

Nonprofit director's purpose is to help others find theirs



Mike Kilen, mkilen@dmreg.com 3:55 p.m. CST December 24, 2014



(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

Marvin DeJear Jr. was all business on a gray December day.

Crisply dressed, the 39-year-old began talking with the language on his resume — "strategic operational plans" and "integrated support service networks." One could begin to see how he founded a general contracting firm in 2006 at age 31, sits on many boards around Des Moines, is director of the nonprofit Evelyn. K Davis Center for Working Families and is working toward a doctorate.

"He looks the part. He carries an aura of professionalism," said Elisabeth Buck, chief community impact officer of United Way of Central Iowa, which joined Des Moines Area Community College to form the Davis Center in

2012. "We are here to be 'work ready,' " she said of the center's mission, which is to help individuals improve their financial position and help them meet their work and career goals. "He always looks 'work ready.' "

DeJear had a tight smile at first, but his passion soon emerged.

"Helping people to a better quality of life drives me," he said. "I'm not here for personal gain. I'm not here for recognition."

In its first two years, the center provided 8,903 services to Iowans, including searching for jobs, finding training or education, or locating housing, mental health or substance abuse treatment. It's a one-stop shop model that has spread to 30 other U.S. cities.

DeJear has big plans for the center in 2015: more programs for youth. More classes for people to learn English. More people with more skills to add to the workforce.

"We see people come in here on their last straw," DeJear said.

He talked about a man who came into the center who was living in a hotel with his wife and kids. He got some training, and now has a home and a job.

He talked about spiffing clients up, showing them how to dress and act in the job world, and watching their confidence grow.

"You may have had problems in life, but you can change the things that have stopped you," DeJear said. "I didn't have a lot growing up, so I know."

Mom's advice: Work through problems

He grew up in Tulsa, Okla. His parents divorced at age 9. His mom, Carolyn Flynn, worked two jobs — a day shift and one at midnight — to make ends meet.

"You can always come to a positive end if you work through it," Flynn said she told him as a youngster. "Don't just throw up your hands and say, 'I can't do it.' Wherever you are in life, you can do it."

She taught him how to cook and to hold down the fort by watching his younger brother while she worked.

It wasn't easy. Gangs were swirling around the boys, recruiting. His little brother joined the Crips gang.

"I never joined it, but I had to deal with all the things that came with it because I would still not let anybody mess with my brother," DeJear said. "I even had a gun put to my head when I was 15."

He looks back now and realizes he was in survival mode. Sure, he did well in school, earning a high college entrance exam score and a scholarship at Iowa State University.

He went on to get a master's degree in business administration, then worked in project management for a construction firm in Des Moines before launching DeJear Enterprises LLC, a general contracting company specializing in commercial renovation.

But something was missing. Part of him was still that kid back in Tulsa who knew a lot of people were suffering. He was that kid whose mom told him he better get his tail to church every Sunday.

So when he heard about the job of operational manager at the new Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Adults, it all clicked. This was how he could serve. He faced four rounds of interviews, six subcommittees, two rooms full of 15 people firing questions at him.

He got the job, and after a year was named director. His no-nonsense tone for his staff and clients, Buck says, is also infused with deep empathy.

He views services as investments

Whether a person is homeless or fresh off the loss of a high-paying corporate job, the center has formed a network of services to help people find the education and skills to do everything from building a resume to solving their personal issues.

"Wherever you are in life," DeJear says, "we'll help you."

He calls this cost-free service a community investment. For example, a person without a high school diploma loses more than \$700,000 over a lifetime, he said, which could be spent in the community.

He can talk about spearheading partnerships and implementing budgets with the best of them, but his human touch fully emerged after that gray December day's interview.

He sent an email and apologized for not opening up. It was his faith that got him to where he is, he wrote, "not the things that others said define someone as a man or being successful."

He found what had been missing more than a decade ago, and it eventually guided him to his place at the center.

"I decided to follow God's plan versus the alternative of living the fast life, partying hard, and making choices that had me taking from the community versus helping it," he wrote.

It helps him understand the people who come to him at the center, some of them frustrated and without hope. What he wrote next in the email was his advice to overcome those frustration — and it wasn't buttoned-down management-speak.

"The biggest challenge I face in my role at the center is fear. The fear of people willing to be uncomfortable with themselves, and this applies to people we serve and partners. The fear of going against the status quo. ... The fear of bettering your situation by just committing some time. The fear of truly collaborating because they might not get credit. The fear of going against the biases, the politics, losing power or status. The fear to walk away from money, power, politics, and divisiveness and look past the stereotypes. The fear of trust in God and having the faith to fulfill your purpose in his plan to help everyone have an opportunity and be treated fairly. Fear is the obstacle we all face daily and it is time more than ever for us all to have the courage to understand we are all human, one body under God, and stand up for the things that are right."

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MARVIN DEJEAR JR.

Age: 39.

Lives: Des Moines.

Education: Bachelor's degree in business administration, Iowa State University; master's of business administration, ISU, 2003.

Career: Director, Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families, Des Moines, 2012-present; founder and general manager, DeJear Enterprises LLC, Des Moines, 2006-present; adjunct professor, William Penn University College for Working Adults, 2006-present; project manager, Pinnell Brown Construction Inc., 2002-06.

Family: Wife, Deidre.

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15 PEOPLE TO WATCH IN 2015

These are central Iowans in business, arts, nonprofits, civic activism and nonelected government positions who are expected to make a difference in their fields of endeavor in 2015.

Readers were invited to submit nominations. Selections were made by Des Moines Register editors and reporters.

Look for profiles daily through Jan. 4.

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Up next: Jennie Smith, owner of Butcher Crick Farms and a sales manager at Kemin Industries.

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