Zendesk and the art of neighborhood compassion

EDGAR’S ROAD TO RECOVERY

A year ago, Edgar hit rock bottom. He had lost connection with nearly all of his friends, family, and loved ones. On a dark and rainy night at 3:00 a.m., Edgar found himself in a state of complete exhaustion, collapsed beneath swirling and fuzzy street lights in Marin County, wet and cold from the rain. At this moment, he had an epiphany: “I was tired of being mad at the world, especially myself, and having no hope of ever coming back. I had nothing else to lose and everything to gain.”

A year later, on another rainy day at the end of February, Edgar stood alongside Mayor Lee, Supervisor Jane Kim, Police Chief Greg Suhr and before reporters from major national media outlets including Time Magazine, The Los Angeles Times, and Fortune Magazine to describe the latest chapter in a year that could change the course of his life forever; one that combines smart phone technology, a leading tech company in the Mid-Market neighborhood, and St. Anthony’s tried and tested wrap-around support services.

The first step for Edgar was to find his way to a small, sparsely decorated office three floors above St. Anthony’s bustling temporary Dining Room. There, he would sit face-to-face with Sr. Mary Rogers, the initial point of contact for St. Anthony’s Fr. Alfred Center, a year-long residential drug and alcohol recovery program that has been a life-changing experience for thousands of men who, like Edgar, find themselves unable to continue life as an addict.

Six months after entering the Fr. Alfred Center, Edgar was ready to re-enter the working world. In those six months, he spent hours with a certified drug and alcohol counselor looking inward into the depths of his addiction, one of the most complicated diseases that inflict human beings. He cleaned hundreds of thousands of Dining Room trays as part of St. Anthony’s job training program, and he accepted the painstaking challenge of preparing for a job with one of St. Anthony’s job Transition Specialists.

If the first six months of Edgar’s quest for sobriety was not difficult enough, his challenge to move beyond the supportive walls of St. Anthony’s was intensified by an economy still smarting after one of the worst recessions of modern times. To add to the difficulty, San Francisco has emerged as a new frontier for software engineers and venture capitalists, an intimidating re-entry into the workforce for a young, recovering addict.

Enter Zendesk, the first tech company to relocate in the Mid-Market neighborhood. Zendesk has set a gold standard for engaging the Tenderloin community in innovative and solution focused projects to make the neighborhood a better place. Zendesk spent nearly two years working side by side with St. Anthony’s Tenderloin Technology Lab to develop Link-SF, San Francisco’s first ever mobile optimized website that connects homeless and low-income residents with critical and life-saving resources nearby. Think of a Yelp-like website for people who are homeless.

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For St. Anthony’s Fr. Alfred Center, a year-long residential drug and alcohol recovery program that has been a life-changing experience for thousands of men who, like Edgar, find themselves unable to continue life as an addict.

While it’s clear San Francisco, especially the Mid-Market area, is changing at breakneck speed, for some that change has opened up a world of opportunity. For Edgar, beaming a few days after hearing news of his first job placement with Acrobat, the opportunities at his fingertips today are a far cry from where he hit rock bottom on the streets of Marin a year ago.
ST. ANTHONY’S NEW DINING ROOM
tops off

Thanks to the generosity of hundreds of friends and supporters, St. Anthony Foundation has completed our three-year, $22.5 million Campaign for the New St. Anthony’s Dining Room. The new building started going up in January 2013. St. Anthony’s was able to announce the completion of the capital campaign on the same day that Nibbi Construction workers topped off the building with a roof, March 14, 2014.

As the campaign approached completion, the Crescent Porter Hale Foundation and Wells Fargo made gifts of $250,000 each to diminish the gap. Board Member Dennis Aftergut donated $250,000 to help close the campaign. Marilyn Cabak, a donor to the project, organized an event at the Fairmont, attended by more than 130 individual supporters and graced by the artistic talents of singers in the San Francisco Opera’s Merola Program. Soon after, St. Anthony’s launched an online “Just a Pinch More” campaign to raise the remaining $100,000 from the community, who responded warmly to this final appeal. After a boost of $25,000 from the S. H. Cowell Foundation, supporters Pat Callahan and David Dee added $100,000 to the hundreds of gifts already donated and turned “Just a Pinch More” into just a bushel full.

St. Anthony’s Dining Room is the only free food program in San Francisco that serves the hungry every day of the year. When meal service in the original Dining Room surpassed 3,000 meals a day, it became apparent that St. Anthony’s had outgrown the original space.

