



## *Best of America: America's Best Boss*

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By JOE RHODES

When Leonard Abess was a boy, he spent his summers and after-school hours working in the print shop of his father's bank, the City National Bank of Miami, doing odd jobs, running errands, getting to know the people who kept his family's business going— the tellers, the security guards, the accountants and the clerks. He was as comfortable with them as he was in his own home. They all felt like family to him.



Geneva Lawson started working in the City National print shop 51 years ago, when Leonard was nine years old. She remembers how happy and diligent he was, never acting as if being there was a penance, the obligation of a privileged child. He always pitched in, wherever he was needed, without anyone having to ask. "The whole family is like that," Geneva Lawson would say, "They are just kind, generous good-natured people."

Which is why she was not surprised – okay, maybe a little – when Leonard Abess, who rescued his father's company from bankruptcy in 1985 and then sold controlling interest to a Spanish bank last November, decided that, rather than keep his \$60 million profit from the sale, he would re-distribute the money, all of it, to his employees. There was no press conference, no public announcement, only an internal memo. All 399 employees, along with 72 retirees, would be getting one-time bonuses, based on how long they'd been at the bank. Some of them received bonuses of over \$100,000.

"When I checked my balance that night," Geneva Lawson says, "I said somebody better take a look at this, because I think they've made a mistake."

In an era when bankers are being vilified as scoundrels and thieves, it did not take long for word of Leonard Abess' stunning benevolence to get out. He seemed embarrassed by the

unsolicited attention, genuinely taken aback by the sudden flood of media requests, most of which he politely declined. "I never once thought this success was about me," he told ABC News. "And I sure as heck didn't need the money."

When he was invited to the White House, as a special guest at President Obama's Congressional Address in January, Abess asked if he could bring one of his employees along. Which is how Geneva Lawson, 72 years old, now working as a safety deposit box custodian, the woman who gives customers their keys and escorts them to the vault, found herself meeting the President and First Lady, touring the Capitol, sitting in the Gallery of the House of Representatives, next to Leonard Abess. She still can't believe it.

"I'm just an ordinary worker with a high school education," she says. "I had no idea anything like this could happen."

"What you've got to understand is that we'd have been proud of Mr. Abess even if he hadn't given us this money," she says. "If you're a good worker, you have a job here practically for life. It's just a lovely place to work."

Geneva Lawson used part of her bonus to buy a car, "not a fancy car" and will put the rest of it in a savings plan, security for her retirement, whenever that comes. There are

471 other employees who are just as grateful, just as proud of their boss.

"It's just so unheard of in this day and age," says Gwen Abell, manager of City National's North Miami branch., whose husband died a few days after the bonuses went out. He lived long enough to know that his family would have enough money to be secure. Gwen Abell fights back tears talking about what Leonard Abess has done.

"It's just so unheard of in his day and age, with all these banks having problems," she says. "You heard swells with pride when you see him standing up there with the President and the Congress acknowledging him.

It felt like we were all up there with him."

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