Charles and Lynn Schusterman find no downside in lives based on family and the responsibility that comes with success.

Charles Schusterman looks out the window of his 20th-floor conference room in downtown Tulsa. Right over there is where he spent much of his childhood—in a poor neighborhood on the north side. His family home is long gone, torn down with the rest of the neighborhood to make way for a public housing project.

Schusterman has come a long way since those early years. He is now one of the nation's most successful independent oil and gas producers. With his wife, Lynn, he has created a far-ranging philanthropic foundation that currently is valued at $50 million and growing.

"I'm fortunate to have had that range in my life," he says.

A compact, youthful-looking man with white hair, Charles is in shirt sleeves. In recent years, that is almost the only way one sees him, summer or winter. He has developed a physical intolerance to heat—a side effect of his treatment for leukemia. He experiences severe pain as tem-
temperatures rise above 70 degrees. Often he holds a cup of ice water to cool his hands.

Lynn joins her husband in the conference room to provide her perspective on family and philanthropy. A petite, pretty woman, she is deeply involved in the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

A theme quickly emerges from their reminiscences—responsibility. To their family. Their employees. Their city and state. Members of their faith. Those less fortunate—especially children. Making a difference is something they think about continuously. Lynn says she tries to live her life so she has no regrets. Charles talks about the obligations that financial success brings.

Charles already had graduated from OU and launched his career when he and Lynn first met—on a blind date arranged by a mutual friend. Charles had been working on a well and was three-and-a-half hours late arriving at Lynn’s Oklahoma City home. Even so, Lynn recalls being quite impressed with the young man from Tulsa.

On a later date, Charles took her along while he solicited contributions for the United Jewish Appeal. “I could see that he was a fair and compassionate person,” Lynn recalls. “My father always felt strongly that one should help the less fortunate. I saw that same quality in Charlie.”

Charles insists that he experienced very little discrimination as a Jewish youngster growing up in Tulsa. The city has always had a strong Jewish community that is well integrated into the community at large.

Lynn feels differently about her growing-up years in Oklahoma City. Even though her parents belonged to the Oklahoma City Golf and Country Club, the city was still fairly segregated into Jewish and non-Jewish enclaves. Most social clubs were barred to Jews. “I felt different,” Lynn says.

Living through the era of the Holocaust has had a profound effect on Lynn. “The Holocaust helped me discover who I am,” she explains. “I’ve always thought about those broken families and people who didn’t have the same opportunities that Charlie and I have had to be parents and see our children grow up.

“Family is the most important thing in the world,” she adds.

Charles nods in agreement. He admits, however, that with the lure of a career he genuinely loved always tugging at him, it would have been easy to neglect the home front. He credits Lynn with “supplying the discipline” when it came to family matters.

While their three children were growing up, Lynn insisted that the family eat together every night. If the children had sports activities, dinner was delayed until the last game was over. And no family vacation was ever canceled because of a business crisis.

The children and I spent a lot of time waiting in the car while Charlie made phone calls,” she adds with a laugh, “but we always went.”

The couple recalls a particular family vacation to the former Soviet Union in 1986. They were able to make contact with members of the Leningrad Jewish community, which in those Iron Curtain days was operating underground. Son Jay helped his dad smuggle in books. Lynn and daughter Stacy wore multiple pairs of panty hose—a valuable black-market commodity—which they peeled off and gave away. They saw firsthand the terrible conditions under which Russian Jews were living.

The family set sail from Leningrad on July third. On the Fourth of July, the captain of the Norwegian liner ordered the Stars and Stripes to be flown, and the Americans on board gathered to sing “God Bless America.” Charles tells about the experience with tears in his eyes. It was a beautiful, sunny day. The flag of the country he loved flew overhead. He thought about the desperate plight of Russian Jews they had left behind. “And I thought of how lucky we were to be born in this great big, wonderful country—to live in the wonderful city of Tulsa.”

“That trip to Russia is part of why I do what I do,” says Lynn, who has been back to Eastern Europe many times since. Now that the children are
grown, she spends a sizable portion of her life volunteering for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a humanitarian organization that assists impoverished Jews and other people around the world. "I want these people to see that there's another human being who is willing to stand up for them and work for them. They experienced the Holocaust and suffered persecution beyond imagination, yet they are brave enough to be Jews again."

Charles' illness has not kept him from his business, and he still works every day at the company he founded, Samson Investment Co. The company name honors his late father, Sam Schusterman, a Russian immigrant who struggled to make ends meet at his oil field salvage business in Depression-era Tulsa.

While one must have the skills to take advantage of opportunities, there is an element of luck in success, Charles says. And timing is important. Luck, skill and timing were never in sync for his father, but they all came together for Charles in the early 1970s.

"That was when I saw that the world supply of oil was starting to bump up against demand, and it looked like the price was going to go up," he recalls. "So I decided to make a big bet."

