

[Send to printer](#) [Close window](#)

Generosity personified

Tulsan of the Year Phil Lakin Jr. epitomizes the philanthropic spirit of our city.

JIM MYERS MORGAN



Imagine, if you will, the city of Tulsa without an accredited zoological park. Without a functional city council willing to work with the mayor. Without an appreciation of the importance of early childhood education. And without a desire to build new parks, beautify its streets or expand its economic and entertainment horizons. Sounds pretty dismal, doesn't it?

Were it not for the efforts of the 2013 Tulsan of the Year — **Phil Lakin Jr.** — city residents might actually be facing such a nightmare scenario. An incorrigible multi-tasker who seemingly never sleeps yet is still boyish at 45, Lakin has taken it as his personal *raison d'être* to do anything and everything he can for the city he calls his first love.

"I love the institutions in Tulsa," he says with a grin. "I love the look of downtown. I love the growth opportunities, and the potential, and the people, and the family settings, the values and the character our city has. It's easy for me to do what I do because I fell in love with the city very early in life."

By anyone's estimation, Lakin does plenty. As the first and only CEO of the Tulsa Community Foundation, he oversees a collection of more than 1,000 charitable funds totaling approximately \$3.5 billion, making the foundation the largest of its kind in the nation. A year ago, Tulsa even obtained the legal rights to call itself "America's Most Generous City," a trademarked moniker Lakin himself coined.

As a private citizen, Lakin spearheaded the successful effort to privatize the cash-strapped Tulsa Zoo and Living Museum, a step that many feel ensured its long-term survival. As a first-term member of the city council, he has been instrumental in repairing council relations with the mayor's office even as he has championed initiatives to make Tulsa both safer and more beautiful. And as a dedicated husband and father, he makes it a priority to model the type of philanthropic generosity he hopes his three sons will inherit.

"Tulsa is not a thing to me," Lakin says. "It is a part of me. It's in me, so it's hard to get rid of it, so I don't. I try to make it better."

Born leader

Given the depth of Lakin's devotion to Tulsa, it might seem logical to assume he was born here, but he was actually born in California. Father **Phil Sr.** is a geophysicist in the oil and natural gas business, so the family (including mother **Jan**, a nurse, and sister **Tracey**) spent time in El Paso and Amarillo before arriving in Tulsa as Phil Jr. was ready to start the fifth grade.

"My first memory of moving to Tulsa was walking outside and hearing this constant buzzing," Lakin recalls. "It was super hot, and a different kind of hot than I was used to. I had lived in the desert my first 10 years. I asked one of my parents why the bugs would not stop making that noise. Then, I found out they were locusts."

Fortunately for Tulsa, Lakin attributed no plague-like significance to the episode. On the contrary, he came to embrace the East 75th Street and South Harvard Avenue neighborhood in which he grew up. He eventually attended Jenks High School, where he served as student body treasurer and as a student council representative. Along the way, he became friends with fellow Troop 10 Boy Scout **Jeff Stava**, who now serves as chief operating officer for TCF.

"Phil has always been very concerned about what other people are thinking, what they care about and what they need," Stava says. "He has this uncanny ability to see that and to understand it, and then be able to take care of those needs. I think that is what has made him a successful leader in all the phases of his life that I have witnessed."



After graduating from Jenks, both Lakin and Stava attended Baylor University, where both were members of a service fraternity — the Baylor Chamber of Commerce — that organized, among other things, what is believed to be the largest homecoming celebration in the country. Lakin credits that organization with helping shape his approach to public service.

"'Anything for Baylor' was our motto," he says. "We were to do everything in humility, so that nobody would see us working. If we were going to paint something, we'd paint at night. If we were going to scrub the sidewalks, we'd do it at night. And we weren't supposed to tell anybody what we did. It was all about service without recognition."

As busy as he was in service, Lakin still found time for his studies at Baylor, earning a bachelor's degree in economics and finance. He even managed development efforts for Baylor for a time before earning a Master of Business Administration there in 1999, the year he returned to Tulsa to lead TCF.

