IN CONTRAST TO THE MYTH OF the “greedy, heartless landlord,” members of the property management industry are known for their altruism. In fact, they are dedicated to serving the people who reside in their buildings. Besides providing safe and clean places to live, property managers regularly engage in charitable activities that benefit their tenants and the communities in which they live.

Skyline Apartment REIT is one of the largest owners and managers of multi-residential real estate in Canada. Skyline Group of Companies (Skyline) exclusively supports the REIT with property management, asset management and wealth management functions through three separate businesses.

Skyline exemplifies philanthropy within the property management industry, as it has made charity a central tenet of its operations and business philosophy. Management has committed to engaging in charitable initiatives within its buildings’ communities, and has helped to improve its tenants’ lives.

Building a charitable base
In 2003, Skyline purchased four apartment buildings in a disadvantaged area of Guelph. The buildings and neighbourhood were both in need of attention and care. As a relatively new landlord, Skyline wanted to upgrade its newly purchased buildings and improve its tenants’ quality of life. Around this time, ownership was introduced to Onward Willow — BetterBeginnings, BetterFutures (www.onwardwillowbetterbeginnings.ca), a non-profit charitable organization that supports the healthy development of young children, and strengthens family and community life in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Skyline discovered that many building residents needed special support programs and were benefiting from Onward Willow’s services. The company recognized how Onward Willow could positively impact tenants through provision of food programs, emergency cupboards, clothing supplies and other essential services, and decided to partner with the charity.

Since then, Skyline and Onward Willow have developed a fruitful relationship that includes creating a community garden, sponsoring food and snack programs at local schools and community centres, and providing support for families during the holidays. Over the last three years, Skyline has hosted the organization’s annual volunteer appreciation dinner to thank the community’s dedicated residents.

“We learned that our success is only as strong as the communities in which our properties exist,” says Marissa Teeter, Director of Investor Relations, Skyline Wealth Management Inc. “We take an active interest in our tenants and support their communities by fuelling tenant-centric community initiatives.”

Focusing on community initiatives
Skyline focuses on three or four charitable organizations and initiatives to prevent dilution of its efforts and resources. The company selects charities that efficiently channel assistance to recipients. Also, understanding that strong communities contribute to strong business, Skyline prefers to work with charities that direct their efforts to the communities where its tenants live.

One such charity is The Children’s Foundation of Guelph and Wellington (www.childrensfoundation.org), which helps children and youth to achieve their potential through programs that provide intellectual, emotional and physical support. Skyline adopted nine Food and Friends student nutrition programs, which benefit families that live in Skyline buildings and surrounding communities. The company provides financial support, and staff members volunteer their time to serve food at a local community centre.

“Skyline’s financial involvement has resulted in a substantial core funding base for two key programs,” says Glenna Banda, Executive Director, The Children’s Foundation of Guelph and Wellington. “Skyline has also helped to increase our community awareness and networking opportunities. Our partnership with Skyline has become a model for us to build relationships with other businesses in the community.”
Another key charity is Big Brothers Big Sisters of Guelph (www.bbbsg.ca), which promotes the development of children and youth in the community through mentoring programs. Skyline brings all of its resources to the table to support the program’s “bigs” and “littles.” In addition to directing funds to the charity, Marissa serves as Vice President of the Board of Directors, organizes third party fundraising events, and provides volunteers, office space and equipment when needed.

“Skyline’s continuing support and contribution has enabled our agency to serve the children in our community,” says Matthew Stanley, President, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Guelph. “Without a doubt, our agency would not be in the positive position it is today, and numerous children would not benefit from our services, without its support. Skyline has consistently gone beyond what could be expected of a community corporate partner.”

Some charitable efforts are a matter of timing and opportunity. In 2010, Skyline planned to develop a piece of land adjacent to an apartment building in Guelph. Management donated the land to Habitat for Humanity (www.habitatwellington.on.ca), a non-profit organization that builds affordable housing for low-income families. Skyline approached the organization’s executive director with the proposal, who was both surprised and appreciative of receiving the land. The company worked with city hall to change the zoning, handled all legal matters and made the transition of the land as seamless as possible.

“We worked with Habitat for Humanity to build a duplex that would house two families,” says Roy Jason Ashdown, Co-Founder and Chief Operating Officer, Skyline Group of Companies. “We volunteered our time with building efforts, and encouraged suppliers to donate materials and resources.”

**Integrating charity into corporate philosophy**

Skyline’s management believes in practicing what it preaches and leading by example. Upper management participates in each charitable event and initiative, taking a hands-on approach to community building while encouraging other managers and employees to get involved in the cause. Attending events and witnessing the impact of its actions has brought Skyline closer to its community, and has provided a better understanding of its tenants’ needs.

