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## From rags to riches

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Dirt poor.

There's no other way to describe it. As the Great Depression came to an end and the nation entered World War II, one southern Minnesota family — a father, mother and four children — lived a life that was, even at that time, difficult. By today's standards, it would seem unbearable.

Their small house on the dairy farm in Norseland, Minn., had neither indoor plumbing nor electricity. The father — a hard-working man of Norwegian descent — would milk the 40 cows twice a day by hand, leaving him little time to spend with his family. Still, long-time residents of nearby St. Peter who remember them say that the family stuck together and overcame adversity, even in the toughest of times.

And things got even tougher.

As the war was drawing to a close and Americans were full of hope and optimism, the father, only 38 years old at the time, died of a heart attack, leaving his wife to try, as best she could, to rear their four children and keep the farm going on her own.

Eventually, the task became too burdensome. She sold the farm, paid off the family's debts, and moved into St. Peter with what little money they had, hoping to create a better life for her children.

For a couple of years, she worked tirelessly at multiple jobs to support her family, eventually landing steady employment at Gustavus Adolphus College as a cook and server in the school's cafeteria. It was a job she would hold for nearly four decades.

The house in which the family lived was modest and, for a time, had neither running water nor electricity. And the family lacked in many material goods. They ate well, to be sure, and had a roof over their heads. But that was about it.

Then, one day, when he was still a lad, the youngest of children, Al Annexstad, was given a piece of advice by his mother that he says has stuck with him all these years.

"She said that the Lord has dealt us a difficult hand and that we might not have a lot of the things that others have," Annexstad said. "She then told me that if I wanted to have success in life and all that goes with it that I would have to do it on my own."

And young Annexstad set out to do just that.

In the years that have passed, Annexstad joined the Owatonna-based Federated Insurance Companies, eventually rising to become the company's president, chief executive officer and

chairman of the board. Under his leadership, he has positioned Federated as one of the nation's largest and most financially secure mutual, multiple-line insurance companies.

The achievements he has made in his 45-year career with Federated has led to Annexstad's induction into both the Minnesota Business Hall of Fame and the Ernst & Young National Business Hall of Fame and his receiving of the Minnesota Business Partnership's Lifetime Achievement Award for his service to young people. He also has received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from his alma mater, Minnesota State University, Mankato, and has been awarded an honorary doctorate from Gustavus Adolphus College — the same school at which his mother worked.

Most recently, Annexstad was honored for his many achievements — and his rags-to-riches story — as one of 11 recipients of the 2010 Horatio Alger Award.

The award, sponsored by the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, is given annually to persons who have overcome great adversity and humble beginnings to achieve the American Dream and to offer their time and resources to help others in need. It is named after Horatio Alger Jr., the popular 19th-century American author who wrote novels about impoverished children who rose from humble backgrounds to great success through hard work, courage, determination and concern for others.

#### Celebrating the American Dream

Washington, D.C., is a long way from the dairy farm in Norseland, Minn. But it was to the nation's capital that Annexstad journeyed last month to be inducted into the Horatio Alger Association.

The three days of festivities began April 8 in the halls of the United States Supreme Court. There, Justice Clarence Thomas — a 1992 recipient of the Horatio Alger Award — presented medallions to this year's recipients, including former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, former Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Central Command Gen. Tommy Franks and Annexstad. That night, the new members were the guests of honor at an inaugural dinner held at the Newseum.

Friday morning kicked off with a breakfast introducing the 104 National Scholars — high school students who receive needs-based scholarships from the association — followed by a Members Forum in which the new inductees answered questions from the students. A luncheon was held that day at the U.S. State Department.

That evening, the formal induction ceremonies, emceed by association members Tom Selleck and Lou Dobbs, were held at DAR Constitution Hall.

"The whole evening was red, white and blue — honoring America," said Melody Morris, manager of membership services for the Horatio Alger Association.

