

Social Entrepreneurship: BUILDING A SAFE HAVEN



Neli Vazquez-Rowland and Brian Rowland.

For several years after graduation from Loyola University Chicago's School of Business, Brian Rowland (B.B.A. '89) operated successfully as a stockbroker. Following the suggestion of a tax advisor, he purchased an apartment building in Rogers Park as a tax shelter.

The 25-unit building was an abandoned crack house. "When I first toured the property, I found myself stepping over people," Rowland says.

Instead of chasing away the substance abusers,

he helped many of them to turn their lives around. In 1995, he established a firm that provides housing for individuals recovering from alcohol and substance abuse. A Safe Haven L.L.C. is now the largest privately held recovery home in the Midwest. It was also first to obtain proper licensing from the Illinois Department of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Rowland says.

"When we first started in this field, it was not uncommon for people in need to be warehoused in a home as long as a client had the ability to pay for room and board," says Rowland. "Drug and alcohol abuse and usage were overlooked along with overcrowding,

A Safe Haven set high standards in a field that lacked them. We feel we are guided by strict ethical standards, no matter where business takes us."

Rowland's wife Neli Vazquez-Rowland (B.A. '85) raised the money for the renovation of the Rogers Park property and found several investors for the company. "She's tenacious!" says Mark Mulroe (B.B.A. '85), legal counsel for the private firm and part owner.

Neli's construction firm, MYS Development Corporation, spent six months restoring the apartment building that now features new electrical wiring, gleaming hardwood floors and freshly painted walls. Her firm has since renovated additional properties for A Safe Haven.

Meanwhile, Rowland developed contacts with a network of social service agencies that enabled A Safe Haven to customize individual treatment programs for residents and serve related family members as well. Rowland modeled the organization's culture upon 12-step recovery programs.

The blond brick apartment building on Chicago's North Side was only the beginning for A Safe Haven. The for-profit enterprise now operates 10 buildings, or recovery homes, in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. "There is a direct correlation between our company's growth and the success rate of our clients," says Rowland, chief executive officer. "We believe that if in our moments of truth, we do the right thing and achieve good, A Safe Haven will do well."

Research indicates that substance abusers benefit more from long-term recovery options, but efforts to conserve federal and state funding have replaced long-term treatment programs with short-term hospital stays that have proven less effective, says Rowland. Because patients must repeatedly seek treatment, short-term treatment options actually cost the government more, he says. "There's also the cost of incarcerating individuals arrested for drug-related crimes."

A Safe Haven stepped into the fold by providing housing and long-term supervision to rent-paying residents. "We consider ourselves a private solution to a very public problem," Rowland says.

Approximately 98 percent of A Safe Haven resi-

dents pay rent and maintain some form of full- or part-time employment. "We consider more their desire to recover and be productive, not their proven ability to earn an income," says Rowland.

Residents receive counseling, job networking services, and access to support groups and structured evening activities. They also make contracts with themselves to achieve specific recovery goals, such as attending self-help meetings, meeting with sponsors, submitting to drug screenings, addressing personal health issues, planning community activities and obtaining steady employment.

A Safe Haven's success rate for recovery is three times the average rate noted for other treatment options, according to a study published by the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Rowland says his reasons for entering this field relate to his personal struggles with alcohol in the mid-1980s. He entered rehab shortly after he met Neli, while they were both attending Loyola. She came to visit him, not as a romantic interest but as a friend.

The Rowlands consider the cultivation of personal relationships an important working value. Mulroe, the company attorney, is Rowland's friend from childhood. Several former residents of A Safe Haven now work for the company and for Neli's contracting firm, MYS Development Corporation.

Penny LoCoco, an executive administrator for A Safe Haven, spent nine months as a resident and managed to shake an addiction to pain pills. She also severed an abusive spousal relationship and gained custody of her children. "Probably the networking helped me the most," she says, "being around positive people, staying away from negative people..."

"Honestly, I don't know what would have happened to me if it wouldn't have been for this place, because I know I would have gone back to the same situation."

—Susan DeGrane

LOYOLA

Contact
Information:

A Safe Haven

180 W. Washington, Suite 1000 Chicago, IL 60602
Phone 312-372-6707 Fax 312-372-6706 www.asafehaven.com

Reprinted with permission from LOYOLA magazine,
Loyola University Chicago, 2004