

Ready, Willing and Able by Patty de Llosa

From Bad to Good: You can get here from there.

Ready, Willing and Able trainees in Liberty State Park, Jersey City, N.J.

Let's call him Joe. When I stopped to chat with him on the street one hot summer day, he was sweeping up New York City's detritus, dressed in the familiar blue pants and shirt of Ready, Willing & Able. Joe told me he got out of prison four months ago. "I've learned my lesson," he said dolefully, "but once I got out the situation was pretty dismal." That's when he turned to the Doe Fund, as tens of thousands of homeless men and ex-cons have done since 1990.

One of some 700 current members of Ready Willing & Able, the Doe Fund's flagship training and sustaining organization, Joe will spend the next few months cleaning the streets for a small hourly wage while the organization offers him a place to sleep and three meals a day. His evenings will be spent working for a GED and learning computer skills. (There are also drug relapse prevention workshops, AA/NA meetings, conflict resolution, financial management, and parenting classes.) Then, if all goes well, Joe will move on to career training and apprenticeship in fields ranging from vocational training to commercial driving to culinary arts. Hopefully he will graduate at the end of nine to twelve months with his own job. However the Doe Fund's help doesn't stop there. Joe will have earned his way to lifelong resources, including career counseling, job placement assistance, and additional training and education opportunities. What's more,

after completing the program, each graduate receives five \$200 installments over a six-month period on proof of active engagement in the workplace.

The Doe Fund (www.doe.org), a brainchild of George McDonald, a garment manufacturer, was born in response to a tragic incident. In the mid 1980's McDonald spent many evenings passing out sandwiches to the homeless in Grand Central Terminal. "It was a terrible time for the homeless in New York City," he says. "They were treated like trash, literally: while sleeping in garbage bags, they were mistaken for garbage and run over or crushed by trucks on the streets. When you see people who need your help, people who are suffering, you have a duty to figure out a way to help them."

On Christmas morning 1984, a woman known to those living in Grand Central only as "Mama" was found frozen to death outside the Terminal after having been evicted by the police. McDonald, whom the police knew well from having arrested him several times for giving out food, was asked to identify her body. To add to his shock, she still clutched the scarf he had given her as a Christmas present the night before. Her death was the determining factor in his decision to find a way to give homeless people "a hand up, not a handout"—a room and a job to pay for it.

"Mama Doe's tragic death was emblematic of the larger issue for the homeless," he says. "That we, as a city, were willing to only go so far to help. We'll give them food but not skills. We'll give them shelter but not a job. When I heard from the homeless people I was getting to know in Grand Central that what they really wanted was a room and a job to pay for it, and that they were willing and able to work—and work hard—to achieve that kind of independence, it was clear that what we needed to provide wasn't a handout but opportunity."

George McDonald, Founder and president of The Doe Fund, 2011

Today the Doe Fund's 400 fulltime employees (some 70% of them graduates of the program) operate four programs to help homeless and formerly incarcerated individuals achieve permanent self-sufficiency. Ready, Willing & Able does this through a 9-to-12-month transitional work program like Joe's. Once graduated (by which RWA means staying sober and maintaining a full-time job and a place to live), he and other members are offered lifelong resources. The second program is an intensive non-residential work and education program for recent parolees, and the third a veterans program which offers homeless vets transitional work and housing, counseling and benefits advocacy, life skills, educational assistance, occupational training, job readiness, and graduate services. The fourth program is built around affordable housing for low-income individuals and families as well as supportive housing for individuals and families who face a variety of complex challenges such as chronic homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and chronic unemployment.

The Doe Fund has succeeded in offering less fortunate citizens of the world we all share a path to self-respect. The best indication of the rightness of George McDonald's approach

to homelessness—and his wife, Harriet, has been a full and equal partner in dedication to the cause—is through some of the results:

One of RWA's early graduates, Dallas Davis grew up in a single-parent household—his father gone, his mother an alcoholic. "I was an angry kid," he recalls. "I dropped out of school in the seventh grade, and by age 15 I had left home and joined a gang." He was soon homeless and living on the streets. "I'd do anything just to stay warm—go into churches, abandoned buildings, even Grand Central Terminal. And that's the one place where I do remember someone showing me kindness." He refers to McDonald—who handed him sandwiches before The Doe Fund was founded.

