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Bob Pew Introduction, delivered at the Economic Club Dinner on June 8, 1998

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The Chicago mobster, Al Capone, is quoted, saying "You go farther with a kind deed and a gun than with a kind deed alone." Motivation by fear, intimidation by power, gain through greed, are fairly familiar in corporate America, and in line with the Al Capone tenet. The career of the Slykhouse Business Person of the Year, Robert C. Pew, is a contradiction to that philosophy. He has demonstrated that concern for employees, their well being, their self esteem, their views, and their ultimate success has built Steelcase into the largest employer in west Michigan and the largest business in the office systems, office furniture industry. No guns needed, only an arsenal of good deeds.

Children's memories often poignantly reveal their parents' values. Kate and Rob remember their dad worrying about a worker whose success on the job required taking medicine for his mental health. Obviously the employee was sometimes forgetful in ministering to himself. Bob involved himself to keep the man on track and employed. Bob Pew's door and heart are always open to the people of Steelcase. He is as much helper as director. He built a business, but he developed a community. The philosopher, Schopenhauer, wrote, "Compassion is the basis of all morality." That describes Bob's moral compass.
Knowing Bob for thirty years, I suspect being in the spotlight tonight is not his idea of a really good time. He might even agree with Mark Twain, who said, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." I don’t think Bob objects to being a good example. He just doesn’t want to think about it. But tonight he has graciously agreed to accept public recognition for shaping west Michigan in our time through industry and philanthropy. As we give him praise, he, I’m sure, will not object to full revelation. There is an edge to Bob’s personality. It shows an intensity in task and determination to win. Bob is really committed to a “win win” philosophy, but that doesn’t work in a golf match. He and I have engaged in some intense matches. Late in the game we often come to a tough water hole, the money is on the line. As he tees up the ball I want to relieve the tension, keep the game friendly, so I say, in a most pleasant tone, “I hope you don’t hit the ball in the water.” He wheels around and shouts, “Shut-up Lubbers.” Then he hits the ball in the water. I was only trying to help, but he is so intense.

Compassion and a hearty competitive spirit are qualities, but there is a relationship of the highest quality, a partnership, a marriage that seems to me more important to Bob in the way he does business and philanthropy than it does in lives of most people who administer at his level. It is risky to mention something so personal in a public description of success, but if it was not, in describing his, there
would be a serious omission and an incomplete picture. His adult children know this and confirm it. L. K. Anspacher wrote, “Marriage is that relation between man and woman in which the independence is equal, the dependence mutual, and the obligation reciprocal. I think this fits what I am trying to say.

This is not the first time this year’s recipient of the Slykhouse Award has surfaced to receive recognition for doing good in his community. Long ago the Wesleyan University liberal arts curriculum shaped his interests. And those interests led ultimately to the Michigan Governor’s Honor Roll Award for support of the arts and to a presentation by President Reagan of the National Trust Historic Preservation Award. This for the restoration of the Meyer-May House, a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. By giving generously to the Grand Rapids Foundation, present and future generations in west Michigan will be healthier, better educated, and more creative. Arts, social agencies, schools, neighborhoods, the downtown, colleges and universities are held closely by the Pews and gain strength. Three local institutions, Aquinas, Davenport and Grand Valley, have conferred honorary degrees, but don’t call Bob doctor. If you do, you are likely to get the raised eyebrows look, the Pew grunt, and a c’mon.

What is more important in Bob’s life – the business or philanthropy? What has served west Michigan best? If you ask a Steelcase worker who now has a family member also employed at Steelcase, he or she might say “creating the jobs
and treating employees fairly.” If you asked a Steelcase executive, she or he might say, “He kept us ahead of the curve, created product, captured the largest share of the market, built a great corporate culture.” If you asked a student, he or she might say, “What opportunities for education the Pews have provided and the facilities. Wow!” If you asked asked a handicapped person, she or he might say, “Thank you, thank you. You provided but you inspired too.” If you asked an artist, she or he might say, “We are in a renaissance in west Michigan. It’s wonderful!”. As he and Mary sprinkle the places where they live and have lived with good deeds, we are here tonight to honor and thank. In the history of his industry and in the history of his place here amongst us, it may be argued, “Was his greatest contribution as a business visionary or as a philanthropic citizen?” The answer, both. Bob, if this is all getting a little too heavy, let me ask you to receive it in the spirit of that great American Goddess, Mae West, who said, “Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.”