

# CRAIN'S

CHICAGO BUSINESS.

Private Intelligence

## You've cashed out your startup. Now what do you do?

By H. Lee Murphy



Credit: Kellie Bucci

The cottage at Bunker Hill Farms has a half-dozen suites for guests.

In the internet age, it's become common for fast-starting entrepreneurs to cash out early with big-bucks buyouts. But what do they do then?

Some business owners stay on to run their old firms. Others go looking for their next startup. Any number will establish family investment offices and remake themselves as venture capitalists.

In the case of Mike Domek, he turned to a dedication to charitable causes — with a twist.

Domek, 54, is president and owner of Bunker Hill Farms and its nonprofit sponsor, Bunker Hill Charities, on a wide swath of rural land west of Woodstock. It's essentially a 450-acre resort with one of the most private golf courses anywhere. On a busy day, a couple of dozen visitors might tee up. Spread around the property are a small lodge, a cottage, and lots of trails for hiking and other activities, including fishing, skeet shooting and live outdoor music concerts.

The price for all this privacy — the cottage has a mere half-dozen suites for guests, and the lodge isn't any bigger — is steep. The per-person daily rate runs more than \$1,500, including room and board, with a hired chef who oversees the kitchen, plus golf and the run of the entire place. But Domek, who has spent more than a decade planning all this and personally approves all fundraising events, doesn't pocket any money. All profits are turned over to various charities. One example: Barrington Children's Charities has charged donors \$9,000 for a round of golf for a foursome.



"We've got lots of land here, but I didn't want large numbers of visitors overrunning the place," says Domek, who rarely hosts more than two-dozen people at a time. "I wanted an experience that was very exclusive and ultra-private. A 200-person wedding is not for us."

Domek figures he gets just 400 to 500 visitors a year at Bunker Hill. There are country clubs for golf and tennis around Chicago that get that many in a day.

He reports he has contributed a total of \$2.3 million to charitable causes in the past decade. The biggest fundraiser each year is an outdoor concert that has featured headliners such as Cheap Trick, Steven Tyler and REO Speedwagon.

It's taken a sizable bankroll to finance all this investment, and Domek came armed with just that. Raised in Woodstock, the son of a trucking company owner, he dropped out of Southern Illinois University a year before graduation. As a student, he had noticed friends and acquaintances hungry for tickets to certain events, so he decided to create his own pipeline, starting the company VIP Tour with a toll-free phone set up in his off-campus apartment. It was 1992, before the internet became ubiquitous.



Credit: Kellie Bucci

Mike Domek, president and owner of Bunker Hill Farms and Bunker Hill Charities

big for me."

Later he moved back to Woodstock, setting up his ticket business with an old [Kaypro](#) computer in a two-bedroom apartment. He made some noise in 1997 when he chartered a plane to fly 350 customers to the Super Bowl. Soon after, he had a website and a new name, TicketsNow.com. Annual revenues zoomed from \$16 million to \$52 million in a single year, then jumped to \$142 million the year after.

By 2005, TicketsNow.com had \$250 million in annual sales and 250 employees. Inc. Magazine [featured the company](#) on its list of the world's greatest businesses started for less than \$1,000. Domek took on some private-equity partners, though he kept control of 60% of the company's stock. He hired increasingly sophisticated staffers, including a chief financial officer, but even so, he admitted "the company had gotten too

He sold out to the most likely suitor: Ticketmaster Entertainment, which paid \$265 million for TicketsNow.com in 2008. Domek, who had been working 60- and 80-hour weeks, had three young boys at home with his wife and, at age 38, suddenly had nothing to do. He tried setting up his own family office for a while, but quickly grew disillusioned with that.

"When you're running a family office, by the time a deal gets offered to you, all the smart money has turned it down," Domek says. Soon he began amassing piecemeal the acreage that would grow into Bunker Hill, most of it reclaimed from an old dairy farm beside wetlands. It was no small undertaking: He dug a five-acre, 50-foot-deep lake, planted hundreds of trees and moved 1 million cubic yards of soil to build the golf course and adjacent ski hill. For a time, he toyed with the idea of reserving the club for just himself and friends. But then the charitable impulse kicked in.

Harry Vignocchi, the Wauconda-based landscape architect who laid out both the golf course and surrounding facilities, has designed clubs such as Bull Valley in Woodstock and Makray Memorial in Barrington, but says Bunker Hill was perhaps his most challenging assignment of all.

"Some of the land was oak savannas, some of it cornfields, and it was pretty raw," Vignocchi says. "Mike had lots of ideas for what he wanted to include on all that land and the project turned into one big puzzle, though it was a lot of fun."

The work on Bunker Hill has been ongoing for nearly 15 years now and Domek, who has no plans to include housing on the land, admits he's not yet finished.

"It's moved ahead in slow motion," he says. "But I worked in the tech world in fast motion for 20 years. This pace suits me now."