

## Goodwill to Great

### A Bay Area social-service group retools — and grooms leaders

By Michael Anft

For months after Clemence Casperian arrived here from the Philippines in 1989, she and her husband, a taxi driver, scraped to get by. They lived in a tiny apartment in the middle of the hardscrabble Tenderloin district, and Ms. Casperian spent much of her time filling out applications and getting rejected.

*"My teacher's degree from the Philippines didn't mean anything here," says Ms. Casperian. "People wouldn't give me the time of day."*

Then, while shopping at a local Goodwill store during a \$2 coat sale, she stumbled upon another kind of bargain. She asked someone behind the counter whether Goodwill was hiring, and soon got a \$4.25-per-hour job sorting record albums.

*"They actually listened to me, which was a first," Ms. Casperian says. "Eventually, they discovered that I was a good worker and could communicate well."*

She began climbing the ladder, rung by rung — as supervisor, then as an assistant production manager, accounts manager, and, eventually, the director of finance at the central office of Goodwill Industries of San Francisco, San Mateo, and Marin Counties. Along the way, she was encouraged to take courses in personnel management, learn accounting, and take other employees with leadership potential under her wing.

Four years ago, Ms. Casperian was named director of retail operations, overseeing 17 stores and 200 employees in the San Francisco Bay Area. When a new president, Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez, was appointed in 2004, Ms. Casperian was encouraged by her new boss to do a bit more to hone her leadership skills, and she responded.

*"I read books on leadership and volunteered to explain financial matters to other workers here," she says. "The people who had mentored me here did so much for me that I felt I had to give back."*

#### Broad Search for Top People

Stories like Ms. Casperian's earned Goodwill Industries of San Francisco, San Mateo, and Marin Counties last year's Leadership IS Award from Independent Sector, in Washington, a nationwide coalition of grant makers and nonprofit organizations. The chapter received \$10,000 for what Independent Sector calls innovative job-training and leadership programs.

*"What struck the award committee is that San Francisco Goodwill chooses leaders from all kinds of backgrounds," says Diana Aviv, president of Independent Sector. "They look for them at the welfare office, on the street corner, or at a prominent university, among other places, and do wonderful things with them."*

Under Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez's tutelage, San Francisco Goodwill has built on the traditional job-training and personal-counseling programs offered by the 208 Goodwill chapters nationwide.

She also is credited with redirecting an organization that had been reeling after years of troubles, during which executives were accused of buying valuable donated items for their own use before they could be put on shelves, receiving too much in pay, and running the charity poorly.

*"When Debbie Alvarez-Rodriguez took over, the agency was not very healthy," says George W. Kessinger, president of Goodwill Industries International, in Rockville, MD., which provides support to Goodwill chapters nationwide, each*

of which is independently managed. *"She has turned it around in record time."*

Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez worked to eliminate what she calls "silos within silos" that had developed within the organization and prevented it from infusing its primary mission — helping poor and disadvantaged people attain skills and find work — in all departments.

*"There was a split between the mission side and the retail side," she says. "We needed to put the organization in a position where it could thrive."*

In her nearly three years on the job, Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez has pushed for and won changes in:

- The charity's mission. At the same time she worked to "change the culture," as she puts it, at San Francisco Goodwill, Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez expanded its mission statement to explain what the ultimate goal of the organization's job-placement efforts was. *"We want to be known as an organization that creates solutions to poverty,"* she says.
- Its approach to recycling waste from used computers and video terminals. Last year, the charity's board ratified her plan to include environmental sustainability as one of the San Francisco Goodwill's major goals. The charity, with money and product donations from Dell Computers, has started computer-disassembling programs geared to keeping potentially harmful waste out of landfills while helping more people obtain marketable skills. San Francisco Goodwill's program is seen by other chapters as a model: Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez heads a committee of Goodwill chapters that is evaluating the best ways to handle electronic waste.
- Programs designed to help former prisoners. Of the 1,000 clients San Francisco Goodwill serves each year, nearly half have prison records. *"When I came here, 35 to 40 percent of our program participants had*

*criminal backgrounds, but I was told that we didn't really want to encourage their participation here because they're too violent,"* says Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez. She hired two people — one with experience in the mayor's office working to control San Francisco's problem with gangs, and the other from the DeLancey Street Foundation, a local charity with well-regarded programs for ex-prisoners — and started programs designed to help people find training and jobs so they stay out of prison.