Passionate advocate

In response to what he saw as a need for Tulsa to have a permanent resource to fund future progress, businessman and philanthropist **George Kaiser** — along with a host of like-minded business and political leaders — had formed TCF in 1998. Kaiser and a TCF selection committee hired Lakin to become the foundation's CEO. Of many candidates, the committee deemed that "Phil had the strongest combination of commitment, energy level, relationship skills and creative ideas," Kaiser says.

As Lakin recalls it, his first year on the job was both educational and humbling.

"When I first got here, George took me to a whole bunch of different sites to meet with the executive directors at major nonprofit organizations," Lakin says. "I liked that so much that I visited more than 150 different agencies in my first year here. I came in believing that I knew plenty about nonprofits since I had worked at a university. But I didn't have the slightest clue. I didn't know anything about what these people had to deal with on a daily or weekly basis. I saw that there was plenty for me to do."



The single largest source of support for TCF is the George Kaiser Family Foundation, which focuses its resources in areas such as early childhood education and civic enhancement. In addition to his role at TCF, Lakin serves as chairman and trustee for GKFF. In that capacity, he has offered strategic direction on a number of high-impact projects, most notably Tulsa's Educare community centers, which provide educational and family engagement opportunities to more than 500 low-income children and their parents.

"Phil has been active in our early childhood work from the very outset," says **Ken Levit**, GKFF executive director. "He helped devise the strategy that led to the operation of three Educare sites in Tulsa and our support of dozens of other early childhood centers.

"He has been a passionate advocate at the foundation for increasing or continuing our investments in early childhood education because of the data that shows it is a highly effective strategy for intervening in the cycle of poverty, and for giving young children the best possible odds for success in their lives."

Never one to limit his activities to one area, however, Lakin also has been instrumental in guiding GKFF contributions in the area of civic enhancement and beautification, according to the foundation's namesake.

"Phil has personally driven the efforts of the Tulsa Beautification Fund, which our foundation funds," Kaiser says. "That program has worked to landscape and otherwise beautify numerous public spaces around the city, especially the area around the airport and highway bridges, such as the new I-44 overpasses."

A plaque on the wall in his TCF office near East 71st Street and South Yale Avenue seems to encapsulate Lakin's approach to his work. It is the philosophy of the Baylor Chamber of Commerce, and an attitude Lakin clearly took to heart. It reads, "There is no limit to what a man can accomplish if he doesn't care who gets the credit."

Pathfinder and diplomat

Lakin's role at TCF also enabled him to assist with the recent successful effort to privatize the Tulsa Zoo, an idea that had been discussed for years but never fully pursued. As public funding continued to shrink and it became clear that the more than 80-year-old facility was in danger of losing its accreditation, Lakin secured funding for an official governance and privatization study for the zoo. That study outlined the feasibility of forming a public-private partnership to fund the zoo going forward. But Lakin did not stop there.

“Phil brought together a group of community leaders to do an initial tour of the zoo,” says **Terrie Correll**, CEO of the zoo’s governing body, Tulsa Zoo Management Inc. “Getting community leaders out here to support the zoo in this endeavor was key, and I think that what was missing before was not having a clear path of how to do it. Phil was instrumental in assuring that we did have a clear path to privatization.”

With the path cleared, zoo privatization took effect in January 2011. With stable management in place and sustainable funding secured, the zoo received its five-year accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums in September 2012.

Having served as the president of Tulsa Zoo Management Inc., Lakin would likely still be in that role had his November 2011 election to represent District 8 on the Tulsa City Council not necessitated his resignation. Lakin is not shy about sharing what drove him to seek public office.

“I was just frustrated,” he says with a sigh. “I’ve spoken about it as the three legs on a stool. The philanthropic sector has been working really well for a long time. The corporate sector definitely works well. But the public sector was the weak leg of the stool. Our city was going wayward because there were elected officials who weren’t paying attention or who were focused on minor issues rather than on a grand vision of what our city could be.”

Though he failed to win a council seat on his first attempt in 2009, Lakin feels fortunate to now be serving alongside seven new councilors with a similar desire to move the city out of gridlock.