The bet involved raising the necessary financing and buying all of Amerada Hess' oil production in California. It paid off big time. Charles recalls the moment he got the news. At 4 o'clock on an October afternoon in 1973, while waiting for a flight in the San Francisco airport, he called his office and learned that the price of oil had tripled as a result of the Arab oil embargo against the United States. That was the turning point, Charles says. "For the first time in my career, I would have extra funds." During the flight to Los Angeles, he planned how he was going to leverage those funds and drew an organizational chart for the people he was going to hire. And even though his company was involved only in marginal oil production and did not "have a single cubic foot of gas," he decided to convert Samson into a "fairly deep, technologically sophisticated company" that drilled for natural gas.

"Gas was under exploited," he explains. "There was money to be made."

Samson is now the largest natural gas producer headquartered in Oklahoma, with operations in 16 states and three foreign countries. After 40 years in the oil and gas business, profit is still the bottom line for Charles, but making more money is not what keeps him interested.

"What excites me now is providing capital for the people who work for me to enhance their careers," he says. "The pleasure of seeing someone's concept work is more interesting than seeing the money flow in."

More and more, however, he is devoting his time to the Schusterman Family Foundation and gradually passing leadership of the company to senior management, including his daughter, Stacy.

Charles and Lynn formed the foundation in 1987 to support Oklahoma-based, non-sectarian charitable groups that focus on education, children and community service. The foundation also funds programs that enhance Jewish life locally, nationally and internationally.

"We provide resources that help people accomplish more than they would have otherwise," Charles says. Examples of Oklahoma organizations that have benefited from Schusterman Family Foundation grants are the Parent Child Center in Tulsa, Planned Parenthood, the Tulsa City-County Library System and the Oklahoma School for Science and Mathematics.

The foundation also supports the
Israel Science and Arts Academy, which shares with the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics an ethics curriculum that stresses leadership and community service. “We want to help the students understand that because they’ve had the opportunity to attend these world-class schools, they have a responsibility to give something back,” Charles says.

In addition to the Israeli school, the foundation supports a wide range of Jewish humanitarian projects brought to the foundation board by Lynn.

“We can’t help everyone,” Charles says, “but we can target organizations and ideas that will have the most impact on society as a whole.”

The University of Oklahoma also has benefited from the Schusterman Family Foundation, which is providing seed money for the OU-based Energy Institute of the Americas, a hemispheric organization formed to address the issues raised by the growing economic interdependency of the Americas. The EIA complements OU’s growing emphasis on international programs, Charles points out. “President Boren is a great leader in this area,” he adds.

The Schustermans also have endowed the Schusterman-Josey Chair in Judaic Studies, which honors Charles’ and Lynn’s fathers. “The Jewish people have a unique history,” Charles says, “and it’s important for people to understand and learn from that history. For diversity to work in this country, we need acceptance and understanding.”

Charles is a great believer in long-term goals. His illness has not changed that. His family, foundation and business all will live beyond him, he explains, as will the good that is done by the foundation.

When he was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia in 1983, he was told that the average life expectancy for those with the disease was about three years, and there was no effective treatment.

Charles says that like everyone diagnosed with a serious illness, he found himself asking “Why me?” He came to realize the answer to that question was another question: “Why not me?” As a member of the human race, he was as likely a choice as anyone to contract leukemia.

“My answer gave me clarity, peace of mind and, in turn, the ability to begin taking charge of the new situation in my life,” Charles says.

He has participated in two experimental protocols since that time and is still involved in one at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. The protocols proved to be the first breakthrough in the treatment of leukemia and are now standard treatment for the disease. Obviously, Charles has had excellent results—14 years have passed since the leukemia was diagnosed.

The treatment has affected his lungs, however; and the intolerance to heat began about three years ago. Until that time, he had kept his illness confidential. “But there’s no way I can walk around in the middle of winter in shirt sleeves without offering some explanation,” he says. He admits that the condition is a true disability and limits his activities.

Charles says that Lynn has played a major role in his continuing survival and calls her his “primary caregiver.” They have fought the battle together. He has lived to know his grandchildren.

When asked about the proudest moment in his life, he explains that there have been six of them—when his grandchildren were born. “And seeing my children be terrific parents,” he adds.

All six Schusterman grandchildren are girls. Hal and his Israeli wife live in Israel and celebrated the birth of their second daughter in May. Jay, his wife, and their two little girls make their home in Boulder, Colorado. Stacy and her husband, Steven Dow, had their second daughter in February. Their daughter, three-year-old Abby, is the senior grandchild.

Stacy and her family have Shabbat dinner with her parents every Friday evening. On the table is a tsedakah—or charity box. “Abby puts money in the box every week to learn how we help the less fortunate,” Lynn says. “Already at age three, she is learning about charity and helping others.”

Charles was honored last November with the 1966 National Jewish Humanitarian Award from the National Jewish Center for Immunology and Respiratory Medicine in Denver, where he receives treatment for his damaged lungs. In his acceptance speech, he explained the various strategies he has used in battling his disease, including maintaining a positive mental attitude.

Charles admits that no one knows how effective a positive mental attitude really is in fighting disease, but it “has no downside, and it’s a better way to live life.”

Lynn and Charles Schusterman accept a plaque from Tulsa’s Parent-Child Center, given in appreciation for the support of the Schusterman Family Foundation.