

Nonprofits & Philanthropy

## **This man may be Chicago's biggest global philanthropist—and you've probably never heard of him**

By H. LeeMurphy



John DeBlasio

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As war rages in Gaza and Ukraine and places like Haiti and South Sudan are overrun with rebel insurrection, many Americans are rethinking their overseas interests and commitments. Maybe the U.S. can't solve all the world's problems, some are coming to believe.

The doubters don't include John DeBlasio, a military veteran and Chicago businessman who has both a corporate and humanitarian presence in many of the world's political hot spots. His for-profit OT Global (named for Development Transformations) has 2,500 employees working in 70 countries (powering \$550 million in revenues last year) on a wide expanse of projects ranging from the building of new roads into the Himalayas and the construction of a cross-island highway in New Guinea.

At the same time, an allied nonprofit called DT Institute, which gets much of its funding from DT Global, does donor work around the world, such as shoring up independent media reporting in places like Syria and Ukraine, where it supports Ukraine army radio. For DeBlasio, 56, who is chairman of both organizations, the two DTs account for just a fraction of his international involvement.

He sits on 10 boards altogether: He is the founding board member of a veterans organization called the Illinois Joining Forces Foundation; co-founded the Center for the Study of Military Operations at his alma mater, West Point; supports the Our Little Brothers Charity that builds houses for the poor in Haiti and other developing nations; and helped set up the Midwest office of an organization dubbed Business Executives for National Security. He also regularly turns up at the prestigious World Economic Forum each year in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, often as the guest of a foreign leader.

DeBlasio's volunteerism has proved to be contagious. Nicholas Gross, a senior vice president at AAR, a supplier of aviation parts based in Wood Dale, who once worked for DeBlasio, now serves at Illinois Joining Forces alongside his old boss. He finds DeBlasio's patriotism genuine.

"His connection to veterans runs deep," Gross says. "But he's expanded beyond that to focus more broadly on government and efforts to rebuild war-torn countries. John isn't content to just donate his money to his causes. He'd get bored doing that. He's got to be more active."

What drives all this global involvement? Crain's sat down with DeBlasio to find out.

**Crain's: After graduating from West Point more than 30 years ago, you served mostly overseas in places like South Korea and then got involved in the Iraqi War. Many retired soldiers would have been happy to come home in one piece and dive into business here. But you started up a global construction company a couple of decades ago that did engineering work in places like South Sudan and Qatar. Why go back to these hot spots as a civilian?**

**DeBlasio:** I'm a liberal internationalist. I grew up in the 1980s during a time when Ronald Reagan took a very different view of America's role in the world. He had an idealistic notion that called for a reinvigoration of America's role in the world. In his famous prairie fire speech some four decades ago, he put forward the idea that democracy must be kept alive and well, and if it was then it would eventually ignite like a prairie fire around the world.

I served in places like Iraq and could see that we ourselves had helped create some of the problems there. The U.S. influence wasn't altogether positive. But I also saw that we could play an important role in helping them sort out all their problems. My idealism was never tempered. Today I would argue that Iraq has emerged as one of the more successful countries in the region.

**Why create both a for-profit and nonprofit DT, often doing parallel work?**

I'm about profit with a purpose. The profits generated by DT Global are funneled, in part, to DT Institute. DT Global has been able to scale up in size much faster on a for-profit model.

With its support, OT Institute has become a very nimble private donor investing overseas where the needs are very acute. We work with like-minded philanthropic organizations like the Rotary and Ford Foundation and others in driving international change.

The Institute can accomplish change much faster than foreign government aid that is likely to be designed to build new ministries and departments of justice and other agencies. That can take decades. As it is, we've got a good hybrid model what works effectively.

**You serve on the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which is influential. But most people with your deep-seated interest in service abroad are more likely to be based in Washington or New York, not Chicago.**

You're right that there are very few purveyors of international development and activism and charity based in Chicago, and I've thought about relocating to D.C. But that ship has sailed. I'm happy here. Maybe I like being a big fish in a smaller pond in Chicago. My passion is to drive impact, and I can do that from here.

**Serving on 10 boards of directors is a lot. How do you manage your time?**

I'm a big believer in the one-third/one-third/one-third rule. I spend one-third of my time on my (for-profit) business, one-third of my time in my philanthropic pursuits and one-third with my family. I get more than seven hours of sleep a night, and I run to keep in shape. I do a lot of travel, but I've learned how to manage my time there, too. I find that I can make any flight at O'Hare Airport by arriving within 25 minutes of departure. Arrive earlier than that and you're wasting time.

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