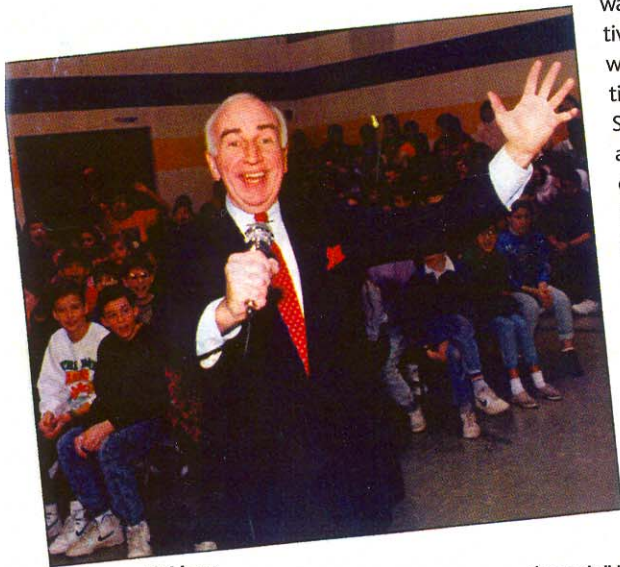


# Selling Activity



George O'Hare

Seventy-five-year-old George O'Hare '49 is grinning ear to ear so that his bushy, gray eyebrows dance above the metal frames of his glasses. Dressed in a crisp, dark suit with a bright red tie and a matching handkerchief peeking out of his breast pocket, a fit, bald O'Hare is sitting at a round table in the Alumni Association offices trying to remember which year he first met Dr. Martin Luther King.

O'Hare waves his hands in the air and says it was sometime in the mid-1960s, and then he is digging through his bag, spreading out manila folders of old newspaper clippings and photographs as he continues to speak rapidly until, suddenly, he pulls out a photograph of himself with Dr. King and black leaders in Chicago from the 1960s. O'Hare leans forward in his chair and pauses to smile proudly over the image.

"He was a beautiful man with a beautiful mind," he says of King.

O'Hare has spent decades as an adviser to many of the most renowned black leaders in the nation including King, Jesse Jackson '60, Muhammad Ali and the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington. It was O'Hare's work in the civil rights movement in Chicago that led the Rev. George Clements of the South Side to proclaim O'Hare "Black Man of the Month" in 1972. The fact that a white man had won such a distinction led to national media coverage, including a story in

Time magazine and a mention by television commentator Harry Reasoner on ABC.

O'Hare comes across as every bit the encyclopedia salesman he once was at Sears. Later as an executive at the company, he began work as an activist in his spare time. After he retired from Sears in 1984, O'Hare served as a senior citizen adviser to several Illinois politicians, and today he hosts a cable talk show and travels across northern Illinois as a motivational speaker. "I will never retire," he declares.

O'Hare speaks to senior citizens, advising them to stay active, and he also has spoken to 900,000 kids in 175 Chicago public schools. "I tell them about my own life and what I went

through," he says.

O'Hare says he was brought up as a "white, Irish-Catholic racist" on the West Side of Chicago. Born in 1927, O'Hare lost his mother and father when he was still a child, and he was raised by his grandmother and then his uncle, Husk O'Hare, an orchestra and big band leader in Chicago. Husk opened his radio broadcasts with phrases like, "Always remember a smile is worth a million dollars, and it doesn't cost a penny," and liked to remind young George to be "always positive, always positive."

The message stuck with O'Hare, and today he is constantly spouting platitudes with such gusto, that, coming from him, they seem genuine, if not original – sayings like, "Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative," a line from the Johnny Mercer song that O'Hare includes on all his business cards and stationery.

O'Hare admits he gets ticked off sometimes, especially when someone treats him unfairly. "It's difficult to be nice to people," he says.

But that leads quickly into another platitude. "I call it, 'Fake it till you make it,'" he says, which means, more or less, ignore the bad stuff people can do and live life the way you want to.

It's a lesson O'Hare says he learned from his friend, black comedian and activist Dick Gregory, who got his big break in the early 1960s when Hugh Hefner '49 DSSWV hired Gregory to perform before largely white crowds at the Playboy Club in Chicago.

O'Hare met Gregory at an event in which Gregory was speaking about racial equality. He sensitized O'Hare to the struggle of blacks and introduced him to King. Soon after, O'Hare was advising King on public relations strategies in Chicago.

It wasn't always easy for O'Hare to work for King. Once before a march led by King on the southwest side of Chicago, O'Hare became afraid. "I didn't want to march because you get hit with a brick," he remembers. "I had a job at Sears and three kids."

King, who knew of O'Hare's fears, took the man aside and told him to stay behind and answer the phones.

Later, King assigned O'Hare to work with Jesse Jackson, then a rising star in the civil rights movement. O'Hare would visit Jackson's Chicago home and often received calls from the civil rights leader prodding him to come to a meeting. "He knows more about press than any PR person does," O'Hare says of Jackson. "He's on stage every day of his life."

O'Hare then met Harold Washington in the 1970s and campaigned for him when he ran for mayor of Chicago (Washington was elected the city's first black mayor). O'Hare calls Washington, who died in 1987 during his second term, "cheerful" and "articulate." "He was just the kind of guy you wanted as your grandfather," O'Hare says.

In the 1970s O'Hare was introduced to Muhammad Ali by Gregory, who had published a book on healthy eating and was advising the boxer on his diet (Gregory had already persuaded O'Hare to become a vegetarian). When Gregory couldn't be with Ali, he asked O'Hare to take his place. O'Hare traveled with Ali to Africa for some fights when Ali was on the comeback trail. O'Hare recently visited Ali with Gregory and was disappointed to see some fat on the former heavyweight champion.

"He's only 60 years old," O'Hare says. "He can change and get in shape."

O'Hare, who was on the UI swim team as a student, keeps himself in shape by swimming; last year he won 12 gold medals in Senior Olympic competitions. He enjoyed competing, but swimming is too much of a solitary activity for a man who is used to being at the center of a crowd.

"Swimming is very boring work because you're not part of a team," O'Hare says, raising his eyebrows. "I like to be part of a team."

— Scott Spilky