

# Famed Flashbacks

## Big Fish in a turbulent supply chain pond

*Simpson generates appeal for being the real deal*

By Fred W. Crans

**SCHAUMBURG, IL (April 22, 2024)** – Hollywood director Tim Burton, who brought such iconic character-driven films to theaters and pop culture, such as “Batman” (1989), “Edward Scissorhands” (1990) and “The Nightmare Before Christmas” (1993), released another film highlighting a poignant character in 2004. In 2004 a picture directed by Tim Burton was released. The picture’s central character was a man named Edward Bloom (played by Ewan McGregor as a young man and Albert Finney as an older man), a traveling salesman who spent his entire life spinning fantastic yarns to his family and friends. These yarns seemed so fantastic that few believe they could possibly have been true.



Robert A. Simpson, Bellwether Class of 2012

Bloom’s character was so overwhelming that his own son Will felt invisible, even at his own wedding, whenever his father was around.

Edward Bloom was The Big Fish.

So too, in many respects, is Bob Simpson, Bellwether Class of 2012, in the Healthcare Supply Chain Leadership Hall of Fame. Simpson’s brief profile is innocuous enough:

Since the late 1970s, Robert A. Simpson has excelled in just about every facet of the healthcare supply chain industry, from provider to government agency to group purchasing organization to supplier to association leadership to clinical charity activities and has developed university curricula on healthcare operations. He currently applies his vast experience and skills to leading a growing IDN, a regional collective of healthcare systems in Florida and a successful consolidated service center that works with organizations inside and outside of healthcare as well as a collegiate internship program to mentor healthcare industry-bound students.

While everything in the brief profile is true, it's sort of like saying, "The Mona Lisa is a portrait of an Italian woman."

It leaves a lot out that can be found in his full profile.

First off, you never meet Bob Simpson, you **experience** him. When Bob Simpson walks into a room, he doesn't light it up; it tilts in his direction. He literally fills it all the way up. Bob is not a quiet guy, and he is not without opinions.

Encountering Bob Simpson is like encountering former Indiana and Texas Tech basketball coach Bob Knight: You better have your [stuff] together or he will run over you. I know. I've gotten into it with both guys and have been lucky enough to hold my own.

Alas, too many people over the years have been quietly or openly resentful of him.

When I first met Bob, I must admit, I was one of the "Who does this guy think he is?" group. The venue was a seminar in Chicago in the mid-1980s. I was a speaker, along with my friend Shaya Romey, the great Charles Housley (Bellwether Class of 2008) and Bob Simpson. He was from a big hospital in Boston, I was from a big hospital in Canton, Ohio.

The two are not equal.

I guess you could say I was suffering from the same thing as Edward Bloom's son – Identity Envy.

As the story in the movie unwinds, Edward Bloom's son learns more and more about his father. The same was true with me and Bob. Over the years, I spent more and more time talking with him. He was always outgoing and kind. He never talked down to me.

Then, the epiphany. I spent two days with him at LeeSar's Centralized Services Center. Going up the stairs, I saw artwork done by local grade schoolers who had been visitors and who Bob had helped via one of the many charities he supported. I walked into his office, which I would estimate to have been about 400 square feet and spotted numerous pictures of Simpson with Mother Theresa and former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill among others. My first thought was, "I've lived in apartments smaller than this."

Bob took me on the tour of his shiny new facility, and what I noticed was not so much the state-of-the-art layout, but rather the way Bob related to the workers. They all seemed to love him and he, them.

On the way to lunch, Bob pointed out the bridge that one of his warehouse workers was living under when he met him. He told me about the incentives he put in employment contracts, such as rewards for perfect attendance. He told me how he threw picnics and parties for the staff and the local EMTs.

And then, he told me the one thing that bonded us forever together and erased all doubts about his credibility.

Bob Simpson had served two tours in Vietnam as an Army medic. I had served one tour in Vietnam as a combat corpsman (medic) with the Marines.

Generally speaking, people who have been in combat judge others based upon a single, overarching criterion: "Would I want this guy in a fighting hole (foxhole if you were in the Army) with me when the enemies are coming over the hill?"

Over the years, I have known literally thousands of folks in healthcare, many of whom are in what I love to characterize as the "Ain't I Great Society" folks who don't need anyone else's approval because they have themselves.

Bob Simpson is not one of those people.

Bob Simpson is the Real Deal.

Eventually, Edward Bloom's son learns that most of the stories his father told were mostly true, which is not surprising. Great storytellers know that they have to embellish at least somewhat to get the most out of the treatment.

I've told a lot of stories over the years. Most of them are mostly true, all are at least partly true, and a few are 100% true.

The story of Bob Simpson is 100% true. He is the Healthcare Supply Chain's Big Fish.

Now there's a story about Bob Simpson, Tom Hughes (Bellwether Class of 2012) and an elephant on the loading dock that I'm still investigating. That one may involve some embellishment.

Hats off to you, Bob. I am honored to call you my friend.

**Editor's Note:** *Bellwether League Foundation debuts next month the Robert A. Simpson Scholarship that recognizes career and professional mentoring for supply chain advancement. For initial information, visit BLF's "Philanthropy" page on <https://www.bellwetherleague.org/>.*

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