

**Y**ou've likely been a customer of Doug Gehrig, whether you've met him or not — and if you've lived in Southwest Louisiana for any amount of time, someone in your household has probably been on the receiving end of a team sponsorship, non-profit fundraiser or other show of community support from him.

Gehrig, of Lake Charles, owns the 10 McDonald's restaurants in Calcasieu Parish. His business operations are extensions of his upbringing. His contributions throughout the area are, he says, part of a positive give-and-take made possible by the local support of his restaurants.

The locations of Gehrig's McDonald's restaurants range from DeQuincy to Iowa. They include four in Lake Charles, Westlake, Moss Bluff and two in Sulphur.

His Golden Arches story spans more than four decades. It includes most of his family — starting with his father, who moved south from Wisconsin to open his first McDonald's franchise.

"Along the way from 1975, I have had three siblings with ownership stakes in one or more of the restaurants," Gehrig said. "As of 2003, I had purchased all of the other family members' stores. Gerard Mack, my director of operations, is also a part owner."

So please pull forward for a conversation that's as much about supporting the community as doing business in it. Here are excerpts:

# first person

with **Doug Gehrig** *by Brett Downer*

**Your roots run decades-deep in Southwest Louisiana.**

My local roots started in 1975, when I moved here. In 1976, I had my first child and it really became home. I have not thought of it as anything else after that.

Only last week, one of my friends asked me where I would move after I retired. The comment caught me off guard. Why would I want to live anywhere else? The Lake Charles area really is a wonderful place to live.

**How has that influenced your business activity and community efforts?**

That "home" feeling affects most things I do. I care what kind of visits my "neighbors" have in my restaurants. As much as profitability is essential in business, I want to be proud of what I offer and deliver. Living here — and planning to stay here — gives me the want and need to improve my community. Why would anyone live somewhere and not try to improve life for everyone?

**What are some of the most rewarding efforts and institutions you and the area McDonald's restaurants have supported over the years?**

An impossible question for me to answer. Over just the past year, I have sponsored events or fundraisers for over 100

organizations, including McNeese Athletics, an engineering project, ten high school athletic programs, six youth sports leagues ... Salvation Army, the Red Cross, the Lake Charles dog park, the Calcasieu Medical Society ... Whistle Stop, the fifth-grade dance program ... seminars and summer school programs for youth...

Organizations that benefit our youth are dear to my heart. The funds I donate — to sports, for instance — make it easier for the children of local families to participate.

There are so, so many worthwhile organizations in our parish — and we have people willing to supply the manpower if they can get help financing their organization. I think it would be staggering to total the hours of community giving, both in man-hours and dollars.

I'm just proud to be part of the community solution. I can afford to do it because of the community support of my business, so I do it. It's the right thing to do — to give back what you can.

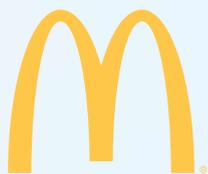
*continued on p16*



Doug was awarded the Ronald McDonald Award in 2012 for his community and corporate contributions, and it is the highest honor the region gives to an operator.



McDonald's of SWLA and Billy Navarre are annual sponsors of the Calcasieu Soccer Club's programs and services.



# Summer Sippin'



©2016 McDonalds

**What local people have been community inspirations to you over the years?**

Two stand out. As a business person, Willie King is so involved with the youth in our community. He is so benevolent, active and hard-working. If you think you're doing enough, spend a day with Willie.

Whether you may agree or disagree with him politically, as a public servant, Mayor Randy Roach is everywhere all of the time. He has shown a dedication to our community for many years now, and takes outreach very seriously. The Energizer Bunny has nothing on him.

**To what do you credit your success in business?**

We try to treat our customers the way we want to be treated — fast service, good hot food, served by friendly people. Easy, right? No. We do not always succeed, and actually we fail all too many times — not that even once a day is acceptable. But when you serve 10,000 people a day, some mistakes are made, and an order is occasionally too slow.

