

# Faith in action: Church deacon harnesses business skills to serve those in need

Lou Primozic's career began in the for-profit sector, where growth is measured by financial performance and customer retention. In later years, Primozic harnessed his results-oriented background in business for a changemaking enterprise that has supporters exclaiming, "I'm in!"

Primozic is founder of Brooklyn Heights-based I'm In Ministry, a Cleveland charity that refurbishes donations from the public—such as bedding, furniture, food and clothing—and distributes them to support the homeless, displaced families, low-income seniors, and other struggling populations in Cuyahoga County.

In serving thousands of individuals and families over the years, I'm in Ministry has earned the reputation as a problem-solver, says Primozic, a deacon in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland.



*Deacon Lou Primozic's organization supports the homeless, displaced families, low-income elderly, and other struggling populations in Cuyahoga County*



*"I'm In Ministry" Truck*

"I understand feasibility and how to build an organization," Primozic says, "When I talked about the idea for I'm In Ministry, people said 'I'm in,' not even knowing the organizational model. That's how the name came out."

I'm In Ministry is funded entirely by private donations, making the charity a "disruptor" within a nonprofit space largely reliant on government dollars, says Primozic.

Privately sourced dollars go directly to those facing hardship—the charity moves 500 pieces of repurposed furniture every week, via a distribution channel powered by a dedicated volunteer group.

Since its launch 12 years ago, I'm In Ministry has built a robust ecosystem of area nonprofits and businesses with which to collaborate, including Cleveland Clinic, Greater Cleveland Food Bank, and University Hospitals Community Outreach. These organizations ensure a steady stream of goods for citizens in need, says Primozic.

*"I saved my best startup for last," Primozic says. "This is the true nature of commitment to service. Even before the deaconship, I'm this poor kid from Cleveland, so I understood what it's like. We had no car and lived with my grandparents. We were working poor outside of the basic needs."*

"What helps is we don't compete for funding with other organizations, so they're willing to partner with us," Primozic says. "And 80% of the furniture we bring in would have been in a landfill. I never thought we'd have such a strong environmental impact."

Donated clothing and food round out material goods, although the group's work does not stop there, adds Primozic.

I'm In Ministry also refers individuals to regional sober living houses, while assisting in "safe surrenders" for people with misdemeanor or non-violent felony warrants.

Volunteers drive trucks, provide financial support, or prepare donations for distribution. Some of Primozic's helpers clock in four days a week—a generosity more akin to a spiritual calling, the charity founder says he believes.

"We are all called to do something—this is about doing something for someone you'll probably never get to know," says Primozic. "I could not do what I do without these volunteers."



*St. Michael's School Students load an I'm In Ministry truck with donations*

## The best for last

Primozic's poor, working-class background in the Collinwood neighborhood became a spark for a lifelong dedication to service, he says. After attending Hiram College, his professional career transitioned from municipal communications to consulting work for a national accounting firm.

The self-proclaimed "serial entrepreneur" later started Orion Consulting, a healthcare- and government-focused company that ballooned to 200 employees under Primozic's leadership. Even during his startup days, he had designs on the ministry, entering St. Mary's Seminary in 2000.

Primozic's nearly two decades as a deacon coincided with the birth of I'm In Ministry. The nonprofit's very existence is part of the reason Primozic took the vow, he notes.

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## Man on a mission

Distribution and advocacy marked the nonprofit's early years. Furniture re-distribution followed, with the charity eventually reaching upwards of 10,000 recipients annually.

Among the most needful populations aided by Primozic's group are pregnant and parenting women assisted by Cleveland nonprofit Zelig's Home. I'm In Ministry provides the organization with refurbished furniture for host homes in Lakewood and Garfield Heights—a beautification that uplifts women transitioning from lives of trauma, abuse, and generational poverty.

"Our mission aligns with I'm In Ministry, because we are giving people a safe space so they can get back on their feet," says Christina Jones, a programs, outreach, and intake manager for Zelig's Home. "To say this work is critical is an understatement."

Although Jones does not know Primozic personally, she's nonetheless appreciative of the energy he brings to his work.

"He's 100% dedicated to the cause, and to Zelig's Home's goal of helping women," Jones says. "It's never transactional with Deacon Lou—he's always invested in meeting the needs of our moms."

I'm In Ministry continues to have a direct and immediate impact on the lives of local community members, Primozic says. The mission was briefly derailed during the start of COVID, when the nonprofit went from delivering 90,000 pounds of food a month to zero.

Primozic tapped into his deep logistical knowledge during the crisis—a background that still helps him cut through bureaucratic red tape.

"We have to maximize all we do, because we can't be everywhere," Primozic says. "You can plan and think things through, then get an emergency phone call where you have to take care of a family. It's all about prioritizing."



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