For the first time in more than 60 years, St. Anthony’s New Dining Room will have a street-level view and natural light. State of the art cooking equipment and a floor plan specifically designed for serving food to large groups will accommodate more guests in a safe and respectful manner.

St. Anthony’s Free Clothing Program and Social Work Center will also relocate to the new building.

St. Anthony’s Free Clothing Program, the largest in San Francisco, and St. Anthony’s Social Work Center will relocate to the new building to make them more accessible to our most vulnerable Dining Room guests. We have partnered with Mercy Housing California who will build and manage 90 units of affordable housing for seniors on the upper floors.

The new building will also be the cornerstone of a city-wide plan for disaster preparedness. In the event of a disaster, St. Anthony’s will assume the role of a communications and assistance center for the neighborhood and the city in general. The project is on schedule for a grand opening in the Fall of 2014.

“This landmark project was made possible by citizens and institutions looking to the future of our city who envision a better life for all San Franciscans,” said Suzanne B. Swift, chair of St. Anthony’s Board of Directors, when the completion of the campaign was announced. “It is a testament to the amazing spirit of giving in our wonderful community. We at St. Anthony’s are grateful for this support, and we are very proud of the people who made this happen.”
A HANDS-ON APPROACH TO job training

Rejoining the mainstream of life can be challenging for recovering addicts. One of the most formidable barriers for graduates of St. Anthony’s Fr. Alfred Center is finding employment. Holding down a job and earning a steady income is more than a survival need; it also helps to rebuild a positive self-image and brings successful, long-term recovery within reach. To give Fr. Alfred Center graduates a better chance, St. Anthony’s has started re-envisioning and revamping this key component of the drug and alcohol recovery program.

In their first six months of recovery, Fr. Alfred’s residents work 30 hours a week in St. Anthony’s Dining Room, gaining both hard skills in professional food preparation and soft skills in functioning in a work environment. Over the past year, St. Anthony’s has sought ample input from experts and program graduates and reorganized the Dining Room job training program to help current Fr. Alfred’s residents develop work-ready attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are necessary to seek and sustain gainful employment. Approximately 12 trainees join the program each month, following an initial period of orientation on program rules, roles, and responsibilities.

Much of the training revolves around work in St. Anthony’s Dining Room. “Hands-on-Training” covers the knowledge and practice of food safety, food-service procedures, handling of commercial-kitchen utensils and equipment, and proper disposal of environmental waste. This program culminates with “Food Handler” Training covers the knowledge and practice of food safety, and many of the trainees and alumni. A Fr. Alfred resident named Robert says, “The California Food Handler certificate is important. I work in food service, but last time I was turned away from jobs because I didn’t have the certificate.”

Program trainees also gain marketable computer skills at the Tenderloin Technology Lab where, over three months, they learn how to use Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, email and social networking platforms, internet search engines, Craigslist and other job-search websites. “I had a job interview at a Lowes warehouse, and knew well how to drive the forklift,” Orlando, another Fr. Alfred resident says, “but didn’t know how to use the computer – so the job went to someone else.”

Throughout the program, such hard skill practices are interspersed with presentation-discussions on fundamental soft skills that all employers desire and value, such as being on time and ready to work, job ownership, teamwork, handling conflict, and workplace safety.

Participants also work with a St. Anthony’s Job Coach to define immediate career goals, develop a cover letter and resume, conduct mock job-interviews, and initiate their job search. Going forward, the program will focus more attention on helping trainees with job placement and on maintaining contact with program alumni to gauge employment-retention.

Trainees like Robert and Orlando often mention the unifying good cheer and spirit of St. Anthony’s staff during the process. Orlando says, “St. Anthony’s is full of beautiful people. They help you and never turn you away; they try to keep the whole family together.”

A WORD FROM BARRY J. STENGER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When Zendesk, the customer service software company, moved into the rapidly developing mid-Market area adjacent to the Tenderloin, they connected with the neighborhood in a profound way. Their employees volunteer regularly in St. Anthony’s Dining Room. The company donates a portion of the proceeds from one of their products to St. Anthony Medical Clinic. And they helped the Tenderloin Tech Lab develop a mobile web site for low-income people to find the services they need, closest to their location, a project now being expanded upon by other partners and the City of San Francisco.