“We are all focused on the same things: creating a vision for our city and not letting incivility continue to rule the day,” Lakin says. “That has really made all of the difference in the world.



“Plus, we have done things that other councils since 1990 have not done. Easy, simple things like setting goals with the mayor. We set about 20 goals at a retreat, where we talked about the issues and how we are going to solve them.”

City Council Chairman (and District 9 Councilor) **G.T. Bynum** has known Lakin casually for a number of years and has worked with him professionally since Lakin joined the council. Bynum admires Lakin’s low-key approach to conflict resolution.

“He does a lot of back-channel diplomacy,” Bynum says. “If there is an issue that needs to be addressed, rather than automatically bringing people before the council, he often goes and quietly meets with the involved parties to try to address whatever it is, so it may never come up in a public forum. He is more focused on getting things done than on playing political publicity games.”

Despite favorable reviews of his tenure thus far, Lakin says he has no plans to use the city council as a stepping-stone to other public offices.

“It’s probably kind of silly,” he says, “but when somebody has a trash problem, and I get their trash picked up, I feel really good that day. I like that a ton better than some of these really tough votes we have to take where I am 51 percent this way and 49 percent that way.

“My objective in life is to make people happy. When I have to vote in a situation like that, I just made about half the people mad. So, I don’t like being put in that position. And you don’t evaluate that aspect of it when you run for office, or at least I didn’t.”

Loyal family man

Though he is a dedicated champion of a variety of causes, Lakin is careful to make sure he does not forsake family time. He and his wife, **Adriane**, attend Southern Hills Baptist Church along with their three sons — **Brooks**, 14; **Alex**, 11; and **Cooper**, 7. Lakin recently devised a unique way to drive home to them the importance and impact of charitable giving.

“Last year we decided that, as a family, we were going to give \$10,000 away,” he says. “So, I went to the bank and got \$10,000 worth of twenties. I dumped them out on the table. You can say \$10,000 to kids, but it’s an abstract concept. I wanted them to see what it looks like. It was a mesmerizing moment for them, and for me. We went through the process of divvying up the funds, breaking it out to DVIS or Child Abuse Network, or whatever.”

Lakin says Baylor and the family’s church received the most support, followed by several service agencies, including 19 nonprofits such as the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, Iron Gate, the Tulsa Zoo and the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

“I wrote down all of the allocations, took the money back to the bank, and the next day the checks were in the mail,” he says.

When he’s not at home or in the office, Lakin can often be found thousands of feet in the air. An avid hiker and mountain climber, he has scaled each and every one of the more than 50 14,000-foot peaks in Colorado — and he’s only the 1,434th person in the world to have done so, according to a listing from the Colorado Mountain Club. Never one to rest on his laurels, Lakin now has his sights set on the Matterhorn between Switzerland and Italy, and on Aconcagua in Argentina.

“Climbing mountains is my release,” he says. “And I don’t know why or how I decided to climb mountains, but I did. That’s the source of many of my really good friendships, and the source for my wife’s friendships, as well.

“We all go up as families sometimes. You put a lot of trust in your partner when you are climbing. They are literally holding the other end of the rope, and that rope is tied around your waist. So, there’s a lot of faith and trust inherent in the process.”

Given all he has done for Tulsa, the prospect of the city without Phil Lakin Jr. is hard to contemplate. As he sees it, the city he loves above all others has given him far more than he will ever be able to give back.

“I think I would find my loyalty somewhere,” he says. “But I always wanted to get back here, back to my first love. I would find a place to invest myself, but it still would not be the same kind of relationship. I would get by and be happy. But if you look back at what I gained before I could invest anything whatsoever, it is immeasurable what Tulsa gave me or built into me to cause me to be the person I am. Without that, I would not be Phil, that is for darn sure.”



In praise of Phil

Everywhere we turn, someone is singing the praises of Phil Lakin Jr.

