

Leadership Profile of Quibila A. Divine of Strengthening and Empowering Lives and Futures, Inc. (SELF)

Chuxuan Sun 20 January 2020



Photo Credit: Reverend Efrain Cotto

Introduction

As an intern of Strengthening and Empowering Lives and Futures, Inc. (SELF), I recently had the opportunity of interviewing Quibila A. Divine, the Director of Programs at SELF, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. SELF was founded nearly 30 years ago by Dr. Sylvester Outley. Their mission is to motivate, empower, and inspire individuals to live their best lives. Their initiatives helped establish Philadelphia's emergency housing system and programming for the homeless behaviorally challenged and substance-dependent populations. As the director of

programs, Quibila works across multiple sites and with various partners to develop, implement, coordinate, and evaluate the agency's transformational goals for the homeless population served.

Q: What was the motivation that led you to want to join or lead SELF?

A: SELF's mission comes from a position of compassion. Because of that, its caring for individuals who are homeless resonates with me. When I was in college, my grandfather told me, "Don't get so smart that you forget what you got smart to do." I took that to mean that whatever education I get, I should come back and teach those less fortunate than me. And I did. I was born in North Philadelphia and I returned there after I finished my first degree. I started a nonprofit organization called the Educational Advocates Reaching Today's Hardworking Students, Inc. (EARTHS) to tutor children in my community who were not learning the way their teachers were teaching. I voluntarily tutored children two nights a week, two hours a day. As we (my sister, Sylvia P. Simms, and I) were tutoring the children, we saw that we also had to help their parents because when sending children home, many parents needed to understand how important it was to reinforce learning at home. I worked with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) as the director of the Governor's Institute for Parent Involvement and with The School District of Philadelphia in the Office of Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. I helped

parents and caregivers understand their roles and responsibilities to be actively engaged in their children's education. My sister started a group called PARENT POWER (What Will You Do With Yours?) to help the families. Together, we applied for a grant and got funded from the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). Subsequently, I contracted as a homeless monitor -- I was the person who went to different school districts to determine whether they were doing what they needed to do to support homeless students and their families. After doing that for two years, I was invited to join the team at SELF.

Q: How is SELF different from organizations with similar goals?

A: The difference that distinguishes SELF from other nonprofits in Philly is its leadership. The President and COO at SELF, Michael Hinson, really gets it. He works hard on behalf of homeless individuals. His vision is that he, as a leader, creates more leaders. So, he does not limit the leadership within the agency. He creates opportunities for everyone to feel that they can also be a leader -- not only the team members but also the participants. We are doing some advocacy work to help participants understand that they have a voice and ensure that issues that are of importance to them get heard by elected and appointed officials. Under Mike's leadership, the SELF team really values receiving feedback from all participants within the

program about the services that are provided to them... not only from our organization, but also from our funders, the City, and anyone else who is providing services to the homeless. We want to know how they feel and what we could do better and differently to improve their situation.

Q: How and when will you know if you've achieved success?

A: I would know that I have achieved success when there is no more homelessness in Philadelphia. I guess I'm working to eventually eliminate the need for my job.

Q: Why do you think SELF will achieve the impact you desire?

A: We have the right team, a very committed group, and individuals who understand that homelessness is temporary. Someone who is homeless today does mean that they lack the skill, knowledge, or experience needed to move forward and move permanently out of homeless. We strive to do whatever it takes to help make that happen with them.

Q: If you were to start over with the knowledge you have today, what would you do differently, and why?

A: If I had the knowledge that I have today, what I would do differently is to ensure that homeless parents are part of the education process (going back to when I was working in the school district). I want to make sure that

parents understand the importance of education, so the cycle of poverty does not continue. If that was to happen back then perhaps, there would not be as many homeless families in Philly as we see today on the streets.

Q: What is your relationship with your funders? How are you part or not part of a coalition of similar types of organizations?

A: SELF has a good relationship with the Office of Homeless Services, which provides the majority of its funding. In addition, they support the work we do, and we rely upon this organization in our work with Winter Initiatives and Code Days. Whenever the weather gets too cold or too hot, we bring in people from the streets into a temporary shelter. We ensure that our team members understand and follow the funders' guidelines. Our strength is that we maintain lower error rates and make sure that all the participants are taken care of with care and compassion. We have an outreach team that recruits participants and refers them to emergency housing. We service about 700 participants a day, we feed all participants three meals a day, seven days a week. We strive to make sure that if they do not have places to live in, they are provided with a bed to lay in and food to eat.

Q: Has there been critical events in SELF that has caused your organization to shift the organization model or mission?

A: There have been some things that happened before Mike's leadership. There was some financial impropriety at SELF. However, since Mike has come on board, there has been an increase of about \$3 million that is available to SELF. With this funding, we have expanded our programs. We have nine different sites in Philly, and we are slowly expanding the number of people we can actually house. Mike helps us see how things are not working out for the community we serve. As a result, he asks the questions, is it better to do x over y or how is that serving the participants? From that perspective, one would have to analyze and see that maybe, the current approach is not serving the participants. As a result, SELF has procured many changes in policies. We challenge the status quo and we also help the funders see how these changes are needed to improve the situation for the participants.

Q: How do the different strategies of your organization come together to accomplish your mission?

A: As for strategies, we have several different positions here in the administration. We have a team meeting every other week of all the program managers. We also have a meeting with other homeless providers. We are a partner with the Urban Affairs Coalition, which has several different organizations, some of which service homeless people and have worked together to obtain funding because we serve the same population. Another strategy that we will implement more this year is to ensure that

partners are servicing our participants with fidelity and being held accountable for outcomes that benefit our participants.

Q: What are your most significant challenges? Why? What is your process for resolving them?

A: We are striving to service mentally ill participants who are not mandated to receive service. This limits our capacity to transition them out of homelessness. Some do not know the best they can be doing. As an agency, we can't mandate them to get treatment...even if they are in addiction. Though the services are out there to help them, we can't make them take advantage of them. The best thing we can do for a homeless person is to find them a permanent home and help them to understand the financial aspects of maintaining a home so that they do not transition back to homelessness. For more information access the SELF newsletter at <https://conta.cc/30dUpJE>.

Author bio

Chuxuan Sun is a first-year Master of Public Administration candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government. She has developed a passion for environmental protection following her experience as an international volunteer in the Maldives during her undergraduate studies. Chuxuan has an interest in continuing her studies in environmental and educational policy.