

MICHELE BRIA:

LEADING A JOURNEY TO CHANGE



At a Journey House retreat, board members and leaders spent time trying to figure out how to deal with two perplexing problems in the organization's Clarke Square neighborhood – abandoned housing and homeless youth who had aged out of foster care.

Soon city and county government, an alderman, a neighborhood initiative, the public schools and others were involved, coming up with an innovative solution, says Michele Bria, chief executive officer of Journey House.

As a result, four old houses “with great bones” have been rehabilitated into homes for young people, where they can learn the skills needed to transition to higher education or careers while building a credit record as renters. Nearby, plans for an affordable, intergenerational apartment complex are underway as part of the project.

As with much of the work Bria and Journey House do, this was a collaborative effort – the city sold the houses to Journey House for one dollar; a grant paid for repairs and renovation; the police helped remove the criminals; John Miceli, a UWM alumnus and retired architect, helped with the designs for the housing and voluntarily oversaw the renovation; Journey House and the county's WrapAround program provide training and support for the residents; and students from Youth Build, a Journey House-MATC partnership, got on-the-job training in rehabbing.

“Now we have some affordable housing for these talented young people who don't have a place to live, and we've taken abandoned, ugly property and turned it into beautiful houses,” says Bria. “The

neighbors see what's happening so they're painting their fences and fixing the holes, the neighborhood has become safer, we've started a garden and we're building community and economic development.”

That's the kind of innovative effort Journey House specializes in. The community-based organization provides education programs, career development and recreation opportunities for thousands of Milwaukee residents – primarily Latino and African American – in 14 zip codes on the South Side and in the Clarke Square neighborhood.

Bria got her start in building creative collaborations while she was working on her School of Education dissertation on how to build effective school-community partnerships. That led to Journey House's partnership with Longfellow School. Eventually Journey House itself moved from a group of houses in the neighborhood to a \$6 million dollar center adjacent to the school. That center houses workforce development programs, adult education classes and after-school tutoring programs.

Journey House has also expanded its athletic leagues, operating the Felix Mantilla Little League and opening a \$2.5 million dollar football stadium in June 2013 – with artificial turf from the Green Bay Packers' practice field. The team's donation makes the stadium the only location outside an NFL stadium that's allowed to use the NFL logo, says Bria.

The athletics programs, says Bria, are one way of building pathways and pipelines to academics. “We call all of our athletes ‘Scholar Athletes.’ Those programs, like most at Journey House, bring partners together with neighborhood residents to make

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change. The UWM athletics department and student athletes volunteer in the sports programs, and Journey House has made UWM’s ‘structured study hall’ model part of its program,” says Bria. The Journey House athletes have to take part in two to four hours of structured study hall to practice and participate in games.