“We take a businesslike approach to our charitable involvement to ensure its effectiveness,” says Jason. “We treat our relationships with charities as partnerships, and look for ways to better integrate with them to improve results.”

Skyline uses its network of stakeholders to promote its charitable causes, consistently informing tenants, employees, suppliers and investors about upcoming events and initiatives. The company’s efforts to unite stakeholders in its goals help with recruitment of volunteers, and increase funds and community awareness for the charities.

“We have an Intranet for employees, we post bulletins and signage in our buildings, and we send out mailings to investors and suppliers,” said Jason. “We also host Lunch n’ Learns so that employees can learn more about the company’s philosophy toward community building, and how they can personally make an impact.”

Skyline also launched a Staff Volunteer Day that provides staff members with one paid workday per year to volunteer for a cause of their choosing. This initiative enables the organization to donate more than 3,000 community service hours per year, and reach out to different causes that impact tenants and employees. Skyline’s Staff Volunteer Day enables its charitable philosophy to permeate every aspect of the company and give employees a sense of pride in their contributions.

**Realizing the benefits of charity**

Beyond the social goodwill of giving back to tenants and their communities, Skyline has realized economic benefits from its philanthropic commitment. The company’s extensive community involvement has greatly enhanced its reputation, which is boosted by its presence at charitable events with media coverage.
Charity begins at home!

“Guelph is a small city, and the property management industry is relatively tight, so we’ve developed a reputation for our charity work,” says Marissa. “In fact, we receive a lot of free publicity and marketing, and it has opened many doors for new business relationships.”

Tenants, employees, suppliers and investors have expressed their pride in being involved with an organization with such a strong focus on charitable endeavours. Skyline’s tenant-centric reputation attracts and retains tenants in its buildings, and its community focus appeals to prospective and current employees.

From the REIT investor’s point of view, understanding the company’s commitment to charity supports the REIT’s obligation to provide “peace of mind investing.” Investors have extolled the company’s virtues and take pride in their association with a real estate investment company that cares about the communities where its properties are located.

Skyline’s suppliers have demonstrated great appreciation for its charitable efforts, especially the Annual Charity Golf Classic in September. Skyline founded the golf tournament to provide financial support, volunteers and resources to its key charities. Suppliers donate generously and work diligently to make this highly anticipated event a success. The Annual Charity Golf Classic provides suppliers with a platform for charitable involvement without having to invest their resources in organizing such a large-scale event. Now in its ninth year, the tournament has raised more than $250,000, as well as awareness for the company’s charitable causes.

“We are very appreciative of our suppliers who sponsor the Annual Charity Golf Classic and support our charitable causes,” says Jason. “They are integral to the event’s success and increase the funds we raise for our charities.”

Skyline has received recognition from local communities and the real estate industry for its dedication to charitable efforts. In 2012, the Guelph Chamber of Commerce presented the company with the President’s Business Recognition Award for Community Building, and Skyline received the Outstanding Community Service Award two consecutive years at FRPO’s annual Marketing, Achievement and Construction Awards gala. Several charities have also recognized Skyline as Corporate Partner of the Year.

“The accolades and support make us want to work harder and do more,” says Jason. “Charitable involvement is ingrained in how we run our business. It’s consistently growing and moving, and the acknowledgements encourage us to keep giving.”

Getting involved in charitable initiatives

Recently, Marissa spoke to nearly 100 business professionals and small business owners on the economic benefits of volunteerism. Here are her five tips on helping your business get involved in community and charitable initiatives:

• Select a cause your company believes in: What causes are relevant to your business’ stakeholders? Do you want to benefit your local community or make a global impact? Does the charity do work in a field related to your company’s operations?

• Ensure the charity is a good fit: Arrange an interview with each charity’s representatives. What are their views on corporate philanthropy? How do they disburse funds, or decide who receives their services? What volunteering opportunities, sponsorships and events do they offer? Is there a natural synergy between your organizations?

• Develop a long-term relationship and partnership: Identify the charity’s needs, and how it may benefit from the partnership. The charity should also be interested in your company’s growth, and how it can reciprocate by offering support and resources to help meet social responsibility and brand promotion goals.

• Promote your cause to stakeholders: Raise awareness of your charitable endeavours with key stakeholders. Maximize your networks and communication media to promote your efforts.

• Donate, volunteer, participate … and encourage others to follow: Lead by example, and integrate community initiatives into your company culture. Organize special events, and empower your stakeholders to do the same.

Supporting charitable initiatives helps to build strong communities, which are essential for maintaining a healthy rental housing industry. For more information, or to get involved with the charities mentioned in this article, please visit www.skylineonline.ca or contact Marissa Teeter at mteeter@skylineonline.ca.