- Opportunities for Goodwill employees to expand their knowledge and sharpen their leadership skills. The charity's human-resources department regularly informs employees of courses and programs. Each department now features a training budget. Jesse Edwards, one of several former prisoners who have risen to a leadership post (he's an operations manager), says that in the past two years he has taken courses in employee supervision, how best to delegate authority, and how to communicate effectively with employees. *"It's given me a lot of chances to learn,"* says Mr. Edwards.

After taking the helm in 2004, Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez put her hands-on approach to work and stepped in to manage San Francisco Goodwill's retail operations for nine months, then took on human resources for a shorter period of time.

*"We believe that experiential learning is one of the best ways to do it,"* says Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez, who came to San Francisco Goodwill after a stint as a vice president at the Omidyar Foundation, in Redwood City, Calif., where she says she learned the importance of developing leaders throughout an organization. She had previously worked as director of a San Francisco government agency that served children and families. *"And we believe that every person who comes through our doors has the ability to become a leader,"* she adds.

### 'Career Pathway'

The concept of developing leadership qualities and the act of preparing disadvantaged people for long-term employment are intertwined in Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez's philosophy.

Shortly after her arrival at the charity, she began to develop new training programs for clients, with an emphasis on career advancement. Moving workers into jobs where their skills will be well rewarded increases the likelihood that they will keep them and become leaders, she says.

In the past, the organization, like most Goodwill chapters, had been known for getting people trained and placed in entry-level jobs. But Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez began pushing for more support for Goodwill-trained workers — more job counseling, career advisers, on-site job coaches, and classes based on skills that could help people land long-term, higher-paying work.

*"We want people to do more than get a foot in the door," she says. "We want them to get out on a career pathway."*

At the same time, San Francisco Goodwill worked to make connections with businesses, community groups, and government agencies — with the idea that if the charity could understand what employers and needy people want, the better its chances would be of placing people in jobs that allow them to chart a career.

San Francisco Goodwill representatives talked to retail outlets of major chains, such as Macy's and Whole Foods Market, about what they would want in an employee and how best to train people for jobs. Even after Goodwill clients are hired, the charity promises to keep working with them, offering advice on work habits and, if necessary, linking them with counseling services.

*"Businesses know that once they hire one of our people, we'll still be there if they need us. The people we train know this, too. We won't run and hide," says Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez.*

The charity also spent nine months in 2004 and 2005 talking with people in impoverished areas about what kind of work would fit their needs. During discussions with leaders of some of the San Francisco area's most violent neighborhoods, the charity learned that opportunities for people with prison backgrounds, those who work in the drug trade, or others who have significant barriers to finding good jobs (such as drug addiction or a disability of some kind) were especially rare.

*"We were serving ex-prisoners, but we weren't doing it very well," says Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez. "People were getting jobs, but they weren't keeping them."*

Employees who were having their wages garnished for legally required child-support payments frequently left jobs because they couldn't live on what was left, she adds.

One way to help employees with such obligations, Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez says, is to make sure that they are trained, paid well, and in jobs that won't be sent overseas by their companies. San Francisco Goodwill performed research to see what kinds of jobs would fit and found that transportation and warehouse work was plentiful, opportunities for it would grow, and it couldn't be handled by workers in other countries.

Trucking jobs looked especially promising. Representatives from the charity told neighborhood leaders that schools that teach people how to drive large trucks cost \$3,000 to \$5,000 per student. Residents responded that the cost was too high.

So, two years ago, San Francisco Goodwill started its own trucking academy, complete with eight weeks of classroom training.

By using money earned from its retail stores, which account for \$21-million of its \$23-million annual budget, the charity pays the \$4,000 in tuition for each of the 50 students the academy takes on each year. (Like most Goodwill

chapters, San Francisco Goodwill tries to be as self-sufficient as possible, relying mostly on sales at its retail stores and using cash donations and foundation grants only for a handful of specific programs.)