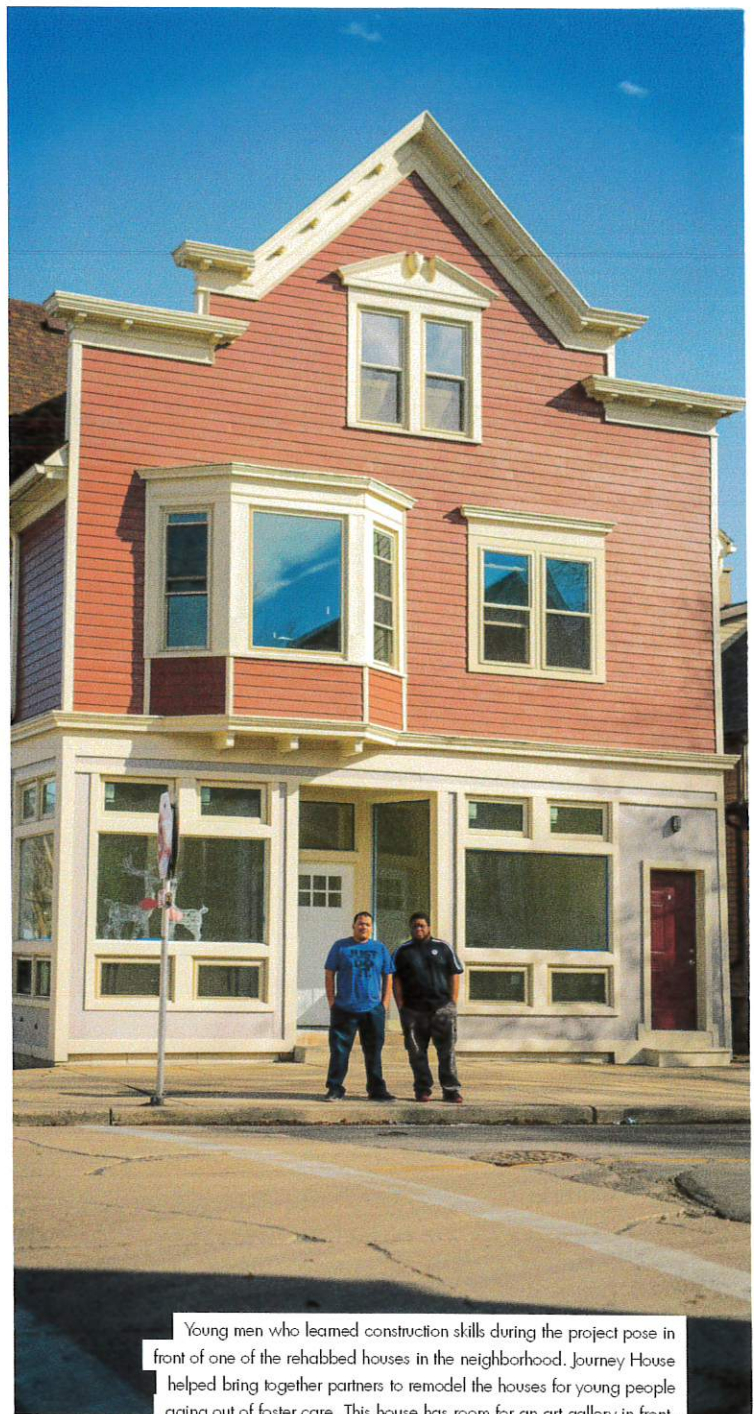
Other UWM schools and colleges provide volunteers and expertise as do Marquette, MATC and many other community partners.

Bria credits what she learned at UWM for helping her develop the organizational and community partnering skills that make Journey House such a force in the neighborhood. Since she became executive director in 1998, the agency has expanded from a small operation with two sites and a \$200,000 budget to a multimillion dollar complex that serves thousands daily.

Along the way, she’s been honored with the Donald Driver Driven to Succeed Award as well as awards from the State of Wisconsin Martin Luther King Heritage Award, Business Journal Woman of Influence, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Marquette University Spirit Award. (She did her undergraduate and master’s work at Marquette).

For her, says Bria, Journey House is a 24/7 job, though she occasionally takes a weekend trip to New York to visit with her daughter, hang out and do some cooking.

Her not-so-secret weapon in keeping everything in balance and building partnerships with collaborators – even those who may not usually work together well – is advanced breathing to relieve stress. It’s a mind calming technique she encourages her staff and everyone Journey House works with to use.



Young men who learned construction skills during the project pose in front of one of the rehabbed houses in the neighborhood. Journey House helped bring together partners to remodel the houses for young people aging out of foster care. This house has room for an art gallery in front.

Her explanation: “When we breathe together, we decrease the production of cortisol. Cortisol leads to stress. By doing some simple breathing techniques, it really allows you to focus, and when you focus you become more creative. Then when you get a lot of great minds together in a room, you’re really going to maximize the talent in that room.”

Finding ways to bring partners together, and thinking creatively about projects like the recent housing rehabilitation program, are vital to solving problems, says Bria.

“We try to meet our mission of helping families out of poverty, and building community. That makes for a stronger neighborhood, a stronger Clarke Square, a stronger South Side, a stronger city, a stronger region, a stronger state and a stronger country.”