

A WAY THAT WORKS

Sunday, January 3, 2010

News & Record

By [Nancy H. McLaughlin](#)

Staff Writer

Tonya Scales had earned associate degrees in music and medical system administration — but also a criminal record — when she latched on to the offerings at the Welfare Reform Liaison Project.

“It gave me the opportunity to reinvent myself,” Scales said.

The Greensboro-based program that guided her off welfare and out of public housing has long been recognized as a national model for doing just that.

Those accepted into the program, which is now 13 years old, are trained to handle inventory and upload digital imaging or design graphics, among other jobs, and are paid an hourly wage while they prove themselves.

“The fear of failure and the fear of success can hinder a lot of people because you don’t think you deserve things,” said Scales, now the Greensboro Housing Authority liaison between family self-sufficiency and client home ownership. “He gives you the thought process that you do deserve whatever you will work for.”

The man Scales is referring to is 49-year-old Calvin Odell Cleveland, who grew up poor in a rough part of Charleston, S.C.

He founded the program based on his mother’s ability to accomplish what she set out to do despite a disability — as she motivated her children to do the same.

* * *

The Welfare Reform Liaison Project, mostly housed in a huge distribution warehouse on Revolution Mill Drive with the look and feel of a Sam’s Club or Costco, is not a household name in Greensboro or High Point, where a similar distribution job training program was reopened in September.



Joseph Rodriguez (News & Record)
Photo Caption: Welfare Reform Liaison Project student/trainees Robin Toler, Wendy Smith and Yvette Guy organize Guilford County records in preparation for converting them to digital form.

The faith-based nonprofit has received awards from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and drawn visits from nonprofits throughout the country seeking to replicate its success.

It all started with a master's thesis.

Cleveland, with a background in prison counseling, was working in sales for a Greensboro trucking company and enrolled in seminary part-time as Congress prepared to pass the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. It was to transform the nation's welfare system from cash assistance for the poor to a program that focused on getting people back to work.

His fear was that many recipients would end up working at minimum-wage jobs, living in substandard housing and continuing to live in poverty, resulting in a transition from welfare recipient to working-class poor.

In his thesis, which looked at what black churches were going to do, Cleveland developed a plan to help them. But there was the usual hitch: finding the resources to make it happen.

He approached his pastor, Bishop George Brooks of Mount Zion Baptist Church, with his idea.

Brooks' support and reputation in the community helped get people to listen to Cleveland's pitch.

"George said, 'Mike, this guy is a rarity,'" said Mike Weaver, chairman of the Weaver Foundation's board of directors, whose charitable nonprofit combed through the proposal. "He said, 'I wouldn't bring him to you if I wasn't willing to stand behind him 100 percent.'"

Mount Zion also allowed Cleveland to use a small, church-owned house for classes, including merchandising, management, teamwork and — in a partnership with GTCC — computer skills.

A \$100,000 grant from the Weaver Foundation was later used to lease a 16,000-square-foot distribution center in downtown Greensboro.

"It has been one of our better entrepreneurial investments," Weaver said. "Growth is fine, but growth for growth's sake is worthless. It's got to have a payoff at the end, and that's what I've been the most impressed with."

* * *

In 1998, the nonprofit had a \$25,000 budget. For 2010, the budget is more than \$4 million and is funded mostly through federal funds and entrepreneurial revenue.

Based on pay stubs and tax returns of the nearly 200 graduates, that equates to income in the \$7 million range.

"That's a lot of dollars going back into households that were at the poverty level," Cleveland said.

That's what brought consultants from the Durham Economic Resource Center.

“We came to see how we could replicate aspects of a program that seemed to offer it all,” said Jackie Brown, chief executive officer. Cleveland had good ideas, Brown said.

“He’s learned how to build partnerships, and if he tries something and it doesn’t work, he doesn’t beat himself up — he says ‘lesson learned’ and moves on.”

Cleveland, a champion athlete in high school and college, learned that through sports.

“We didn’t always have the best talent on the floor, but we had a coach who understood strategy,” he said.

So, case managers work with participants on the pitfalls of the working poor, such as getting to work on time when they don’t have transportation and getting their GEDs.

“The program works for you if you want to work at it,” said S.T. McElroy, an electrician by training who went through the program and landed a job installing solar panels.

In 2003 the operation moved to the 70,000-square-foot distribution warehouse on Revolution Mill Drive. The nonprofit essentially acts as a middle man, collecting new goods donated by manufacturers or businesses and specified for the working poor or others served by nonprofits. In 2009, it collected \$10 million. At the warehouse, merchandise is sorted, inventoried and set out on display in a “store” setting.

Other nonprofits send needy clients over to pick up goods, such as clothing, diapers, toiletries and household items. The only charge is a small handling fee, pennies on the dollar, that either the client or the sponsoring nonprofit pays.

The nonprofit is looking to expand its electronic records imaging division in a spacious building that’s safe, secure — and on the bus route.

“A young lady came in beaming this morning because she got a full-time job, and at the same time I had another person on the phone who was getting evicted on Saturday,” Cleveland said.

“You celebrate the success of each person ... but you’re constantly reaching back to help someone else. There’s still so much more work to do.”

Contact Nancy McLaughlin at 373-7049 or nancy.mclaughlin@news-record.com