When Del Seymour got sober and stabilized his life, partly with help from St. Anthony’s, he decided to connect visitors to San Francisco with a community usually omitted from the guidebooks: the poorest people in the city, many of whom live in the Tenderloin. His Tenderloin Walking Tours are now a favorite among readers of The Huffington Post, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal.

When Eric Barrett looked out the window and saw St. Anthony’s Free Clothing Program serving hundreds of low-income residents, he did not content himself with looking on. He called St. Anthony’s and donated some of the stock he’d earned as an engineer at Facebook to support the work he saw. He participated in the work by making a gift.

These are people who bloom where they are planted, who live where they find themselves: across the street, across UN Plaza, across the economic divide. This is also the secret of living that St. Anthony’s guests teach our staff and volunteers every day. Be where you are. Join in. Don’t look the other way. Be part of the miracle.

The Tenderloin, for all its troubles and tragedies, is a vibrant community. Filmmaker Henri Quenette discovered this last year. He was so inspired by the people he met that he made a documentary about the neighborhood, Love me Tenderloin, spotlighting four Tenderloin residents, some of them St. Anthony’s guests, and inspiring others to see the beauty in these streets.

It’s easy for those who do not live or work in the Tenderloin to define the neighborhood by what is missing. We at St. Anthony’s define it by what – and who – is here, and we ensure that we not only connect those in need with stabilizing services, but also that we connect those who share a common dignity as human beings; that we bring together people who would not otherwise have met.

When people connect at St. Anthony’s, they reconnect to the heart of the city. We are so glad that you have connected with this community.

Barry J. Stenger
Executive Director
St. Anthony’s does a wonderful job,” Feinstein said. “It’s a very special place.”

As part of a day-long teambuilding exercise for 70 employees, Genentech staff gathered to assemble 7 brand new chairs for disabled San Franciscans in need. They decided to donate the fruits of their labor to St. Anthony’s after signing up to serve meals through their social worker.

Del’s goal is to inspire Tenderloin residents to show people “there is a way out.” In a neighborhood so often overlooked, Del’s stories have opened up a window for the world to see into the Tenderloin.

You can schedule a tour with Del by emailing TLWalkingTours@gmail.com.

The San Francisco Chronicle.

‘I live across the street from St. Anthony’s Clothing Program on 8th and Mission. Every day I see your people working tirelessly with the poor and disadvantaged. It’s a reminder of everything good this city has stood for,” Eric said upon donating Facebook shares to St. Anthony’s.

When an individual donates stock, they can receive a tax deduction of up to 30% of their adjusted gross income for the full fair market value of the donated assets. At the same time, they are helping San Francisco’s most vulnerable residents to build better futures for themselves.

We’re grateful for Eric’s support and proud to be the recipient of the terrific generosity of this tech worker and others like him.

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A NEW SET OF WHEELS

St. Anthony’s guests have been rolling out onto Golden Gate Avenue in style with new wheelchairs built, decorated, and donated by the New Products Commercialization Division of Genentech, Inc., a Bay Area biotech company.

As part of a day-long teambuilding exercise for 70 employees, Genentech staff gathered to assemble 7 brand new chairs for disabled San Franciscans in need.

They decided to donate the fruits of their labor to St. Anthony’s after signing up to serve meals in St. Anthony’s Dining Room earlier in the year and witnessing firsthand the need our guests have for wheelchairs. Many guests come through our doors in search of replacements for old, broken wheelchairs, which can be very expensive.

The last volunteer-assembled wheelchair adorned with the license plate “GFORCE” is all set to find a home with a disabled San Franciscan who needs a new set of wheels.

The mother of two children whose family was served by Senator Feinstein agrees. The family has been visiting the dining room for the past five years and has used many other resources offered by St. Anthony’s, including the Free Clothing Program, help with paying rent for their South of Market apartment, and homework assistance for the grade-school children.

St. Anthony’s 40 millionth meal is a reminder of the thousands of people each day who fall through our society’s safety net. Executive Director Barry Stenger remarked, “At St. Anthony’s we are blessed to be the link between caring and generous people who have stepped up to donate their food, time, and funds to make this work possible, with those who line up each day in need of our services: the working poor, seniors living on fixed incomes, low-income families, the mentally ill, and veterans struggling to rebuild their lives.”

Senior Feinstein said there is a steady stream of disadvantaged residents who depend on St. Anthony’s. “It wouldn’t be San Francisco without St. Anthony’s,” she said.