

Marlon Eilts – 2023 IPCF Philanthropist of the Year (Outside Twin Cities)

Each community, no matter the size, has those members who rise above to make a difference for its citizenry. These women and men are often looked to as “pillars” – those who are there to give of themselves time and time again for the betterment of their fellow humans. They care about the place they call home and want it and its residents to succeed and prosper. In the City of Pontiac, there is no person doing or giving more to that end than Marlon Eilts.



Marlon grew up in Pontiac and had the benefit of seeing numerous “pillars” give back to his community. He saw the countless ways they impacted Pontiac for the greater good. When he finished his undergrad at Illinois State University and moved back home, it was no surprise to those who knew Marlon that he was not going to sit idly by as a spectator. Marlon was going to get involved and make a difference in Pontiac just like those who had gone before him. And my, what a difference he has made.

He became an agent for COUNTRY Financial in 2005 and immediately began using his personal and agency resources for good in the Pontiac community.

He is a sponsor year after year of numerous community events including the St. Mary’s School DrawDown, Pontiac Threshermen’s Parade, Hunter Gerdes Memorial Golf Outing for St. Jude, United Way Power of the Purse, Livingston County Ag Fair, Vermillion Players Community Theatre, Pontiac District 429 Education Foundation Dueling Pianos Fundraiser, Pontiac FFA Auction, and on and on.

While writing checks is an important part of giving back to your community, Marlon’s philanthropy is so much more. Through his membership in Pontiac Rotary Club, Marlon has served on and chaired club committees, served as club president and volunteered at countless local Rotary events. Even more remarkable, through Rotary, Marlon and his wife Stacy have sponsored three foreign exchange students at Pontiac High School. He and his family have opened their home to allow these young people from overseas to get a taste of America and central Illinois. Their hospitality has also allowed Pontiac High School students to learn firsthand from these exchange students about cultures and different perspectives at an international level.

Marlon’s volunteerism extends also to First Lutheran Church, Livingston County Boys & Girls Club, Pontiac Parks & Recreation, Illinois Agricultural Association Youth Scholarship Committee and many more. The Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce recognized Marlon’s efforts in 2014 when they named him “Community Volunteer of the Year.” This was followed up by another award from the Chamber in 2016 when Marlon was named “Business Person of the Year.”

Seeing a need in the Pontiac community to encourage local entrepreneurs, Marlon founded “Happy Hedgehog Business Incubator.” Marlon describes it as a “micro-kickstart company.” To make it happen, he purchased an empty building, renovated it, furnished it, and then invited the community to use it to make their entrepreneurial dreams come true. Marlon describes Happy Hedgehog like this, “We find self-motivated people in a variety of fields and encourage them to leverage their skills to create their own businesses. Our partners support and lean on each other to provide services that are lacking within Pontiac. We want to grow from within. Supporting and highlighting local products and services is essential in the success of the community. Filling local needs with local talent is what drives us.” Happy Hedgehog is currently home to the Pontiac Phantoms Traveling Baseball Team; the Break Room, which is a co-workspace and community gathering space; and Lola’s Filipino Cooking. Lola’s has been a hugely successful restaurant that would not have been possible without Marlon’s guidance, encouragement and the Happy Hedgehog building.

Seeing the need in Pontiac for a family-friendly summer event, Marlon founded the City of Pontiac Family Fun Days. This daylong free event allows families to enjoy inflatable bounce houses, face painting, caricature drawings, fire house tour by the Pontiac Fire Department, cat and dog cuddling opportunities by the Livingston County Human Society among various activities. Concessions sold benefit local Pontiac nonprofits and youth

organizations. Family Fun Days has become an annual community tradition that has been happening for more than 10 years.

In 2018, Pontiac Junior High School wanted to purchase a 3-D printer for its STEAM program. Unfortunately, the school district lacked the funds to do so. As with anything, when Marlon hears of a need, he responds. Led by Marlon, a committee was formed to organize a “Golf for STEAM” golf outing. Donations for the event came from around the community (including Marlon himself) and at the end of the event, the school district had enough money to buy their 3-D printer.

Marlon Eilts gives back to his community through his time, treasure and talents. He is a philanthropist through and through. He loves his community and wants to do all he can to see it and the people who call it home prosper. There is no community need too great or too small that Marlon will not work tirelessly to fulfill. He is passionate about helping others succeed and live their best life and everything he has done for his community shows this to be true. He has become one of the “pillars” he looked up to all those years ago. If asked, Marlon would probably say he feels lucky to have Pontiac as his home. The truth is that Pontiac and its many institutions and people are lucky to have Marlon.

Community Service:

- Pontiac Young Professionals Group: Founding Member
- IAA Foundation Scholarship Committee: Member
- Livingston County Boys and Girls Club Board of Directors: Member
- Pontiac Rotary Club: Member, committee member and chair, past president, foreign exchange student host and sponsor (3 semesters)
- First Lutheran Church: Member and church board member
- Pontiac Heart and Soul Committee: Member
- Pontiac Farmer’s Market: Exhibitor and supporter
- Pontiac Relay for Life: Team leader

Honors and Awards:

- COUNTRY Financial All American Award (13 of the last 18 years)
- COUNTRY Financial All Star Agent (6 of the last 9 years)
- COUNTRY Financial Agent of the Month (9 times)
- Visionary Award recipient
- 2014 Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce Volunteer of the Year
- 2016 Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce Businessperson of the Year