Although many academy graduates start their trucking careers as Goodwill employees, many will get hired by one of the 34 companies or government agencies that regularly scout San Francisco Goodwill for truck drivers. Drivers can make as much as \$25 to \$30 per hour.

Goodwill hopes to increase the number of slots available to about 80 per year. The charity won't have trouble filling those slots; for every student being trained, eight applicants have applied.

### Staying Out of Jail

Goodwill is also focusing on ways to make sure former prisoners and first-time offenders don't commit crimes that would land them in jail. That is a major challenge in San Francisco, where about 50 percent of prisoners return to jail after being released.

In 2004 the charity formed a program to help women who had just left prison adjust to their new lives. More than 300 women have taken classes that teach them how to prepare for work and deal with their problems.

But the organization is especially proud, Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez says, of Back on Track, a program it runs in conjunction with the San Francisco district attorney's office.

Financially supported by the JEHT Foundation, in New York, and designed to help first-time drug offenders avoid jail and the cycle of incarceration that can follow a first arrest, Back on Track has trained 154 people in the last three years.

Started at the behest of the district attorney's office, which ran the program in its infancy, Back on Track takes drug offenders ages 18 to 30, screens them, encourages them to plead guilty, then puts them through a year-long

program. Participants are expected to perform 220 hours of community service, or 110 hours if they have paid work.

Goodwill helps them deal with their addictions and mental problems and advises them on how best to come up with a "personal responsibility plan" that outlines their goals. While in the program, participants can receive counseling, educational help, or job training. If they graduate, the district attorney withdraws the guilty plea and they face no jail time.

The program received a \$125,000 grant from JEHT (which stands for Justice, Equality, Human Dignity, and Tolerance) in 2003. But the district attorney's office had trouble finding the right staff, says Robert Crane, president of the JEHT Foundation.

After the district attorney's office asked Goodwill to manage the program, JEHT made grants totaling \$344,000 in 2004 and 2005. Annually, JEHT makes \$20-million in grants to programs that help former prisoners across the country.

*"Nationally, Goodwill has a good reputation for helping ex-offenders," says Mr. Crane. "They're a mainstream organization and that's important because helping ex-offenders is a controversial subject. Goodwill has legitimacy in the community and in the political realm, where they're neutral."*

Adds Kamala D. Harris, district attorney for San Francisco: *"One of the best inoculations against incarceration is to create a population that has work skills and gets jobs. That makes Goodwill the perfect partner for us."*

The program saves money for the state of California. It costs \$10,000 to prosecute a felon and \$35,000 to put him or her in jail for a year; it takes \$5,000 to train a Back on Track participant.

### Spreading to Other Cities

The program's success has attracted plenty of attention. Only 10 percent of those who have gone through Back on Track have ended up in jail.

The National District Attorneys Association, a professional organization in Washington, has recognized Back on Track as a model program that could be copied in other cities.

Participants in the program say it has made a difference. One year ago, Tarie Richmond was selling \$1,500 worth of cocaine per night from a corner in the Mission District when police caught up with her.

After her arrest, her public defender recommended her for Back on Track. Her 72 hours in jail were enough to make her grateful for the program.

*"I was scared straight,"* says Ms. Richmond, 24.

Although the two jobs she now has at Goodwill — as a customer-service representative and at a retail store — don't pay nearly as well as Ms. Richmond's street job, she appreciates the new lease on life Back on Track has given her and her 3-year-old son.

*"I used to hire a lot of babysitters for him, then buy him nice things to make up for the fact that I never saw him,"* she says. *"I'm glad I'm off the street."*

Such stories can be multiplied by the thousands, Ms. Alvarez-Rodriguez says, adding that a major part of San Francisco Goodwill's mission is to help people in trouble find value in themselves.

*"We get society's discarded goods and discarded people, many of whom are ostracized by society,"* she says. *"We see talent and skill there. We think other people should see it as well."*

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