

# HOMETOWN HERO

## LAKE GENEVA'S SAL DIMICELI FIGHTS POVERTY, ONE FAMILY AT A TIME.

By Lisa M. Schmelz

**SAL DIMICELI IS A SELF-MADE MILLIONAIRE WHO BATTLES POVERTY ON A DAILY BASIS.** Dubbed the “Dear Abby of the down and out,” Dimiceli was recently named one of CNN’s Top Ten Heroes for his efforts in helping the poor in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. Through his nonprofit, The Time is Now to Help, nearly 500 people each year get assistance with some of life’s most basic needs like food, utilities and housing.



For Dimiceli, 60, the war on poverty is personal.

“I know what it’s like to hear your mother cry because there isn’t enough money,” he says in the conference room of his successful real estate firm, Lake Geneva Area Realty. “And I made a vow to God that if he could give me the will to work hard and be successful, I’d help others.”

Dimiceli made that vow when he was only 11. One of four children on Chicago’s west side, his mother, Theresa, was a part-time beautician. His father, Joseph, he adds, was a tool-and-die maker who was frequently gone and had a serious gambling problem. The family’s existence was always bare-bones. When rent went unpaid, eviction notices were served. Food was often in short supply, and when it wasn’t, the power wasn’t always on to cook it.

Dimiceli says he learned quickly that the family’s financial solutions rested in the paychecks his father did manage to bring home.

“I knew that paycheck was magical by the way my mom reacted to it,” he says. “I wanted one. I wanted to help.” At 12, Dimiceli found work as a dishwasher and promptly turned over his paychecks to his mother, a

practice he’d continue throughout his youth. When college got in the way of taking care of his mother and siblings, he dropped out and took work shoveling concrete, unloading semis, and as a security guard.

His fortunes changed dramatically when he was 29 and took a position as a sales representative for an Illinois manufacturer of custom computer cabinets and circuit boards. Five years later, he owned the company. From manufacturing, he made the millions that should have rendered poverty a distant memory.

But as his income rose, he never forgot his promise to help those who struggle. In 1989, he took a wrong turn and drove through the town of Pembroke, Ill. In Pembroke, poverty was as much a part of life as oxygen. He soon returned with food and supplies. Ultimately, he’d donate over \$1.5 million to Pembroke residents, much of it going to render shack-like structures into actual homes.

When he and his wife, Corinne, relocated to Lake Geneva, he expanded his outreach to those in southern Wisconsin. In 1993, he started The Time is Now To Help. Newspapers throughout southern Wisconsin carry a popular column he pens called, what else, The Time is Now. There, he shares with readers the real-life struggles of those who benefit from the nonprofit’s help, signing each column with the initials W.C., short for “With Christ.”

Far from a bleeding heart, Dimiceli is careful about who gets aid from The Time is Now. He personally verifies income, reviews budgets and does his own background checks if something doesn’t add up. He’ll even call fam-



ily members he feels should be made aware of a loved one's plight, especially if they're elderly or disabled, and ask how they can help before he opens his own checkbook.

"The Time is Now comes in only after every other avenue has been exhausted," he says, adding he also works with people to try keep them on solid financial footing.

Not surprisingly, Dimiceli was 40 minutes late for the interview for this story. Mid-day, he'd learned there was a single mom who was about as down on her luck as she could be. Her utilities had been shut off, and there was little food for her six children, two of whom are disabled.

"We're getting the utilities on, and we've gotten some other people to volunteer, to network, to help this family," he says. "These things just come up."

Indeed, they do. Appeals for help have long-exceeded The Time is Now to Help's ability to meet them, and since Dimiceli was honored by CNN, requests are pouring in from all over the nation. At times, this slight-built man with a gold cross hanging from his neck finds himself overwhelmed by the depth of poverty that exists in this country. Like his own mother did so many years ago, he's been known to cry himself to sleep, only over the sufferings of people he barely knows.

"This is America, and when I see how some of my fellow creations are living, it breaks my heart," he says. "Then in the morning, when I wake up, I feel renewed. I'm always ready to go out again." ▲



Sal Dimiceli poses with CNN's Anderson Cooper (top) and actor J.R. Martinez (below). Dimiceli was one of ten CNN Heroes honored at an All-Star Tribute on December 11 in Los Angeles.

## TO LEARN MORE

about The Time is Now to Help, log onto [www.timeisnowtohelp.org](http://www.timeisnowtohelp.org). Donations can be sent to The Time is Now, P.O. Box 70, Pell Lake, WI, 53157-0070. Donations can be earmarked for specific communities if a donor desires. Requests for help can be mailed to the same address above. In addition to accepting donations, The Time is Now also uses volunteers in a variety of capacities.