Personable. Warm. Nice. Dedicated. Brilliant. Caring. Charismatic. Humble. In short, “Nobody’s perfect, but he was close,” explained Carmeline Worley about her husband, Ed Worley. Ed was the founding Executive Director of the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. And, for almost 20 years, the Food Bank became his incredible passion.

In 1979, Ed found himself looking for a new career path, just as the other founders of the Food Bank found themselves in need of an Executive Director. “Rollie Smith came to Ed and said, ‘Look we’re working on this.’ He asked Ed to help and Ed said, ‘sure.’ There was no Food Bank then, it was just them getting together and talking about it,” explained Carm.

In November 1979, Ben Hauserman, another of the Food Bank’s founders, launched the official discussion to hire Ed as the Executive Director of the Food Bank. On November 5, 1979, Ed was hired to work on a two-year commitment. And work he did, even without being paid until funding came through in January 1980. Ed still hit the ground running, and the rest was history.

Less than a month later, Ed and his co-founders discovered the Meyer Dairy building and started the process of preparing it to house the Food Bank. “It wasn’t like you could just move food in,” Carm explained. “You had to clean and paint. It was a mess! Even my older sister was there painting. We were all there.”

For Ed and his family, the Food Bank was almost like the family business. “The Food Bank was like another person in our family,” Carm explained, remembering fondly the many family vacations they took, always stopping to visit other Food Banks. When Ed and Carm got married, they even honeymooned in Chicago because Ed had an important meeting about the Food Bank. But, Carm never minded. She understood then, as she does today, how committed Ed was to feeding people. “His vision was that everybody had the right to food. And that all human life was dignified and should be treated with dignity.”

Ed treated every person he met with dignity, from the clients served by the Food Bank to the people sitting in the Boardroom. “He wanted to know you,” explained Jedene Westmoreland, the Food Bank’s longest-running employee, who originally worked for Ed. “He remembered everything. Even though he was the director, he felt like your coworker.”

“He was one of the most caring people I know. His passion for the Food Bank and the people we served, as well as the people who worked here, was amazing. His heart was really in the right place,” explained John Nestor, a former Food Bank Board Chair.
But Ed wasn’t just compassionate and personable. He was also extremely dedicated. For about a year during his career at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, Ed also stepped up to the plate and took on the role as Interim Director of Second Harvest, which would eventually become Feeding America, the national association of food banks, an undertaking that cannot be overstated.

“He was flying back and forth,” explained Carm. “I was dropping him off and picking him up at the airport. He was the full director here and there.” At the time, Ed and Carm had three teenage daughters at home, which made this time even more chaotic for their family. But even then, Carm said, a brightness coming to her eyes, “he did an amazing job. He was so good and he cared so much. He just worked his heart out.”

Bill Coquillette, another founder of the organization, and a Board member at the time, isn’t sure how Ed was able to handle both roles. “Running Second Harvest was an extremely burdensome obligation,” he explained. “He was always very composed and he never complained about it. It was amazing how he could do both things.”

Although offered the Director role at Second Harvest, Ed decided that he – and his family – would stay in Cleveland. So, after more than a year of flying back and forth from Chicago, Ed returned full time to Cleveland and to his home at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank.

There, Ed worked to fulfill his vision. As Carm explained, Ed felt he wouldn’t be successful until the Food Bank put itself out of business, when there were no more pounds left to distribute or people in need to serve.

“He had a vision and the passion came along, too,” explained John Nestor, a smile spreading across his face. “It was fun to be with him. I admired his mind and how he thought about things. He had some plans for the Food Bank and how we were going to get over the next hurdle.”

Ed’s extraordinary mind is what helped him create a strong vision for the Food Bank and food banking as a whole. “He just knew everything about food banking and wanted to share it wherever he could,” Carm explained. And, as Bill Coquillette wrote in a beautiful eulogy about Ed, “I have told people for years I never had a client smarter than Ed Worley. Ed was our compass on many occasions. The combination of brainpower and this moral compass gave Ed a remarkable ability to figure out the moral implications of a complex and difficult
situation. He had the intellectual discipline, courage, and strength of character to recognize and face moral choices openly and squarely and then do the right thing.”

Ed did the right thing in every situation he was presented with. Jedene remembers, “You could mess up an order and feel terrible. You’d think ‘Oh, no, I’m going to get fired.’ And Ed would say, ‘I’m glad we caught this before it got out, and next time, we’re just going to do a better job.’” Ed’s gentle calmness was present always. Even after his passing in 1999, his calming spirit remained in the hearts of the people who knew him.

“Everybody felt it was a big loss,” explained Bill Coquillette, “It came as a shock to people.” Beyond working with Ed for two decades, Bill and Ed had become friends.

“People were devastated,” explained John Nestor. “He’d been the only one that was there. He had hired all of those people. There wasn’t anyone else even close to him. It was a real sense of loss.” As Carm explained, by 1999, Ed had become Mr. Food Bank, as people affectionately called him.

But, despite the unimaginable loss of their humble and fearless leader, the team at the Food Bank continued to press forward. Why? Simply, it’s what Ed would have wanted. “What held everyone together was their alliance with Ed,” John said. “Everyone felt an obligation because of who he was, even before he died.”

“You want to do a good job,” Jedene Westmoreland explained, “not only because it’s the right thing to do, but you wanted to do a good job because Ed was at the top. You wanted him to shine.” And now, two decades later, the Food Bank is shining because of the strong foundation that Ed set in place for the future. When he passed, he was in the process of searching for a new building for the Food Bank. The operation had long outgrown the facilities on East 27th and Payne Avenue. “Even the day he died,” Carm explained, “he was ready to find a new site.”

If Ed could see the Food Bank now, Bill explained, “I think he would be amazed by the infrastructure that the Food Bank has today, the size, the freezer, the storage capacity. It’s several steps up from what we had in the beginning.” But even beyond the capacity of the Food Bank, he’d be proud of the staff and Board working tirelessly to ensure the people served by the Food Bank are served with dignity.

“His love of people and giving people dignity. That was a big thing for him,” explained Carm. She has a knack for simply stating the power and presence of Ed. “I can’t put Ed in a couple words. His being was too good, but you’d never know. He was a normal guy. So smart, so wise, so good.”

That he was. Ed Worley was a good man. And it’s all of the other things about him that made him that way – his caring, his intelligence, and his strong moral compass. The Greater Cleveland Food Bank and all the people served, the food banking industry, and every person who had the pleasure of knowing him are better because of Ed.