

Undercover volunteer: Wealthy car dealer does the dirty jobs quietly at Tampa charity

Few at Metropolitan Ministries, where Tony March volunteers, know he made a fortune.



Tony March slices ham for sandwiches last week at Metropolitan Ministries in Tampa. March grew up poor in Daytona Beach but got a scholarship to go to Howard University. OCTAVIO JONES | Times

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TAMPA — Ask the staff around Metropolitan Ministries what they know about Tony March and you'll learn how little he has revealed about himself in eight years as a volunteer there.

"He talks about poker a lot so he must like it," said kitchen employee Candi Jacks.

"I think he runs a business," said executive chef Eric Champagne.

They know him more as the man who puts in 20 hours a week, every week, at the ministries campus on N Florida Avenue, preparing off-site meals on some days, serving food on others to the 100 families living here temporarily, or one day last week, scraping crusted tuna and egg from a sinkful of serving trays with a steelwool pad.

March, 66, of Tampa carefully inspected each tray as he went.

"I'm so OCD I don't go to bed with a single sock out of place," he acknowledges.

March does indeed play poker and he has owned a business. But only top brass at Metropolitan Ministries know the rest of his story. That's how he wants it.

March has played poker professionally for four years — twice competing in the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas — and gave away all \$250,000 of his winnings to charity. Metropolitan Ministries is a chief beneficiary.

He can devote himself to the game because he built up one of the nation's most celebrated black-owned enterprises, Tampa-based March/Hodge auto dealerships, with 21 locations at one point and gross earnings last year of \$672 million. But it's not enough for March to give away cash. Even though some 23,000 people a year volunteer with Metropolitan Ministries — which took in \$23.3 million in 2014, according to its most recent tax filing — he always finds work to be done here.

And getting elbows deep into it serves as a reminder of his own past, growing up in the poor neighborhoods of Daytona Beach, where his childhood duties included searching Dumpsters for food.

Toward the end of his six hours on dish-washing duty Tuesday, March lamented the back pain that required him to undergo surgery in 2003. The Tampa kitchen prepares 2,500 meals a day for 28 meal sites, and every time he finished washing one tall cart of trays, another was wheeled in.

"It's going to be a four-Advil night."

March has begun to share bits of his story, in part so he might inspire others to give.

On Twitter, he mentions his company's worth in his profile and posts photos of himself volunteering.

He's also writing an autobiography. Getting him to open up has been a chore for Marvin Karlins, the local author helping with the project.

"He doesn't want attention," Karlins said. "He just wants to help people."

Karlins estimates that March has competed against 10,000 poker players but has only shared his story with a few.

"It's like Undercover Boss," said Tim Marks, chief operating officer of Metropolitan Ministries. "He could have his name on a building. Instead, he anonymously washes dishes."

March, who is divorced with one grown daughter, lives well but not as well as he could.

"I can't even remember the last time I went on a real vacation," he said.

He has one house, in the wealthy Lutz enclave of Avila, and owns two luxury cars: a Lexus LS and a Cadillac XLR convertible.

March and co-owner Earl Hodge founded their company in 1998 and grew it into one of the largest minority-owned dealership groups in the nation, with 13 locations in Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio and New York. The group offers a staggering number of brands, according to Hoover's Inc. business research, and has been recognized nationally as tops in customer satisfaction and for turning its local partners into co-owners.

None of the dealerships meant more to March personally than one he bought in Daytona in 1998, and not just because he bought it for \$750,000 and sold it eight years later for \$25 million.

As a teenager, he spent Saturdays selling newspapers on the streets of Daytona Beach, earning a nickel each.

Lloyd Cadillac/Buick, a few miles from his home, was along his route.

The dealership had a water fountain that only white children could use. Because he was black, March had to sip water from a hose offered by a black car washer named Willie who lived in March's neighborhood.

In August 1998, business partner Ernest Hodge asked March whether he would be interested in buying a dealership in Daytona — Lloyd Cadillac/Buick.

"Conquering that memory 100 percent had to do with that," he said.





Willie was still working there and recognized March.

"He told me how proud he was of my accomplishment. That compliment was maybe the most satisfying recognition I ever received."

March was married to Gail March 33 years before they divorced.

Now living in Austin, Texas, she said she is puzzled at the suggestion there's anything unusual about the way her ex-husband has shunned the limelight.

"That's not the type of people we are," she said.

They lived more than two decades in Hartford, Conn., when the dealership group was based there, and March followed the same routine — contributing readily to charity, spending hours every week getting his hands dirty for a good cause and staying quiet about it.

"That's appropriate," said Gail March, who volunteered alongside her husband.

She welcomes the idea of a memoir, though.

"I think there comes to a point in your life where you need to leave a legacy," she said, "and he is choosing to do so in print." Still, it hasn't gotten any easier for March to talk about himself.

"Look, I think they're listening," he said to chuckles from the kitchen staff as he sliced deli meat during a volunteer shift Monday at Metropolitan Ministries.

He even turned to author Karlins to help share his stories with a visitor. One of them illustrates how far the businessman has come in life.

A young March, Karlins said, was walking to school one day in Daytona Beach when he encountered the aroma of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, felt pangs of hunger — then pulled out and ate his lunch of sandwich bread spread with just enough jelly to color it.

Once finished, the boy wept.

"He realized it was all he had to eat that day, and it was gone," Karlins said.

With five children, his single mother had March scour nearby trash bins to help feed them. An alcoholic, she had them wash down his harvest with beer, he said — to kill the tapeworm.

The federal surplus food program provided basics like powdered milk and eggs, but if there were a soup kitchen nearby March never saw it.

That's why he volunteers at one now.

March lived in 17 homes before graduating from high school, one of them an orphanage where his mother placed him one summer between sixth and seventh grade.

He still doesn't know how he qualified to stay there.

"That's the \$64,000 question, and only my mom knows the answer. And if she told me why, I wouldn't believe her reason. Too many lies."

Throughout his childhood, his mother would tell him that any one of three men might have been his father. He doesn't think any of them were.

In high school, he learned he was born Tony Reid, according to his birth certificate, but his mother always called him by her last name. As an adult, he made the change from Reid to March legal.

The neglect March endured at home may explain his motivation to succeed, he said.

He came to realize that teachers would heap praise upon him for good grades so he worked hard even as his ugly home life turned him into an introvert, uncomfortable with attention.

By senior year of high school, he was living with his sister, her husband and their nine kids in an 850-square-foot apartment. He had \$1 a day to eat on so college was never a consideration despite straight A's and a first place win in the Florida State Science Fair.

Then one day his uncle's childhood buddy dropped by. The dean of admissions at historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., the friend declared, "You are going to college."

March attended Howard on a full scholarship and went on to earn a degree in electrical engineering, land a job with General Motors, graduate from its dealership academy, and buy a car lot in 1985. He acquired more dealerships and partnered with Hodge.

March fell in love with the Tampa area when he bought Wesley Chapel Honda, which he later sold. He moved to Tampa once he relocated the group's headquarters here in 2008.

He started the following year at Metropolitan Ministries.

"It just seemed the place where I could have the biggest impact."

The charity hosted a lunch recently for business leaders, CEO Marks said, and March attended — helping first with the food preparation then donning a suit to join in.

"That's just who he is," Marks said. "He's very unique."

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