“Phil is a guy who gets up every day and thinks about what he can do for the city of Tulsa. From the minute his feet hit the ground in the morning to the time he puts his head on the pillow at night, he is constantly thinking of ways to improve, things to fix, people to connect, in order to make our community a better place. And he lives it, eats it and breathes it every single day, and every moment of every day. He’s truly a 24-7-365 kind of guy.”

— **Jeff Stava**, *chief operating officer, Tulsa Community Foundation*

“Phil is a civic leader in all of its senses, as a business leader of the foundation, as a family member with an active family in the community, and lastly as a councilor. He gives an enormous amount of himself in the spirit of working in the public good. I think Phil as much as anyone in city government represents all of the values we would want in city leadership: professionalism, integrity, civility, good management. So, he’s a breath of fresh air, and really pivotal. I appreciate that the city can still attract people like Phil Lakin to city government. It’s a thankless task, and I’m grateful that Phil does it.”

— **Ken Levit**, *executive director, George Kaiser Family Foundation*

“I have the utmost respect for Phil Lakin. He has served this community as the CEO of the Tulsa Community Foundation, which is at a level of generosity unmatched anywhere in this country. Phil is currently a city councilor and, as with his devotion to the city, whether it is the Tulsa Zoo or any number of community functions he has chaired, he is there for all the right reasons. He serves exclusively for the love of Tulsa. I am deeply proud of Phil’s service and hold his friendship to me at the highest level.”

— *Tulsa Mayor* **Dewey Bartlett**

“Phil is bright, analytical, personable, persistent, articulate and a good listener — a combination of characteristics that don’t often reside in the same body. He gains friendship and respect from colleagues and is therefore able to secure cooperation in moving plans from concept to reality.”

— **George Kaiser**, *founder of the Tulsa Community Foundation; donor to the George Kaiser Family Foundation*

“Phil’s drive, his focus and his tenacity are what stand out to me. He is an avid mountain climber and a fitness enthusiast, activities that require intense focus and commitment to training. He brings these same powerful skills to his many professional and volunteer roles. I admire his motivation, determination and work ethic in everything he does. In addition to being a successful community leader, Phil is a dedicated family man and does a great job at striking a balance between his home life and his work in the community.”

— **Mike Neal**, *Tulsa Regional Chamber president and CEO*

“Phil Lakin excels in each endeavor he undertakes. His passion for making a difference in our community is evident through his work on the city council, Downtown Tulsa Rotary, the Tulsa Community Foundation and even his dedication to the Tulsa Zoo through the ‘One Wild Challenge’ Grand Teton climb. All the while, Phil carefully balances his roles as father and husband. We are lucky to have Phil as an engaged member of the Tulsa community.”

— **Kathy Taylor**, *former Tulsa mayor and Lobeck-Taylor Foundation co-founder*

“I think of myself as good at time management, but Phil operates on a different level. He does a lot, and he does it well. He’s a good dad, a good husband and a diligent councilor. We on the council call him ‘StuCo Phil’ because it’s like he’s still in student council. He’s so thorough, and he reads all of the backup material, even in committee meetings. I’m impressed by how thorough he is, given all the other demands on his time. Honestly, the only negative thing about Phil is that, because he accomplishes so much, he makes you feel worse about yourself.”

— **G.T. Bynum**, *District 9 city councilor*

“Phil Lakin, winner of a 2012 Star Award from Leadership Tulsa for his work on the privatization of the Tulsa Zoo, has been an exemplary community leader. Although his work at the Tulsa Community Foundation and on the City Council afford him many positive opportunities to make an impact, he always goes above and beyond official roles for the betterment of our community. He

has a strategic mind and is always looking for ways to build partnerships that are good for all involved.”

— **Wendy Thomas**, executive director of *Leadership Tulsa*

“Phil works on behalf of Tulsa and the whole community. He loves Tulsa and he wants to see it thrive, and for the community to live up to its full potential in the same way that he could see that for the zoo. Everything he touches he would like to see become the best that it can for the citizens and the community. The zoo is just one example of his work and his involvement in the community to make Tulsa a great place.”

— **Terrie Correll**, CEO of *Tulsa Zoo Management Inc.*