"After 48 arrests and 5 felony convictions, I had nowhere to go," says Dallas of his last prison sentence. "But I had started to recognize that if I kept spending time with the same dysfunctional people—and doing the same dysfunctional things I had always done—I'd get the same dysfunctional results." Released from prison, he was referred to Ready, Willing & Able by his counselor. "I tossed and turned that night, but the next day I got up, put on a shirt and tie, and marched through the doors of the Harlem Center for Opportunity (the 200 bed facility where RWA trainees live and work). I had been through so many institutions in my life—jails, group homes, drug programs. They always told me what they could do for me. But this was the first time that I was told what I could do for myself." Dallas at first resisted the job of cleaning the streets. But "a funny thing happened during those first few blocks," he says. "Turned out I didn't mind it at all. In fact, I kind of liked it! I wasn't just picking up trash from the street, I was picking up integrity. I was picking up values. I was picking up self-esteem. And then, when I would look back at the block I had just cleaned, I would see what a great job I had done—and I picked up pride."

One of his most gratifying experiences was actually one of the most grueling. "During the huge snowstorm in early 2010, we were out there making paths for the elderly, for children, for people to get to work. Here we were, people who had slept in the garbage, in the train stations, under bridges—those who society once thought couldn't accomplish anything. We were the ones bringing the city back to life."

Dallas describes the difficulties of reconnecting with his family: "I never had anything to offer, but I had plenty to take," he explains. "I didn't know about healthy relationships...And I really didn't know my children, or the woman who had given them to me." Over the course of several months, his family began to warm up to his new role as a father and husband. "They began to see that instead of taking things, I started giving them. Today they look up to me for guidance, and they honor me. My wife sees me as a partner, someone who is there when she needs me."

Dallas currently works in maintenance management and is pursuing his associate degree in human services. "When I'm done, I hope to go into counseling," he says. "I want to be able to help people just as I was helped. Ready, Willing & Able did for me what my mom couldn't do, what my teachers couldn't do, and what all those judges and program directors couldn't do. It showed me that I have potential."

Nazerine Griffin was an armed robber, stealing for his drug habit. He came to RWA from a homeless shelter. "We were a bunch of warehoused human beings with no way out," he

says. He's now the director of the Fund's Harlem Center for Opportunity. "I AM this program," he declares. "I'm a straight-up product all the way. I used to think it was corny to go to work from 9 to 5, but by the end of my run, all I wanted was to go to work. I can remember hiding under cars after selling crack all night long, watching people get up and go to work and thinking, 'I wish I could go to work.'" Now a role model and mentor to many of those coming through RWA, he says, "There's nobody better to lead you out of a minefield than someone who has been in it."

However the ticket RWA offers to a new life isn't exclusively for the down-and-out. The other day I asked a man sweeping on my street for his story. He hopes the Doe Fund will help him to a new beginning after messing up the company he ran for 11 years. "I made a lot of mistakes," he told me, "but I've learned my lesson. It's the Man Upstairs who guides me now and I'm here to make a new life with my wife and son."

Mural in Brooklyn, N.Y., 2011

Since 2009 the Doe Fund has run a Veterans program, and Van Sherrod has profited from it. A Marine Corps vet who lived a comfortable suburban lifestyle with his wife—he was paying off his mortgage and working for a marketing firm even as the ghosts of his tour of duty in Beirut, when 299 of his fellow corpsman were killed in an attack on their barracks, began to haunt him. "At that time, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder wasn't widely known so I was misdiagnosed by doctors for years," he says. When the economy collapsed, his wife was laid off and his work ended. Three suicide attempts later, he met a Doe Fund recruiter at the Bellevue Men's Shelter. Today, Van lives in Staten Island with his wife and is taking the steps toward a Master's in sociology. "I want to know what causes people to think and behave in certain ways," he says. "Too many people are hurting and are hiding the pain because they feel they have no one they can trust."

Levant Bracey fought in Operation Desert Storm. "Life in the desert meant you never knew when you'd fall under attack or lose a friend," he recalls. "That's when fear and anxiety began to enter my life." Diagnosed with PTSD on his return, his life began to fall apart. So he entered The Doe Fund's Veterans Program, happy to be "finally part of a team again," he says. Levant later enrolled in New York University hoping to become a motivational speaker because, as he says, "I am living proof that people can overcome adversity."

Today the Doe Fund's programs—transitional housing, transitional work, career training and licensing, and social services—have been replicated dozens of times throughout the United States and other organizations from around the world turn to them for advice on

how to develop similar programs. When asked if he was satisfied that it corresponds to the vision born in 1985, McDonald replies, “people want to work and be paid. That was how we started and that’s at the core of what we do today. The Doe Fund has a restlessness to it: there are programs and pilot projects always in the works as we strive to develop and innovate new ways of serving both the homeless and the city.”