

How Honeybees and Cross-Sector Partnerships Provide Second Chances for Returning Citizens

Daniel J. Rossi & Brenda Palms Barber 24 April 2017

Mass incarceration has devastated communities throughout the United States. Today, more than 2.3 million Americans are incarcerated, including one in 15 African-American men.¹ More than 95 percent of these prisoners will eventually return to their communities.² However, even after serving their time, many are caught up in a revolving door of barriers as they fight to turn their lives around. Sweet Beginnings, LLC is a social enterprise that provides needed second chances to these returning citizens.

Located in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, Sweet Beginnings provides transitional and permanent employment to adults with felony backgrounds by maintaining urban apiaries throughout the Chicago area. Workers also produce and sell honey and honey-infused skincare products under the beelove™ brand. The social enterprise is a wholly owned subsidiary of the North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN), a 501(c)3 organization dedicated to serving the unmet employment

needs of North Lawndale residents.

In North Lawndale, the unemployment rate is 21 percent and the per capita annual income is \$12,548.³ While the community is rich in history and culture, mass incarceration, deindustrialization, and systemic racism have deeply affected its economy. NLEN's program model is a community-rooted response to these forces.

In 2001, NLEN commissioned a study to document the devastating impacts of mass incarceration in North Lawndale. While one in 100 adults are incarcerated nationally, in North Lawndale the ratio is one in four. When including those on probation or parole, up to 57 percent of North Lawndale's adult population is actively engaged in the criminal justice system.⁴

Returning citizens regularly list employment as one of their highest priorities upon returning home.⁵ In North Lawndale, this is no different. Since 2001, NLEN has operated the U-Turn Permitted job readiness and placement program. This four-week training, rooted in cognitive-behavioral therapy, prepares adults with felony backgrounds for employment. However, while we knew that our graduates were job-ready, capable, and dedicated, employers remained reluctant to hire them.

While a fascinating idea, the truth is that Sweet Beginnings was born out of frustration: frustration at a criminal justice system infected with racism, frustration

that a criminal conviction could haunt someone years after they served their time, and frustration at employers' refusal to hire returning citizens. Ultimately, founding NLEN Executive Director Brenda Palms Barber decided that if employers were not willing to provide that first chance to her graduates, she would create that chance herself.

But why bees?

After considering several ideas from temp agencies to lawn care, a friend was bold enough to suggest beekeeping. Palms Barber was drawn to beekeeping because it is an ancient profession passed on through storytelling and can be learned by anyone, no matter their skills or experience. Better still, through production, manufacturing, and sales, workers would be exposed to a number of business processes.

If NLEN's goals were not only to create opportunities, but also to erase the stigma of a criminal background, what better ally than the humble honeybee? Despite the fear and stigma surrounding honeybees, they pose little threat to the public. Honeybees produce humanity's oldest natural sweeteners and moisturizers. They see no difference between flowers and weeds but draw out the sweet and good from any plant to share with their colony. And while media outlets headline violence and drugs in North Lawndale, the community's historic tree-lined boulevards produce flowers and people that are sweet,

good, and redemptive.

But how do you turn this vision into a thriving social enterprise that has employed more than 400 people? How do you give credibility to an idea that, to some, seemed nothing short of insane?

Partnerships and recognition have been essential in building our business. NLEN launched Sweet Beginnings in 2004 with seed grants from the Illinois Department of Corrections and the City of Chicago. These grants included wage subsidies to hire those currently on parole in three-month, paid, full-time transitional jobs.

Government officials acknowledged the tremendous economic turmoil caused by mass incarceration and survival crime. Politics aside, something needed to be done about the tens of thousands of prisoners returning to Chicago each year and jobs creation was their strategy.

Palms Barber also enlisted the help of the business sector. Employees of The Boeing Company drafted Sweet Beginnings' first business plan as part of a volunteer strategic consulting initiative. After the plan was presented to a review board of Boeing executives, Boeing decided to increase its involvement. A Boeing employee still holds a seat on NLEN's Board of Directors.

Meanwhile, staff quickly realized that Sweet Beginnings was pursuing a path of most resistance. Due to contractual terms and the impact goals of transitional

jobs, the business model intentionally offers employment periods of only 90 days. This model comes at the cost of high employee turnover. Further, beekeeping is seasonal work and honey, a commodity, has low profit margins. To expand profit margins and ensure year-round work, Sweet Beginnings began infusing beelove™ honey into skincare products.

beelove™ products also had to compete on the same shelf against major retail competitors. Palms Barber worked with local universities to guide product sales: University of Chicago conducted focus groups to define Sweet Beginnings' customer base, DePaul University interns created our operations handbook, and Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Business developed a market strategy.

Word about Sweet Beginnings began to spread. In 2006, NLEN had its breakout moment when it earned the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Then, in October 2007, the Chicago Tribune highlighted Sweet Beginnings in a four-part, front page feature written by Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Louise Kiernan. The feature paved the way for other media coverage. Soon, Sweet Beginnings was featured on CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, the New York Times, Inc. Magazine, and several local TV stations.