We have all updated facilities. Every one of our restaurants has been remodeled or rebuilt within the last few years. [That] helps our customers feel good about us as well as helping our employees' attitudes. Everyone likes "new."

I also believe in giving back to the community that supports us. That may sound trite — maybe it makes a huge difference in my business, or maybe only a slight difference — but I do believe in giving back to the entire community.

**What's your message to other businesses on how they might give back to the community?**

All the business people I know do give back. I know that in addition to funds, many of our area businesses enlist their employees to give of their time as well.

That is a wonderful gift if you can do that.

The stronger our community — one with more people involved finding solutions and caring for others — the better a place to live, work and raise a family.

**And to individuals?**

Get involved in some organization. Whether it's time or money that you give, get involved. Any involvement makes the community a richer place.

**Southwest Louisiana is poised for tremendous growth. What are the opportunities -- and challenges -- ahead?**

The whole area is a large opportunity for growth in my business. We are completely fresh and new, and we are ready for the influx of business to come. The largest challenge is staffing. We are already seeing the pinch in hiring — and it will not get any easier.

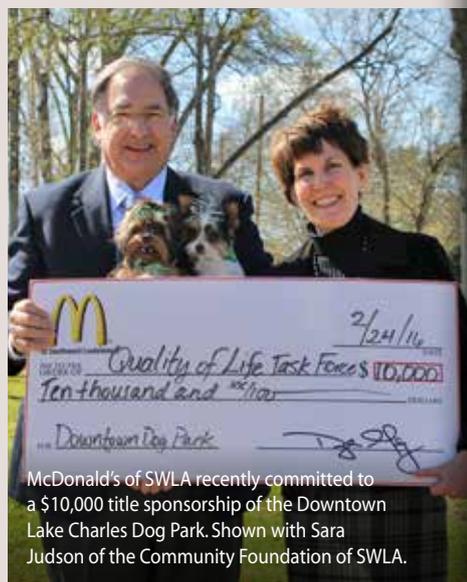
We will also see the cost of labor going up. Minimum wage is not the consideration anymore; the question is what will it take to get a good employee and then keep them. Wages may be a consideration by the employee whether to take a job, but paying a higher wage does not guarantee good employee performance. But the higher the wage, the greater the expectation. It's a system that takes both parties to bring the answer.

**It's noon and you're in a hurry for lunch. What do you order at the drive-through?**

Filet-o-Fish. Small fry. Large ice water.



All ten McDonald's locations have been completely renovated. The Maplewood location in Sulphur held a ribbon cutting this year.



McDonald's of SWLA recently committed to a \$10,000 title sponsorship of the Downtown Lake Charles Dog Park. Shown with Sara Judson of the Community Foundation of SWLA.

# SIDES

**SMALL FRY:**

Grew up in tiny Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, just north of Milwaukee. One of seven children. Father owned a small meat-packing plant and, later, a restaurant, A&W Root Beer drive-in and a car dealership. "My parents were extremely hard working," says Gehrig. So was he, working at all of the businesses during the summer or after school.

**ORDER UP:**

Worked at the snack bar of his dorm while at the University of Illinois in Urbana (where he earned a degree in mechanical engineering). Was perhaps too good for his own good; when he joined a fraternity, they made him the kitchen manager. As he puts it: "Food service seemed to follow me everywhere."

**SO GET UP AND GET AWAY:**

As his parents — having grown weary of the Wisconsin cold — moved to Lake Charles to open their first McDonald's, he took an engineering job at General Electric. Within three years, however, he was convinced to come down and help with the family's growing enterprise here.

**YOU'VE WON A FOOD PRIZE:**

Has earned multiple national awards from the McDonald's Corp. — including, three years ago, the regional Ronald McDonald award for community and corporate contributions, the highest such honor given to an operator.

**LOVIN' IT:**

Has three daughters and two stepdaughters — and, now at age 66, has six grandchildren.