The evening was highlighted with the introduction of this year's recipients and a recounting of how they had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to achieve the American Dream. Indeed, Morris said, that achievement of the American Dream is at the heart of the award itself.

Morris said that the inductee selection process for the association begins with nominations that are then reviewed by a committee before being taken to the association's board of directors for the final selection. The announcement of this year's inductees was made in December 2009.

The main criterion for the selection, Morris said, is that of overcoming adversity.

"Basically, it's the rags-to-riches story," she said. And, she added, in the case of Annexstad, he was "selected because of his adversities."

When making the announcement of Annexstad's selection in December, David Sokol, the president and CEO of the Horatio Alger Association, affirmed that view.

"We believe that adversity builds character, and Mr. Annexstad's story is no exception," Sokol said in a statement released by the association. "His life story of strength, resolve and achievement is commendable, and he will help fulfill our mission of helping other young people realize similar success."

In an interview with the Horatio Alger Association, Annexstad told of the odd jobs, often menial, that he had starting as a young boy. He mowed lawns, did farm work, worked in a creamery, cleaned sewers, worked in a hardware store, shucked acres of corn and even sold greeting cards door-to-door.

"Probably the job that built most character, as it were, was my paper route," Annexstad said. "I was able to meet a lot of folks and learned the importance of getting up early and having a lot done before most others were even up."

He described how facing the brutal prairie winds on his newspaper delivery route on winter mornings gave him time to dream of a better life one day. He didn't just hope that life would get better, but set out to do something about it.

"I dreamed of one day never being in a position again where I was dependent upon others for the quality of my life. I wanted to have what my mother told me I could have," he said. "I learned early in life that there is a big difference between a dreamer and a visionary. Dreamers are those who merely waste their days away hoping that life will get better. Visionaries, on the other hand, are those who form a clear view of what it will look like and then set about achieving it."

Even as a lad, Annexstad was a bit of a visionary. When other boys his age were out playing baseball, Annexstad couldn't play as often as he would like because he didn't own a baseball glove. So he took a job picking corn to earn enough money to buy his own glove. When he wanted a bicycle, he worked harder at his newspaper route and paid for the bicycle on an installment plan — \$1 a week — an agreement that he made with the owner of the hardware store. And the reason he wanted the bike? So he could take on a larger paper route.

During his college years at what is now Minnesota State University, Mankato, Annexstad sold furniture and worked as the evening desk clerk at a hotel to pay his own way through school.

"Because I had to pay my own way, it did take me a little longer to earn my degree," Annexstad said. "However, the education I received was enhanced by these work experiences as I learned the value of time — and sleep."

### Sharing the dream

Founded in 1947, the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans has, as its announced mission, to honor the achievements of outstanding individuals in our society who have succeeded in spite of adversity and of encouraging young people to pursue their dreams through higher education. Past recipients of the honor include former presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas; former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell; baseball hall-of-famer Henry Aaron; broadcasters Tom Brokaw and Paul Harvey, and television host and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey.

At the heart of the association is the belief that hard work, honesty and determination can conquer all obstacles.

It is a philosophy that Annexstad said he shares.

"I believe the American Dream is alive and well, of course," Annexstad said. "I suspect that people everywhere harbor dreams of a better life. Here in America we have the best opportunity for one to realize those dreams."

A big part of realizing those dreams, he said, is education.

To that end, Annexstad and Cathy, his wife of almost 50 years, have had a deep commitment to the cause of youth mentoring. The couple co-chair an annual event — The Federated Challenge — for the benefit of the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization. Since its inception, the event has raised more than \$10 million for mentoring programs.

In addition, Al and Cathy Annexstad established the Annexstad Family Foundation, a private foundation that provides college scholarships to deserving young adults who have matured through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

"My time on this earth has taught me that despite life's adversities, dreams can and do come true for those who believe that they will," Annexstad said. "My greatest reward, though, is knowing that the values of my youth still matter, that life's greatest pleasures come from helping others accomplish something that they felt was unreachable."