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After 38 years leading Isles, Inc., Marty Johnson is ready to write his next chapter

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Marty Johnson, CEO and founder of Isles, Inc., will be stepping down next year to teach and write books.

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By [India Duke | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

The founder and CEO of Isles, Inc. in Trenton will be stepping down early next year after 38 years of leadership.

Marty Johnson, 60, said he'll spend the next 20 years teaching to others what he has learned over the last 38 years. He will also be writing a book answering the question, what did you learn?

He started the community development and environmental nonprofit in April 1981 during his senior year at Princeton University while studying cultural anthropology. [Isles, Inc.](#) was founded following a student-organized seminar kicking around the question of how to address basic human needs in ways that were long term and sustainable.

From there, the Akron, Ohio native chose to invest his time into growing the organization after graduating, which meant turning down high paying jobs in management, transportation and technology.

"We didn't have much money obviously, but I didn't have much money coming into Princeton, so it wasn't such a big deal turning down those job offers," he said. "It would've paid me more than my father ever made, but I had this dream that we could create something new."

The organization's focus is to provide families and communities with the proper tools to "address basic human needs in ways that were culturally appropriate, environmentally sound, and controlled by those that they're intended to serve. Those principles permeated everything we've done so far."

However, as time went on and Johnson learned more about the community needs in Trenton at the time, the mission evolved into just nine words: "To foster more self-reliant families and healthy sustainable communities. At the end of the day, that's what we care about," he said. To do this, the nonprofit focused on planning and development, education and training, wealth creation, and community environmental health.

Over the years, Isles, Inc. has been able to provide vocational and life skills training for 1,120 people between the ages 16-24 through the Isles Youth Institute, which opened in 1994. "We started thinking about connecting a high school diploma with construction training and targeting kids that didn't do well in high school who dropped out."

The organization has also built and renovated over 100 homes, purchased or saved 600 homes from foreclosure, established 200 community and school gardens, and remediated lead contamination at 350 others.

As Johnson prepares to take a step back from Isles, he hopes the nonprofit continues to do the work that they've done in and around the greater Trenton area.

"My hope is that we can continue to implement, execute with excellence on the ground, but peak our head up from the day-to-day and say 'OK, what are the policies that could help this? What are the approaches that were learning and be connecting to the outside world?'"

Johnson said he is going to continue to work with the organization part time in an "outward-facing role at Isles, assisting my successor as needed. So this is not yet goodbye!"

Isles, Inc. will have a [legacy celebration](#) next month on Nov. 16 at Mill One as a tribute to Johnson.

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