

Meet Hometown Hero Ken Crowley, Auto Dealer, Philanthropist



Ken Crowley, Chairman of the Crowley Auto Group, reflects on his various philanthropic causes including his support of diabetes research and hiring veterans, like Alex Cruz, a Marine veteran who served four tours in Iraq. Cruz was hired by Crowley Ford-Lincoln in Plainville several years ago for a sales job and now is manager of internet sales.



By **Susan Dunne** • Contact Reporter

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Ken Crowley grew up "a street kid in Waterbury," he said. His family was not poor, but of modest means. "My father always had a job. I never went to bed hungry. But we never had anything extra."

To have money of his own, Crowley got a job on a farm at age 9. "I fed the chickens, milked the cows and I drove a big truck. I was only 9, but I only drove it on the farm," he said. Thus began a lifetime of working with cars.

As a teen, he worked at a gas station, pumping gas and fixing cars. After high school, he got a job as a salesman at a Chrysler-Dodge dealer in Waterbury. On the sales floor, Crowley found his niche in life. He was good at selling cars. Years later, he discovered he was even better at running the dealership.

Today, Crowley is one of the biggest auto dealers in the state, owner of 13 franchises in the Bristol-Plainville area. Crowley Auto Group employs 300 people and last year sold 10,000 cars: Chryslers, Dodges, Fords, Jeeps, Kias, Lincolns, Nissans, VWs, RVs and Ram trucks.

Crowley, who lives in Woodbury with Norma, his wife of 48 years, is the king of an automotive empire. But his humble origins are never far from his mind. "I always had very strong feelings about giving back. I came from absolutely nothing," Crowley said. "I feel very indebted to people in the community. They supported me. They didn't have to. There are many places to buy a car."

Crowley has given back to the community in a variety of ways. He is so devoted to helping others that the **Ford Motor Company** this year chose him as one of six Ford dealers in the world — out of 6,000 dealerships — to be honored for their community spirit.

"That was one of the highlights in my career," he said. He received his award in January at an international convention in New Orleans alongside the other five honored dealers, who hail from North Carolina, Florida, New Zealand, Saskatchewan and Turkey.

In a news release, Ford said Crowley's dedication to his charities "typify his leadership and compassion for helping others." The company commissioned a portrait of Crowley as part of the honor.

Fund-Raising

Some of Crowley's projects are car-related. He was on the committee to build Bristol Technical Education Center, which opened 30 years ago. "A lot of great automotive technicians have come out of that school," he said, adding that he donates vehicles to the auto-shop program. Another educational project is "Drive One 4 Ur School," an initiative that donates \$20 for every test drive taken to the school of the test-driver's choice. That initiative helped to finance the founding of the Plainville High robotics team.

Crowley's most well-known charitable project kicked in in the mid-90s, when his granddaughter was diagnosed with diabetes. "That was a tough, stressful thing. A 7-year-old had to start injecting herself with insulin," he said. "I became active in the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation."

Over the years, Crowley and his employees became the linchpin for JDRF fundraising. They started the Crowley Automotive Golf Tournament in 1997. Over the 20 years it existed — ending in 2016 — the tourney raised \$1.1 million for JDRF.

"Yale has done a lot of research to develop an artificial pancreas. It's been approved by the FDA. I like to feel our funds played a large part in that," Crowley said. "One big thing about the JDRF is that they have very little expenses. Everything you collect pretty much goes for research."

Crowley has championed the emotional and physical well-being of children in other ways. For four years, Crowley Ford in Plainville has hosted Nico's Lemonade Stand, which was founded by Nico Fasold of Plainville when he was 4 years old. Since it was founded, Fasold, who is now 10, has raised about \$55,000 for the Make-a-Wish Foundation, which grants the wishes of gravely ill children.



Ken Crowley, left, chairman of the Crowley Auto Group, stands with Alex Cruz, internet sales manager, in the Crowley Ford-Lincoln showroom in Plainville June 6. Crowley raises money for various charities and makes a special effort to hire veterans like Cruz, a U.S. Marine who served four tours of duty in Iraq. (CLOE POISSON|c.poisson@courant.com)

"He has this thing that every like he gets on his Facebook page he donates one dollar to the lemonade stand. He's done it for three years," Nico said in an interview. "He lets us set up outside his business. He collects donations. He brings awareness."

