

John Niekrash, Proximo Spirits Individual Award – *Innovator*

John Niekrash, a 42-year veteran of the beverage business, has defined the spirit of *Giving Back* in the hospitality Industry through forging a path that directly benefits the families who serve in our channel.

John started in the spirits business as a line worker at Heublein's bottling plant in Hartford, CT. From this humble beginning, John climbed the Supplier ladders of Distributor Management, Brand Marketing and, for the last 26 years, in National Account Sales. Throughout his successful career, John has always kept his eye on the welfare of others around him. Whether it was a daring ocean rescue of a drowning man, developing the foundation of what we all know today as CORE or founding a veterans charity called Work Vessels for Vets, John has always been about finding new and innovative ways to give back.

As Vice President of National Accounts for Skyy Spirits back in 2003, John took an idea from a late-night conversation with clients and colleagues, at the national restaurant show in Chicago, and created a mission that has galvanized the Hospitality channel...giving back to our own – helping children of restaurant employees. Over the past 14 years, thanks to most everyone in the room, CORE has grown in awareness, funding and gifting – making it THE charity for the hospitality channel. CORE has raised more than \$2.5 million and granted support to more than 250 families from across the industry. When we think of Innovation our minds tend to think of technological advancements, but sometimes the most meaningful innovations come from big hearts, brilliant ideas and grassroot efforts.

John is an active member of the Founders Board for CORE, Director of Business Development for Applebee's at Proximo Spirits and Chairman of Work Vessels for Vets. Finding new and innovative ways to *Giving Back* is in John's DNA.