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What worlds are left for a man to conquer at age 76? He's already taken an idea (The Home Depot) that only existed in his imagination, at a time in his life when he was broke and unemployed, and made it a reality. He grew that company from nothing in 1978 into a successful enterprise generating more than \$58 billion in sales in 2002 at the time of his retirement. What can be left after such phenomenal success? If you are Bernie Marcus, you start over with something new.

When Marcus' imagination kicks in, it kicks in big. When Marcus retired from The Home Depot, he went to work on his newest dream—the world's largest aquarium. On Nov. 23, 2005, Marcus saw his latest dream come true when the Georgia Aquarium opened its doors.

"The Georgia Aquarium is a gift from my wife Billi and me as a thank you to the people of Atlanta and Georgia for their support of The Home Depot, as associates, customers and shareholders," Marcus says.

But what drives this man to undertake something so colossal at a stage in life when others are thinking of retirement and drinking mimosas on a beautiful beach? "Tzedakah," he says, a Jewish mitzvah (a good deed) that simply means "giving back."

Marcus grew up the son of Jewish immigrant parents from Russia, in a tenement in New Jersey. His mother instilled in him a sense of philanthropy that drives him to this day. In those early years when his own family did not have much, a portion of his ice cream money always went to those less fortunate.

"I [retired from The Home Depot because I] wanted to spend the rest of my life in philanthropy. I find it much more satisfying. Day-to-day business in today's environment is very stressful," he says. "I am fortunate that I don't have to do anything that I don't enjoy. I'm having fun."

This isn't simply lip service. Marcus puts his money where his mouth is. In his final years of service at The Home Depot, he and co-founder Arthur Blank created

Team Depot, a division of the company charged with the ideal of philanthropy. By 1998, the company was investing \$12.5 million in community projects.

Early last year the Salvation Army awarded him its highest accolade, the "Others Award," which honors individuals for their outstanding charitable service.

But if "tzedakah" drives Marcus' heart, "bashert" fuels his ambition. Bashert, another Jewish term taught to him by his mother, means "It is destined to be." In other words, anything can have a positive side, thus change is simply an opportunity. His mother reminded him, he recalls, "Don't spend time replaying the past; it only keeps you from focusing on the future. And don't spend time on things in which you can't make a difference."

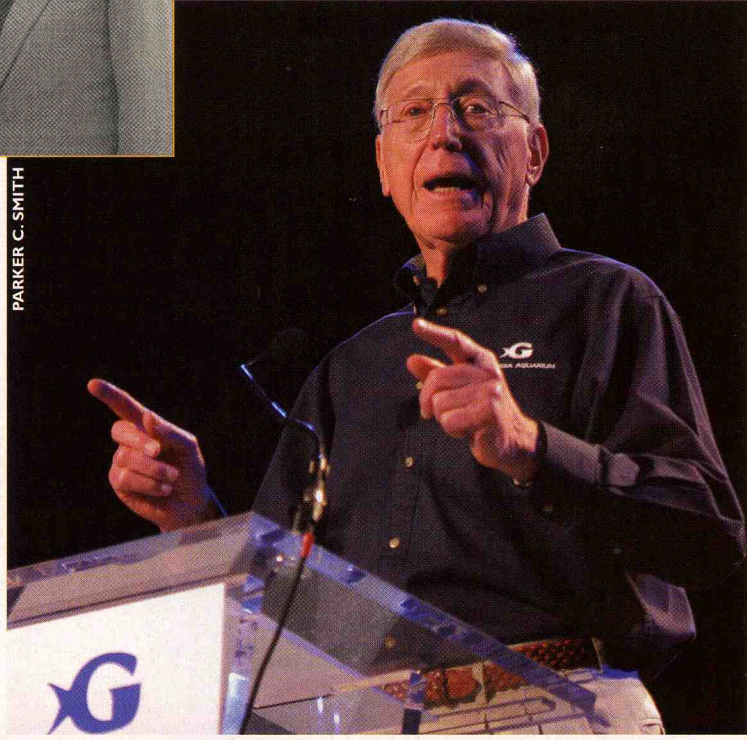
It is this theme of improvement that marks the major milestones in Marcus' life. From his time as a pharmacist, through his years at Handy Dan and The Home Depot, and even now with the Aquarium and the gentrification of downtown Atlanta, he looks for ways to make a difference.

Currently researchers have told him



Inset above: Bernie and wife Billi are all smiles.

Right: Bernie Marcus challenged the team who constructed the Georgia Aquarium to move quickly. Their response? A 500,000-square-foot facility built to perfection in just 28 months.



PARKER C. SMITH