

# DAYTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

MARCH 13, 2009

dayton.bizjournals.com

## Life Success prepares for evolution

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DBJ CONTRIBUTOR

Twenty years ago someone persuaded Dan Rolfes to attend a Life Success seminar.

"I told him I don't need a personal growth seminar," said Rolfes, chief executive officer of Cincinnati-based Holiday Homes. "They told me no, it's business. So I went. Halfway through, I realized it was personal. Then afterward, when I came back to my business, I found out it was a business seminar."

That's because it all comes down to relationships.

Mike Monahan, executive director of West Chester-based Life Success Seminars Inc., said his goal is to put leadership back into the community by showing individuals they have the answers they need inside of themselves.

"People are afraid of us because we deal with feelings, but anything done well is done with passion," he said. "Your life is your life. Why not use your whole life as a tool rather than eradicate pieces of it?"

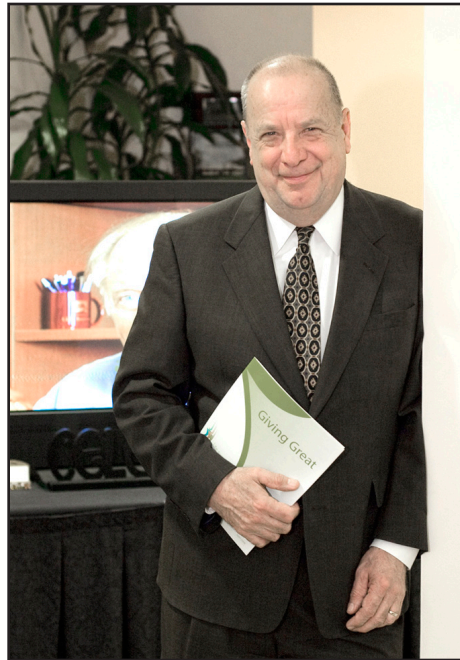
So what is Life Success really about?

The philosophy is that people have the answers, Monahan said. They have the courage to identify the things they want, take personal responsibility and not blame others.

In the past few years, more and more people have looked to Life Success for guidance. The nonprofit has increased its revenue from \$583,000 in 2007 to \$880,000 last year, a more than 50 percent increase. Monahan attributes the growth to program graduates donating more to Life Success, as well as an increase in the total number of new clients.

He said the average number of new clients per year is about 500, but that number has been growing as the economy has soured.

"When the economy is bad, we do pretty



Mark Bealer - For the DBJ

**Michael Monahan, executive director of Life Success Seminars, speaks to a group in West Chester.**

### **Life Success Seminars Inc.**

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**Business:** Leadership and business development

well," Monahan said. "Employers want to get the best out of their employees."

Rolfes, who operates Holiday Homes and more than 20 other affiliated businesses, said Life Success taught him one of the hardest lessons he's ever learned. And it was about his family.

"With the kids I was all about do your homework, clean your room, eat the right food — all those kinds of things you are supposed to do as a parent," Rolfes said. "But the kids did not seem to be flourishing,

and a divorce came along. It never dawned on me that the most important thing is to nurture them."

Rolfes' children — who are now grown — also attended Life Success, as have many of those who work for him.

"For me, it took the limits off," he said. "The only business I had ever been in was the mobile home business. Afterward I wondered why I had limited myself."

The Life Success graduate roster is filled with well-known names, locally and nationally, including former N.Y. Yankees and L.A. Dodgers Coach Joe Torre and his wife, Ali; Crayons to Computers founder Shannon Carter; Triad Capital Advisors Principal Susan Branscome; and others.

More than 11,000 people have attended from 48 states and 11 countries, mostly on word-of-mouth. And Monahan has raised \$1.3 million from his graduate base.

Yet the program is little-known.

Monahan and his board are working to change that, but they also are being cautious to maintain their culture.

"It is quite amazing that they've touched so many lives and have not in a sense been marketing to the point where people know about it," said board member Mike Mathile, president and CEO of Vandalia-based DoubleDay Holdings LLC, who attended Life Success after his brother and sister-in-law went through it.

"There is something to be said for a very humble organization to be able to do what it is doing on a day-to-day basis and do it so well," he said.

Mathile, like others, resisted going at first. But then he saw the changes in his brother and wanted that for himself.

Life Success graduates and even Monahan said it often is difficult to explain what comes out of a seminar.

"Everyone in the room hears the same thing, but each uses it differently depending on where they are in their lives," Monahan said. "You come out feeling good

about yourself. Oddly enough, people are skeptical of those who feel good for no apparent reason.”

Now, Life Success itself is getting ready to grow. It was started in 1985 by a few people who broke off from Life Stream, a similar program operating in other cities. Prior to 2003, seminars took place at hotels.

Now, Life Success’s home is the West Chester Conference Center, west of Interstate 75 in Butler County, that it owns and operates as a for-profit business. The center is not yet profitable.

With the move to the conference center, Life Success took on more staff, growing from three to eight people.

Monahan and his board are exploring ways to add programs to help grow Life Success’s profile in the community.

It gave away 100 seminar scholarships last year.

Companies such as Cincinnati-based Kroger Co. and Framington, Mass.-based Staples Inc. regularly send employees to Life Success, and Monahan wants a broader reach.

“I’m trying to figure out the business,” he said. “I need to refocus on more product,

and we need new partnerships.”

Monahan was introduced to Life Success after his wife attended the Basic seminar, which attended in 1987, when he was working as a pipefitter. Then he went through a second seminar.

“School was tough for me. I only have a high school education,” Monahan said. “When I did Life Success, it was the first time people told me I did know the answer.”

He started volunteering at Life Success and then facilitating. When the director position opened up, he was selected from a pool of 100. Since then, he’s learned this: “Show up authentic, and it gives you freedom.”

Monahan wants to add an academy and top cop program. The academy would focus on academics for ages 16 and up. A top cop program would pair police officers and community members from their beat to build relationships between them. Monahan is in talks with the police academy.

Life Success’s client base is shifting, too. It used to be mostly people in their 40s and 50s, and now there are more 25 to 35. Among those who complete the \$595 Basic program, 37 percent go on to the advanced

Inter-Personal Intensive classes. This five-day program costs \$1,395 and includes two follow-up sessions. Many return after a few years to take a refresher course for \$195.

“The greatest time to come is when you are 40, worn out and need to get re-energized,” Monahan said.

Mathile, son of Dayton businessman and philanthropist Clay Mathile, said the board and Monahan have a balancing act ahead of them.

“It’s about those one-degree shifts that change your life dramatically over time,” Mathile said. “Now it’s about how do you create those shifts to get more customers in the door? How do you remain small as you get big?”

Rolfes thinks he knows the answer. He’d like for his business to slow down and for Monahan to create a workshop for that. And he’s writing a book and hopes to teach his own seminar someday.

“I think I can say why the changes occur,” Rolfes said.

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