

# COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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## \$1M donation gives Family Business Center means to expand

Business First of Columbus - by [Kevin Kemper](#) Business First



Former Marion Steel owner James Conway, left, gave \$1 million to the Family Business Center of Central Ohio, co-founded by Columbus attorney Bea Wolper.

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After rebuilding and then selling a nearby steel plant, an entrepreneur is giving the Family Business Center of Central Ohio an unexpected gift that will allow it to expand its services.

James R. Conway, the former owner of Marion Steel Co., is giving the center \$1 million, a major endorsement of its mission and money that will enable it to offer services more broadly throughout Central Ohio. The gift comes more than two years after Conway sold Marion Steel for approximately \$110.7 million, and it gives a boost to an organization that has been operating on a shoestring budget.

"This will double our income," said J. Richard Emens, the center's volunteer executive director. "We're very excited about the gift."

The Family Business Center, which will be renamed the Conway Family Business Center of Central Ohio, is a 350-member education and networking organization for family-owned and family-controlled companies.

Annual membership fees have been capped at \$385 per company for years so the group can attract businesses to join, Emens said. The low dues have meant, however, that the center's services have been limited, he said.

The center operates at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus but isn't affiliated with the school. The center puts on monthly workshops on various family-owned

business issues. The center also throws an annual awards ceremony that recognizes excellence in family business. Columbus Business First has been a sponsor of the awards for a number of years.

The center plans to place the \$1 million gift into an endowment that should generate about \$50,000 annually. No specific plans have been set to make use of the windfall, Emens said, beyond a goal to expand programming.

Jay Young, chairman of Ohio Dominican's Division of Business, hopes the gift will further strengthen the university's relationship with the Family Business Center.

"On the one hand, they provide a place where family business owners can come together and talk about their challenges," he said. "And they also provide education and recognize excellence in family business. ... It serves the business community in a way we would like to."

### **An offer too good**

Conway, who declined to comment for this article, was never a member of the Family Business Center, but his attorney is Beatrice E. Wolper, a partner at Chester Willcox & Saxbe LLP in Columbus who co-founded the center in 1998 with Emens, her husband. Emens also is a partner at Chester Willcox, and the husband-and-wife team practice family business law.

"I would often discuss things with (Conway) that we were doing at the center, and for years he was using that advice," Wolper said.

Conway, a former steel salesman, moved from Minnesota to Marion in the late-1980s when he had the chance to buy what was then a struggling company, Wolper said. A number of family members came to work with him over the years, she said.

"He loved being able to work with his family in the family business," she said.

Conway had planned to pass his company to the next generation, but when Charlotte, N.C.-based Nucor Corp. came calling with a purchase proposal, everyone in the family recognized it was an offer they couldn't refuse, Emens recalled. Conway sold the company in 2005 to Nucor, which renamed it Nucor Steel Marion Inc.

The plant produces angles, flats, rebar, rounds and signposts. When Conway sold the facility, it was producing about 400,000 tons of steel annually.

"After he sold the company, he basically didn't do anything for around two years with the bulk of his money," Wolper said. "He often said he wanted to help family businesses like his."

The center is just one of the organizations Conway made gifts to, though Wolper did not name the others.

**Conway Family Business Center of Central Ohio**

Business: Membership organization for area family-owned or family-controlled businesses.

Based: Ohio Dominican University, Columbus

Executive director: J. Richard Emens

Members: About 350

Employees: One, a part-time assistant director

Web site: [familybusinesscenter.com](http://familybusinesscenter.com)

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