.). At the time, they were known as the ‘Dead Wings’ because of their poor record. Mike and Marian believed the team was a “sleeping giant” and “took charge to turn the team around,” leading the Red Wings to win their first Stanley Cup in 42 years (Ilitch Holdings inc.). Ten years later, they bought the Detroit Tigers and built a new “state-of-the-art

ballpark” (Ilitch Holdings inc.). This brought an influx in hotel and restaurant businesses in the Metro Detroit area, including in Bloomfield Hills, a town the Ilitchs fell in love with.

The Ilitchs ended up purchasing a beautiful estate in Bloomfield Hills where they held multiple fundraisers for charity. The Ilitchs chose to send their children to Cranbrook because of their admiration for the school and Bloomfield community. Today, their son Christopher (the current CEO of Ilitch Holdings) still resides in Bloomfield Hills.

Philanthropy

It wasn't just through estate parties that the Ilitch family helped their community. In 1985, the Ilitchs created the Little Caesars Love Kitchen with two trucks that were essentially restaurants on wheels. The trucks traveled around the Detroit area and “the country, providing free, hot pizza to the hungry and homeless, as well as [to] disaster survivors,” ultimately serving over 3 million people (Weird History).

Additionally, Mike, who'd served in the military himself, created the Little Caesars Veterans Program in 2006 which “provides honorably discharged veterans with financial incentives and other support to help them open a Little Caesars franchise,” helping not just veterans in their home town of Bloomfield Hills and Metro Detroit, but the entire country (Ilitch Holdings inc.). Quite famously, the couple also “quietly” paid civil rights icon Rosa Parks' ren (Levenson). Parks, who'd moved to Detroit two years after the heroic 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, had been left struggling financially after being “robbed and assaulted” in 1994 at the age of 81 and the Ilitchs were more than glad to lend her a helping hand after reading about her unfortunate circumstances the local paper (Levenson).

A Lovely Legacy

Mike was honored not only by the Bloomfield Hills community, but all of Metro Detroit after his passing in 2017. His wife and many of his seven children continue to carry on his legacy through charity and community commitment.

Mike Ilitch School of Business was opened a year after his passing thanks to his and Marian's \$40 million donation (Wayne State University). Students learn from Mike's impressive business endeavors while simultaneously being inspired his belief that if you "develop a love for all people; be humble; [and] work hard... you will be successful in life." -Mike Ilitch, 2012 (Ilitch Holdings inc.).

While Marian now lives in Bingham Farms, Chris, his wife, and their three children still reside in Bloomfield, the town where Marian and Mike chose to raise their family (Gestner). As Chris wrote in a statement after his father's passing, Mike (and the entire Ilitch family's) "positive impact in the world of sports, in business,... passion for Detroit, ...[and] generosity to others..." will be forever cherished not just in Bloomfield and the rest of Metro Detroit, but the entire nation (Donnelly).

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