

Business: A Force for Good

Justin Hong

Brookfield East High School

As someone who moved from Houston, Texas to Brookfield, Wisconsin, I would think that most people back where I was born would be surprised to see a move from "everything's bigger in Texas" to the farmlands of Wisconsin. How could Wisconsin possibly be better than a diverse and large state like Texas? What I have found since living here for three years is that the people of Wisconsin are a tight-knit community who feel like family: they are willing to support and help each other through tough times. No other Wisconsin company better exemplifies this spirit than Sendik's Food Markets.

Sendik's Food Markets is a family-owned grocery business with 18 locations in Southeast Wisconsin. They sell groceries, meats, wine and spirits, bakery, and housewares. Sendik's was founded by the Balistreri family who immigrated from Sant'Elia, Sicily to Milwaukee in 1926. Sendik's name came from a simple misunderstanding. As immigrants from Sicily, the Balistreri family faced a language barrier between themselves and local Wisconsinites. According to family lore, Tom Balistreri, the founder of Sendik's, asked a store clerk for a stove. He told the clerk to "send it" to him. The clerk misunderstood and wrote "Sendik" on the order. Tom Balisetri would hence be known as "Mr. Sendik." Since the creation of the first Sendik's, the company has branched out from a horse and buggy operation in Northeast Milwaukee to stores in Bayside, Brookfield, Elm Grove, Franklin, Germantown, Grafton, Greendale, Greenfield, Hales Corners, Hartland, Marquette, Mequon, New Berlin, Oconomowoc, Waukesha, Wauwatosa, West Bend and Whitefish Bay.

Sendik's is nearly 100 years old. They have flourished because they have become known for their "honesty and integrity in treating customers and suppliers with courtesy and respect." Their core mission has been to improve the customer experience with quality products and quality service. While doing so, they have given back to the community in many ways.

One Saturday afternoon, I interviewed Paul Voelz, the store manager of Sendik's at the Corners of Brookfield. There was a cookie sale going on for World War I and II veterans as we spoke. The store clerk was busy handing out boxes of star, sprinkle, caramel, and chocolate chip cookies in red, white and blue stacked on large sheet trays by the escalator to the second floor. Nobody could go upstairs and miss these. The clerk handed each box over to an eager cookie customer in the famous plastic red shopping bag with the Sendik's logo. For every pound of cookies sold, one dollar would be donated to the Stars & Stripes Honor Flight Network, a national organization that funds trips for veterans to visit war memorials in Washington, D.C. Mr Voelz said that during this event, Sendik's customers could also round up their grocery bill so that the difference could be a donation too. This event was going on at all 18 Sendik's store locations the weekend of June 2 and 3, 2024. Last year, Sendik's raised \$100,000 from May to July for Stars & Stripes Honor Flight.

Sendik's also does a lot of behind-the-scenes donations daily. I learned that every morning at 5:00 am, the NourishMKE food pantries (formerly known as Frieden Food Pantries) of Milwaukee sends trucks to pick up unsold bakery goods from Sendik's locations to bring to food pantries throughout Southeast Wisconsin as part of the Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin operation. In 2022, Sendik's raised over \$70,000 and distributed 120,000 pounds of food. I was able to experience this firsthand through volunteer work at two NourishMKE food pantries in Milwaukee: Mitchell Street Food Center (formerly Despensa de la Paz) and Orchard Food

Pantry (formerly Hope House). When I first volunteered, I was impressed by all the red plastic bags that people were carrying home filled with canned goods, breads, vegetables, fruits, meats and condiments from Sendik's. Just this past weekend, I helped a 10-year-old Asian girl shop for rice for her immigrant parents at the Orchard Food Pantry. She said that getting free food every day has helped. This seemed like home, so much so, that she came by herself.

Sendik's is helping not only people, but cats and dogs as well. Sendik's has partnered with the Wisconsin Humane Society of Milwaukee and Ozaukee Counties. They have sold an animal themed curly straw for one dollar and have implemented a rounding up program where every straw sold and every dollar rounded up will go toward the care and feeding of pets. This has given these Wisconsinites quality food, shelter, and a better life. This partnership raised \$42,718 in 2023. To find homes for these pets, Sendik's has hosted pet adoption clinics outside their stores.

Sendik's has also funded other community charities. Sendik's has partnered with Midwest Athletes Against Childhood Cancer (MACC). Between November, 2022 to January, 2023, Sendik's raised \$105,000 to fight childhood cancer. As of 2021, Sendik's had raised \$1.5 million for childhood cancer and blood disorders research as a proud partner with the MACC fund.

Moving from Texas to Wisconsin has revealed to me a deep sense of community and support that define the Badger State. Heartfelt connections, communal spirit, and a willingness to help others is what sets apart Wisconsin from other states. No other business embodies these qualities more than Sendik's. From caring about our veterans, feeding our people and pets, to caring about our future through ways to stop childhood cancer, Sendik's has been a role model

for community service. Sendik's started with a family and that family has continued to care for all of us as a family. That is truly the Wisconsin spirit.

#### Citations

<https://www.sendiks.com/about/charitable-work>

<https://www.sendiks.com/about/our-story>

<https://maccfund.org/blog/proud-partners-sendiks>

<https://www.nourishmke.org>

<https://www.honorflight.org>

<https://feedingamericawi.org>