Suited For a Second Chance

Last week, just after the Blue Jacket Clothing Company opened at 10:00 a.m., I went outside to view the newly donated signs that the clothing store committee created. Most of the summer flowers on our grounds were in full bloom with the garden finally sprouting fruit. Two graduates tended to the watering and cultivation of the garden beds, they waved as I passed. With over thirty students in class, cars packed the parking lot. The campus was alive. I imagined myself a customer and began to walk through the freshly painted Blue Jacket Clothing Company doors.

As I entered, I was overtaken by the aesthetics of this thrift store that rivals many department stores. I chuckled under my breath, giving thanks for a powerhouse committee that helped put together an electric environment to shop. I was grateful for the many people that showed up at the right time to make the impossible happen. Like a family friend that happened to work at Glenbrook Mall, who out of the blue called and gave us first rights to anything in the old Marshall Field's Department Store. Like a team of MBA students from IPFW looking for a business to evaluate. Like the AWS Foundation who not only provided the space but the support to repair the damaged lights and mechanicals. I was grateful for the donors, for the army of volunteers, contractors, and designers, all showing up at the right time.

This store embodies class.

As I walked a few more feet into the store, I was greeted by the sweet smile of Misty, a Blue Jacket graduate and volunteer, who is a former prostitute in recovery from her drug addiction who witnessed an unimaginable trauma a few years ago. Her addiction affected the quality of teeth in her mouth, but not her smile. Her glow is infectious. As my staff recollect, Misty is the best volunteer that we have ever had. Misty holds out her hand to shake mine, greets me with a kind hello and jokingly recites the welcome pitch, "Welcome to the Blue Jacket Clothing Company, have you been here before?" She directed me first to the boutique area. She has been unemployed for some time and she is awaiting her opportunity in customer service or housekeeping. I've seen her delicately serve our customers and she handles their money at the register. We trust all of our graduate volunteers with this big role. They meet our expectation every time. She talks "street," a slang-like drawl in her syntax. Her passion likely drives customers to understand our mission better as they shop. She is the reason we are in business, because she is doing it right.

The hope, redemption, and pride that this store provides are palpable.

In the future tailoring area near our checkout counter, Jerry presses the freshly washed donated product, preparing it for the floor. His age, his trade, his physical appearance and his criminal background make him seem virtually unemployable, but we all have an odd hope that the right employer match will come along. He somehow drives here nearly 5 times per week to put in 7 hours per day recording new donations; laundering, tagging, and measuring. He has credited over 1,000 volunteer hours in this store as he awaits his opportunity at paid work. He job searches before and after each shift. He has a witty sense of humor, and I ask him if he missed me while I was on vacation, he responds quickly with, "You were gone?" Jerry's commitment to productivity prompted his elderly father to buy him a more reliable vehicle to get him to Blue Jacket. Last month his immediate family including his children, who are often the unseen victims of any crime, came in to visit Jerry and his accomplishments inside of the store. This was a display of forgiveness that we seldom get to witness. Jerry waves to Jamone who is walking with a mop in his hand.

Jamone voluntarily cleans our office building while awaiting his opportunity. He has not worked a day in his life. He went away to prison at age 12 for homicide. He is Fort Wayne's infamous offender that shot a civic activist to rob $300 from him. The Judge stated at sentencing, "When you get out you will either be one scary son of a bitch or you will be rehabilitated." Jamone is not expected to make it, coming from a notorious family of criminals. My staff members all agree that his crime and conviction might have been the ticket out of that life and that Blue Jacket could be the vehicle driving him. We hope, and we pray. Fort Wayne needs less violence. Through everything we see, he is leading himself to his own freedom. His social skills are lacking, his attention deficit and diabetes keep him distracted. He appears here to clean religiously because he seems to feed on our interaction with him. At first, he made us nervous. We work with him on task lists, on boundaries, work ethic, and professional etiquette. This is usually in passing, because the staff at Blue Jacket is very busy, working double time. We seem to be the only ones that Jamone trusts to hear the truth. As I walked by Jamone toward the main office he forgot to smile when he greeted me, a learned social skill from the streets. I quickly corrected him, and instantly his smile made his salutation much more welcoming. I think to myself, how does one rebound from that life? Where would Jamone be if there would be no Blue Jacket? Last week, the same local minister that referred him to Blue Jacket helped me set up Jamone's first interview as it went very well. He has hope. He believes in himself and in the academic world, we state that he possesses 'self-efficacy', which is an intrinsic belief that he can achieve his goals. We are learning that this is a bigger predictor for someone not committing another crime than employment.

Jennifer Crickmore, our Clothing Store Manager catches my eye and waves her index finger in the air as I walk by her office, I stop and hear that she just arranged for a free load of mulch for the gardens, because this year, she somehow got everything donated to our urban farm. Then a non-English speaking family makes their way past me, smiling and nodding, carrying dress slacks and shirts. Jennifer informs me that they are repeat customers, here almost every week. She stopped me to inform me of two Blue Jacket board members that continue to donate things from their clothing and hardware stores. Jennifer, an impassioned employee, has a story of her own. She too is a graduate of Blue Jacket and hopefully one day a retiree. Since graduating our training three years ago, she gained confidence to obtain a college degree and she is now working on her second. She shines a light on redemption, and for many walking through our door, hope.

After I plopped into my office chair, I decided that a gift of appreciation is providing you with a glimpse into what I get to see daily. Yes, I could have written a letter providing statistics or peripheral facts about the impact of your donation. Instead, I am giving you this true story because we serve people not numbers. This is a major reason why we left the federal grants. I chose to write this for you because when many thought the wheels were going to fall off the Blue Jacket bus one month ago, you had faith and supported us. You supported me. I thank you for contributing to Blue Jacket's cause.

We serve the hardest of the hardest to employ. More important than fighting a battle against crime, we fight a battle against an enabling culture. We specialize in it. We provide long-term development of a human being's right to work and to be productive in this world. We hold people as accountable as the world should expect. This is why Blue Jacket is so exciting.

Over one year ago, we created this store as a small, strategic income stream to help Blue Jacket's sustainability and to relieve the glut of clothing donations. However, it quickly turned into something more miraculous than we expected because there are, at this very moment, hundreds of stories like Jerry, Jamone, Jennifer and Misty, and many of these stories are best seen firsthand in the Blue Jacket Clothing Company.

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