Nico's father, Kyle Fasold, said that Crowley also has nominated Nico for grants from the Connecticut Automotive Dealers Association. That money, like all money raised by Nico, goes directly to Make-a-Wish.

Crowley Auto Group also has used its Facebook page to raise money for Save the Children, to benefit people in Japan affected by the 2011 tsunami, and for the Tornado Relief Fund of Red Cross Western Massachusetts, after a tornado touched down in Springfield that same year. Crowley Auto Group donated a battery-operated, child-sized jeep to Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Farmington, for children to ride into the operating room. "It's quite traumatic for them to go in there, with all the lights," Crowley said. "The little Hummer makes it less traumatic."

Veterans

In 2002, a few years after Crowley started the golf tournament, another pet project came into his life, by way of a phone call from then-Gov. Jodi Rell. "She asked if I would be willing to help with a Christmas party for families of deployed troops," Crowley said. He and his staff loved the idea. "We put pickup trucks in the showrooms and had a contest for which dealership could collect the most toys and food and money," he said. "Pay is low in the military. Sometimes people need oil or food gift cards."

Since then, Crowley has embraced Operation ELF (Embracing Lonely Families), which is run by the National Guard.

"I've never met anyone who has such genuine love and concern for the military here in Connecticut," Operation ELF volunteer Kim Hoffmann said in a YouTube video about Crowley created by Ford Motor Company. "You would only need to spend maybe five or 10 minutes with him to know and understand that what he does, he does from his heart."

The involvement with families of soldiers led, naturally, to a commitment to those fighting men and women themselves. In 2008, Crowley Auto Group became one of the first car dealerships in the country to team up with the U.S. Army Reserve's "Employer Partnership Initiative," to help military veterans find civilian jobs.

"We make an effort. A lot of employers don't. Ex-military members are reliable and dependable. They are used to teamwork and following directions. They have a lot to offer a businessman," Crowley said. "We sit here fat and happy and they're over there with people shooting at them. We have to do something."

Alexander Cruz of Rocky Hill was one of those veterans who needed a job. Cruz was born in Hartford. His mother raised him alone after his father died of a drug overdose when Cruz was 4. Cruz graduated from Hartford High in 2001 and enlisted in the Marine Corps after Sept. 11, 2001. He did four tours of duty in Iraq. "I was in motor transport," Cruz said. "We'd transport toilet paper, food, troops, ammunition, tanks, helicopters. As the war progressed, we were more security than transporting materials."

Cruz also spent years in the reserves. In 2010 he was home for good. He needed a job that paid enough to let his wife, Cindy, stay home with their two autistic children. "I spent the better part of three years applying for state and federal jobs," Cruz said. "There was nothing except state trooper and corrections officer. I had already spent years of my life getting shot at. I was done with that. I didn't want to put my family through it."

Cruz worked temp jobs — door-to-door sales, installing solar panels — while he looked for a full-time job. Many employers wouldn't consider him because he lacked a college degree. He said the stress was overwhelming. "It does a lot to a person, especially a person who has PTSD," he said.

At a "Heroes for Hire" event at Rentschler Field in 2012, Cruz met Crowley representatives, who hired him as a salesman at Crowley Ford in Plainville. Since he was hired, he has been recognized as one of the region's top salesmen. Currently, he is the Internet sales manager. "It's been awesome since then," he said.

Crowley said today, his auto group employs about 25 veterans. The group's work with veterans and their families has earned Crowley honors from several regional and national military support organizations: the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Connecticut National Guard, etc.

One of Crowley's favorite honors, however, wasn't from an organization but from a person. To this day, he does not know the name of the man who gave him an American flag, which Crowley displays in a triangular frame in a conference room at Crowley Kia in Bristol.

"I was in my office and I got a call from downstairs. They said, 'A soldier wants to see you.' He was in fatigues," Crowley said. "He had this flag from his company that had been flying over Baghdad. He carried it all the way back in his pack to give to me. He said, 'You help us.'"

"I didn't know him. We'd never met," Crowley said. "But he knew what we do."