

2024 SACHEM AWARDS – Clay Robbins
Governor Eric J. Holcomb
November 26, 2024

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon, everyone.

It is my privilege to be here today, surrounded by the friends, family, and colleagues of Clay Robbins, to present him with the Sachem Award.

Today, we celebrate not only a community leader but also a man whose lifetime of excellence, integrity, and service has had a profound and lasting impact on the state of Indiana and beyond.

The Sachem is the highest honor an Indiana governor can bestow—no more than once a year. The name of the award comes from the Algonquin term for village leaders who demonstrate grace, judgment, and wisdom. Achievement alone is not enough. In a Sachem, achievement must flow from moral example.

The Sachem Award recognizes the best of what it means to lead with purpose, vision, and heart. By those requirements, the award was made for Clay Robbins and the precious few like him whose names will be recognized forever at our Indiana Statehouse.

This is the 8th and final Sachem Award that I will bestow. There is no “power of office” that I cherish more dearly.

So it is with great joy that I present the Sachem today to Mr. Clay Robbins.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel a personal sense of accomplishment in having presented the Sachem, once and for all, to Clay Robbins.

I’ve never had to try so hard to convince someone to accept a recognition that he so plainly deserved. I was starting to think that I would just have to barge in here and force it on him—which I would have done, even though it’s not easy to barge into the Lilly Endowment!

In truth, Clay’s avoidance of recognition is among the strongest marks of this quietly extraordinary man.

Great leaders in philanthropy do not apply for their jobs. They are called to their roles, after gathering experience and having a tremendous understanding of the human heart and mind.

A proud Hoosier, born and raised in Indianapolis, and a proud Wabash graduate, Clay’s early life of hard work and community service nurtured in him a sense of responsibility to his home state and a commitment to make it better.

As a young man, Clay became an Indianapolis attorney, active in civic life. Among his clients was Lilly Endowment, an organization from which he learned even as he served it—an organization that already exemplified behind-the-scenes stewardship.

In 1993, Clay joined Lilly Endowment directly, bringing with him not just legal expertise but a passion for the Endowment's proven role and its further potential.

In more than three decades under Clay's leadership, Lilly Endowment has become one of the country's largest and most impactful philanthropic organizations which, fortunately for Indiana, never lost sight of its roots in our state.

Clay's leadership has been characterized by a belief in the power of philanthropy to create enduring change. I could not begin to list the examples of such change that he has quietly spearheaded.

I will mention only one specific initiative for what it says about the Lilly Endowment's—and Clay's—larger legacy. The impact of the Endowment's quarter-billion-dollar gift to the Indiana Economic Development Corporation to complement the state's READI investment and support capital investment, arts, and culture throughout Indiana will be visible for generations to come.

No one has had more impact in Indiana while remaining so little known among Hoosiers at large.

The tens of thousands of Indiana parents whose children gained a stronger start from early childhood education initiatives, the legions of our fellow Hoosiers and visitors who relish some of the greatest cultural institutions and public spaces in America, the many members of minority communities who have experienced better access to services, better educational opportunities, and better physical infrastructure in recent years—

Almost none of these people know the common denominator behind these initiatives, and that common denominator is Clay Robbins.

And Clay will do his utmost to make sure that they never know his name and that he stays quietly anonymous!

That is why he is a Sachem.

Clay has the imagination to see what a better future looks like and the leadership to navigate toward that future. At the same time, he also has the ears to hear many other people's good ideas and the eyes to see the essential roles of his colleagues and fellow citizens in making change happen.

There is no better example than Clay of the power of partnership, in all its forms, to get things done.

That is why Clay received the Sachem in this place and among those of you in this room. If it were up to him, Clay would share the Sachem with all of you. This event is as close as he could come to getting away with that scheme!

Clay, in your humility, you have always placed the needs and recognition of others ahead of your own.

But today, we are turning the tables.

You have earned the Sachem Award, exceeding its every requirement. And you have done so quietly, as I've repeated several times.

But now, this audience is going to be anything but quiet. You're going to hear what gratitude for your hard work, kindness, openness, and service sounds like from the people who know you best!

Congratulations and thank you, Sachem Clay Robbins!

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