

Leadership Profile of Mary Kay Meeks-Hank, Executive Director, Face to Face

Louisa Garrido 20 January 2020



"All she can for her corner of the world."

No matter how you come to Face to Face -- as a volunteer, donor, or most importantly, a guest -- you are made to feel welcome. Their motto is "Hospitality, Mutuality, and Transformation." Started as a soup kitchen out of St. Vincent de Paul Roman Catholic Church 35 years ago, Face to Face incorporated as a separate 501(c)3 over 20 years ago and works to provide basic human needs for those affected by deep poverty in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia.

When Mary Kay Hanks-Meek started as executive director at Face to Face in 2009, she had never run a not-for-profit organization. The cornerstone of Face to Face's services is its dining room where guests are welcomed with warm interactions and delicious meals. However, in Mary Kay's first two years there, she had felt a sense of discomfort with the manner in which the guests entered the building. Guests (the term used to refer to those who receive services) would line up in the hallways and outside the front door. Her first decision as executive director was to remove the stanchions and have guests enter the dining room to wait and then be served restaurant-style by volunteers and staff. She made a seemingly quick and insignificant change, yet her decision expanded the feeling of inclusivity and empathy for everyone. Guests feel loved, with a top down approach to being treated as equals. They assume trust, and it feels like a safe place. In Mary Kay's words, "It has made all the difference."

Despite her inexperience in leading an organization on paper, Mary Kay has grown Face to Face over the past 10 years through a successful capital campaign that surpassed its \$5 million goal and has increased the annual budget almost two-fold. As she says, "there are many ways to skin a cat," and she sees her leadership strength as her ability to weave relationships of staff, board members, volunteers, and guests. Many of her abilities are innate and in Peter Drucker's words as summarized by Jim Collins "do what you're made for" is a great way to

describe Mary Kay's personality and path to leadership. Raised in a traditional Catholic family, Mary Kay married and began raising a family in Bucks County. Always interested in gender and racial equality, she obtained a master's degree in Sociology, and became an adjunct professor at LaSalle University. About 15 years ago, she was looking for a progressive and open-minded Catholic Church and came across St. Vincent de Paul in Germantown. She and her family made the commute every week and began volunteering at the Sunday meal at Face to Face. After connecting with founder Eileen Smith, Mary Kay was encouraged to take a paying job with Face to Face as a part-time Operations Director and within 18 months was hand-selected to replace Smith upon her retirement. Mary Kay hit the ground running in an organization that had very little structure or any semblance of a fundraising plan.

The Face to Face team is largely de-centralized and non-hierarchical. Mary Kay has surrounded herself with "the right people" who have helped achieve growth while maintaining a unique environment to help their guests feel at home. Her lean team of 14 consists of a program director, a finance and human resources director, dining room director, and a development and communications team of three that work fluidly together. Mary Kay thinks ahead and was instrumental in securing a long-term lease from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and conceiving of the capital campaign to refurbish their historic building.

Through drive, focus, and determination, she was able to kick off the campaign by asking the Maguire Foundation for \$1 million directly to which they said yes. The campaign brought the function of the building to new heights and has allowed a pre-K program administered by Mercy Neighborhood Ministries to set-up in the building. She knows that impact will be achieved for those facing deep poverty through education of their children.

Level 5 Leadership, (Collins, *Jim Good to Great*, 2001) is an attainable goal for Mary Kay. She has the proper combination of humility and will where she stays laser focused on Face to Face's core issues -- urban poverty and its effect on African Americans in Germantown -- and doesn't take credit for the successes of the organization. She sees everything as a team effort and is humble enough to consistently reassess and change programs as needed. With the decision to open a pre-K program, an after-school program and summer camp for elementary age children had to be eliminated. It was a painful decision, but necessary to be able to "do better" by creating and growing a program that would serve more families in the neighborhood. She has to have many difficult conversations with staff and guests and uses her listening skills, empathy, and resolve to facilitate the transformative atmosphere. The paradox of hope and reality she confronts every day doesn't stop her from moving the flywheel in her work. A succession plan was not discussed, and eventually she will have large shoes to

fill but undoubtedly filling her role is on her mind. In her words, her leadership "doesn't have a fancy recipe, and mutuality creates messiness," but Mary Kay Meeks-Hank brings hope to this microcosm of Philadelphia and her work can and will create a ripple effect.

Despite the raw human suffering she witnesses on a daily basis, Mary Kay works to keep her heart soft and stay resolved. She is courageous and inspiring in the way she tells the story of Face to Face, believes that depth trumps breadth, and despite the current trend to focus on outcomes and numbers, in the end, leadership in the social sector is all about relationships.