

Leadership Profile: Mr. Wesley R. Payne IV, Board Chair, Bethesda Project Partner, White & Williams LLP

Mandy Tsang 27 January 2016

"You don't just take from the society, you have to give back." Those are the words Wesley R. Payne IV, board chair at Bethesda Project, emphasized as a theme throughout the conversation I had the privilege of having with him about Bethesda Project, how he got into the nonprofit sector and his leadership style. For more than thirty-six years, Bethesda Project has been working to end homelessness one life at a time. Bethesda Project's mission is to find and care for the abandoned poor, and to them, the people that they serve are not nameless numbers, they're members of the Bethesda Project family. The core values of service and family that the Bethesda Project represent are consistent with Wesley Payne's background and ideals, making both a great fit for each other.

Before assuming his role as board chair at the Bethesda Project, Wes was a board member for more than six years. In addition to his work there, he also serves on the board

at the Homeless Advocacy Project, and sits on several pro bono and civil boards while active in many legal organizations. Apart from all of this, Wes is a partner at White and Williams LLP, a law firm with over 240 lawyers in ten offices. Based in Philadelphia, Wes has over twenty-six years of experience representing insurance carriers and insurers in first- and third-party litigation matters. He also serves as a Judge Pro Tem for the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. Wes obtained his BA from Washington and Lee University and his JD from the University of Maryland, School of Law.

The duty to serve others and give back to society has been instilled in Wes' mind throughout his life. When he was in seventh grade at The Boys' Latin School in Baltimore, Maryland, Wes had the opportunity to be involved in a community giving program where he worked with kids who were on the verge of being homeless. As a result, the mindset to serve others and give back to society followed him through his years at Washington and Lee University and to the army. To this day, as an attorney, he still believes that you have to do something for others, not just for yourself.

Wes' attraction to Bethesda Project ("Bethesda") came about through many sporadic exposures. One of his earliest interactions with Bethesda's work was when his eldest daughter prepared meals for residents at one of Bethesda's locations as her high school service project. Another exposure was through the legal clinic that Wes

ran at Our Brothers Place (one of Bethesda's locations) where he got to know many of Bethesda's residents. The final draw that led to Wes' deeper involvement with the organization was when he met Bethesda's founder, Father Domenic Rossi. Wes was moved by Father Domenic's passion and vision to end homelessness by becoming a family to Philadelphia's most vulnerable citizens, the chronically homeless. Wes recognized this as a great concept to end homelessness in the city and he ultimately joined the board of directors.

Wes said what makes Bethesda unique is that many organizations believe that "the way to address [homelessness] is to start at the top of the ranks and work your way down. Bethesda does the exact opposite; it is the most affected chronic homeless that we target to help. So the people at the very bottom, the people who are literally falling through the cracks, [they] are not on most organizations' radars. If we can save one life, one year or winter, then it was worthwhile."

When asked about how Bethesda measures impact, Wes admitted that it is an area that Bethesda is working on improving. Because of the qualitative nature of their mission, Wes said that the best examples of impact are the individual stories of the residents who have gone from rock bottom, to a daybed, to a bed of their own, to almost living self-sufficiently because of their experience with Bethesda Project. Wes emphasized that "it is great to be able to say everybody [we serve] progressed, but that is

just not true, people hit rock bottom, they try, they fail, go back to rock bottom, they keep going and trying, but what Bethesda is there for is to be that family that says 'it's ok to fail as long as you keep trying and you will eventually succeed.'"

Speaking about socioeconomic impact and how Bethesda's work benefits the city of Philadelphia, Wes understands that it's important to obtain grants or corporate sponsorships. However, Wes' focus is not on how businesses can specifically benefit from Bethesda. At the end of the day, Bethesda values getting people out of the cycle of homelessness and getting them back to the society, thereby society is stronger and businesses profit from a strong society. When asked what Bethesda's greatest funding needs are, Wes quickly said "unrestricted gifts for operating costs."

Additionally, Bethesda hopes to secure funding for the Bethesda Project Beacon. The Bethesda Project Beacon fulfills Bethesda's vision of creating a one stop shop for all needs relating to homelessness. According to Wes, raising seed money for a redevelopment project such as Bethesda Project Beacon is as challenging as raising operating funds. Not many donors are excited to give seed money, as they want their money to directly help the individuals. Though challenging, Wes is optimistic about the project and the many individuals it will benefit.

Bethesda Project has had its share of setbacks, one of

which, according to Wes, has been a failure to plan ahead. The founding concept of the organization "has always been every nickel that we can put forth to getting people off the streets, do it. Even our board meetings are run with that thought process in mind. If donations or grants come in, we automatically look to whoever is next in line to help now and not really who we can help three to five years from now." However, the Board has started to embrace the idea that it's good to have more reserves for the future to prepare for a rainy day.

Guiding and implementing this slightly new financial concept is one of the challenges Wes faces as board chair. But what Wes loves about the Bethesda board is that it is run through consensus and everything is voted upon. "The first thing about leadership is knowing who you are and not who you want people to see you as." Wes was a commissioned officer in the army and everyone always assumes that when you give orders, the orders get followed, but that's not how Wes was taught to lead. Wes is a great believer in listening, "not just listen, but really listen and appreciate." This is advice that he would share with anyone at any stage in life and profession. Wes believes that an effective leader is one that utilizes the people and the team around them, "you don't have all the ideas, sometimes the best ideas come from those around you and it's the leader's job to select and implement those best ideas."

When I asked Wes whom he admires as a leader, Wes

responded with a very historical choice, Abraham Lincoln, which surprised me. Wes probably sensed that I was slightly shocked and went on to explain that he admires Abraham Lincoln because he was an individual placed in an impossible situation and he had never been trained to lead a country through a civil war, having to make some very tough decisions while getting consensus. "And somehow, through self-confidence and not thinking too greatly of his own importance, he was able to cobble together not only a way to eventually win the civil war, but to do it in a way to not allow the country to be split."

When I asked Wes what inspires him every day, he answered that it is his family. Everything he does, he does so that his family can be proud. Wes never wants to feel ashamed to tell his family what he did that day. From our conversation, it was clear that Wes and Bethesda Project have the same core values, which are family and helping those in need. It is evident that Wes is part of the Bethesda Project family and is extremely passionate about Bethesda's mission. Even when we talked about the challenges and setbacks of Bethesda, he committed to the 'glass half full' perspective that everything will be ok in the end as long as Bethesda Project continues its goal to end homelessness one life at a time.