

Frederica Williams: Transitioning to Fulfillment

Position: Chief Executive Officer, Whittier Street Health Center

Start Date: 2002

Education: London School of Accountancy; MBA, Anna Maria College; graduate certificate in administration and management, Harvard Extension School

Previous For-Profit Experience: accounting, health care finance consulting

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Dimock Community Health Center, Partners Healthcare, Children's Hospital Boston

Organization Information: urban community health center providing primary health care and outreach services to nearly 12,000 individuals from culturally and circumstantially diverse communities around Boston; founded in 1932; located in Roxbury, MA; 103 employees; \$8.5 million budget

After growing up in Sierra Leone with a rich sense of community, Frederica Williams felt detached and unfulfilled working at a large hospital. By switching to the nonprofit sector, and working at a community health center, she has found both her biggest challenges and her biggest rewards.

"We were all caught up in the bottom-line focus, I was working crazy hours, I had kids, and I wasn't even enjoying it. I wasn't feeling the connection to the work, and I wanted to bring my experience to a community-based nonprofit. I needed to feel a sense of family and community. I also felt that the hospitals were Caucasian male dominated, and I had much more experience than they recognized. I was torn between my money, my dignity, and my future, and I wasn't fulfilled."

"I wanted to be in a visible leadership position with relationships with the community, and I wanted to be around diverse populations—in terms of race, religion, and class. I am a citizen of the world; that is how I was raised. And then suddenly I had found myself in this one-dimensional world. I had acquired a lot of skills, and I believed that I could use them to have a personal impact. I wanted to be a role model for women of color, and I wanted to be able to teach people in my job."

"When I finally announced I was going to a community-based health center, people thought that I had lost my mind. They said things like, 'Do you know they don't have any money?!'"

"I ended up doing more hours and ended up doing more things than I ever thought I would do. It was baptism by fire. But I didn't resent the hours away from home like I did before. Every time I turned around,

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor

Boston, MA 02116

P 617 572-2833

F 617 572-2834

New York

3 Times Sq., 25th Floor

New York, NY 10036

P 646 562-8900

F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor

San Francisco, CA 94104

P 415 627-1100

F 415 627-4575

I would see the men in the detox program or the halfway house. Every time I wanted to get frustrated, I saw the people that it was all about right in front of my nose."

"People there were impressed by PowerPoint presentations! Putting all of my skills from the private sector to work and helping an organization that had limped along for many years was incredibly fulfilling. One thing that drove me crazy at the large hospitals was the endless committee meetings required to make a decision. Now I could just go get it done without the fuss."

"At the large nonprofit hospital where I worked, we had a very formal environment, and at the community health center to which I initially moved there were people constantly in my space, and it was overwhelming, so many people coming into the office with no boundaries. The resources were lacking, they owed millions of dollars, and I realized that my whole life could be dominated by cash concerns if I let it."

"People have a perception that people in the nonprofit world don't know what they are doing. But I have had to be savvier here, because if you don't have resources, you have to be innovative and creative. Anyone who wants to be a leader, to be entrepreneurial, then the nonprofit world would be the best place to go."

"I'm working to implement a community-based and community-driven post-prison release program (Whittier's Post Prison Release Collaborative). The collaborative will include community leaders and residents working together to provide supportive services to ex-offenders. This program should have an impact in the reduction in the rates of recidivism, provide ex-inmates with an opportunity to improve their life-styles, improve public safety and improve the quality of life of community residents. The range of services will include primary medical care, programs, and job training job placement."

July, 2003

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.