Awards and media coverage provided Sweet Beginnings with desperately needed credibility. Palms Barber

continued to strategically stretch the farthest reaches of her network to gain access to decision-makers, funders, business consultants, and government officials. Over time, reactions evolved from "you are trying to do *what* with bees and returning citizens?" to "I heard about that! Where can I buy your honey?"

After four years of selling at farmers' markets, beelove™ products spread onto the shelves of local boutiques and co-ops. A strategic partnership with Whole Foods provided Sweet Beginnings a new customer base and opportunities for our employees to practice selling in a retail environment. Today, beelove™ has an even greater grocery presence through distribution in 29 Mariano's grocery stores. Mariano's has also hired many our transitional workers into permanent positions.

Sweet Beginnings' dual function in returning people and land to productivity furthered its growth. The Chicago Department of Aviation (CDA) has worked with Sweet Beginnings to advance its environmental sustainability initiatives. In 2010, CDA Commissioner Rosemarie Andolino approached Palms Barber and asked if she would be open to maintaining an apiary of one to two hives on vacant airport land. Palms Barber quickly agreed, suggesting, "How about 100"? The Sweet Beginnings O'Hare apiary was the first airport apiary in the United States and today is one of the largest in the world.

The Sweet Beginnings-O'Hare partnership was

recognized with the 2012 Urban Land Institute Vision Award and the 2014 Airports Going Green Award. It also introduced Sweet Beginnings to new airport retail outlets including HMSHost, Hudson, and Rick Bayless' Tortas Frontera restaurant.

With support of Cook County Commissioner Robert Steele, Sweet Beginnings established a similar relationship with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County in 2014. We now maintain apiaries at two Forest Preserve locations, conduct onsite honeybee education programming, and sell products at community events.

With all that Sweet Beginnings, has accomplished, there are still opportunities for growth. Sweet Beginnings has four permanent employees but hires 20 to 30 transitional workers each year. A high priority is scaling the business to offer more full-time jobs. While our transitional workers are prepared for careers in manufacturing, assembly, distribution, and sales, employers still have biases against workers with criminal records, particularly those with violent convictions. But this bias is unfounded. While 52 percent of individuals released from Illinois prisons are reincarcerated within three years, in the last 10 years fewer than eight percent of our employees have been.^{6,7}

Our next phase of growth will include significant capital investments to improve production efficiency and meet growing product demand. While NLEN will always maintain 51 percent ownership of Sweet Beginnings, we

are seeking equity investors to bring the business to scale.

This is the growth that our workers and North Lawndale deserve. Sweet Beginnings is an economic development strategy that can be pollinated nationwide. But it takes big partnerships – government, business, academic, and community – to respond to the even bigger forces that created economic exclusion. It also takes patient leadership and trust that community members can and will do good when given the opportunity. Sweet Beginnings is just one of a number of untapped innovations in communities like North Lawndale around the country. Real investments in these innovations will yield great social and economic return. The only question is whether leaders are bold enough to give these innovations a chance.

References

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Brenda Palms Barber Bio

Brenda Palms Barber has been the NLEN Executive Director since its founding in 1999. She has a Master of Science degree in nonprofit management from the Spertus Institute. Under her leadership, NLEN has grown from two to 20 employees, launched the Sweet Beginnings social enterprise, generated an annual budget in excess of \$2.4 million, and received numerous awards including one of the first MacArthur Foundation Awards for Creative and Effective Institutions in 2006, the prestigious 2015 Bank of

America Neighborhood Builders Award, and 2012 Chicago Neighborhood Development Award - Special Recognition. Brenda is a 2008 Aspen Institute Ideas Fellow. In 2013, Seventh District Congressman Danny Davis awarded her with the Cardiss Collins Trailblazer Award. Brenda has raised the national profile of NLEN through national media including CNN, the NBC Today Show, CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley, and a recent TEDWomen Documentary. In 2008, she attended the Harvard Business School's Strategic Perspectives in Non-Profit Management program as a Roman Nomitch Fellow. Brenda is also a graduate of the Chicago Urban League's nextOne program, an intensive business marketing entrepreneurial training program that included classes at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Brenda holds a Bachelor's Degree in business management from the University of Phoenix.

Daniel J. Rossi Bio

Daniel J. Rossi, Evaluation and Innovation Manager, provides leadership and strategic direction to NLEN program evaluation and data management projects. Daniel brings six years of direct service experience to NLEN, as well as experience in federal and local government. Prior to joining the NLEN team, Daniel completed two years of AmeriCorps service and worked as an HIV/AIDS test counselor and educator. Daniel holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from

Illinois Wesleyan University and earned his Masters of Public Affairs from Indiana University in 2013.