

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

CHARITY DEVOTED TO LOW-INCOME SENIORS

President says keeping our elderly healthy, independent benefits the whole community

Name: Paul Downey
Occupation: president and CEO of Senior Community Centers, a San Diego charity that helps low-income seniors remain healthy and independent while reducing health-care costs to the community
Born: in San Diego
Current residence: Mount Helix
Age: 52
Family: wife, Mary Curran-Downey, and two grown sons



Paul Downey

Q. How did you get involved with seniors?

A. I was working for an elected official, and our office volunteered to serve lunch at Senior Community Centers (SCC) once a month. At first, I have to admit that I wasn't the most enthusiastic volunteer SCC had ever seen. At 26, I didn't think I'd have anything in common with the center's clients. As it turned out, the center was filled with seniors who had fascinating stories to tell — living historians who only needed to be asked to share their amazing experiences. They also taught a middle-class kid what poverty looks like and, more importantly, the fortitude it takes to overcome it.

In 1995, I learned that SCC was looking for a new president and CEO. By this time I had developed a deep passion for seniors and aging-policy issues and jumped at the opportunity to join the organization.

Q. What is the impact of Senior Community Centers?

A. We keep seniors healthy. Healthy seniors remain independent. Independent seniors go to the emergency room less often, spend fewer days in hospitals and can eliminate or defer the need for long-term care like nursing homes. Healthy seniors are infinitely happier. The biggest challenge is that 86 percent of our seniors live on less than \$11,000 per year and spend three quarters of their income on rent. Providing wrap-around services that meet basic needs such as food, shelter, health and mental-health services is critical. But we also recognize that just because someone is poor doesn't mean that he or she can't give back to the community in a very meaningful way. Our civic-engagement program helps seniors find ways to be active and engaged based on their skills and abilities. The seniors feel empowered and the community benefits; it's a win-win for everyone.

Q. Any big revelations about aging that you have discovered?

A. A few months after becoming presi-

dent and CEO, a woman named Marvel spoke with me about two seniors who had recently passed away. Since neither had family, she wanted to know if we could have a memorial service in our dining room. I said of course and asked if she knew what religion they were so I could arrange appropriate clergy. Marvel shook her head and said, "The seniors all want you to do to the service." I explained that I was not a minister but would be happy to get one. She said, "You don't get it, do you? We want someone who knew these folks. It isn't the dying we're afraid of, it's that nobody will notice." Talk about being hit over the head with a two-by-four. The notion that people could die and go unnoticed had never occurred to me. I think of this story often to remind myself to always acknowledge, respect and honor each individual who comes through our doors.

Q. What else have you learned?

A. The adage about not judging a book by its cover is true. Too often judgments are based on what is seen — gray hair, wrinkles, the need for a cane or wheelchair, use of a hearing aid — and many people assume the person is somehow no longer vital, relevant or can even remember being young. A dear friend of mine, a retired clinical social worker now in her 80s, says she can

recall walking into a room and feeling important. Now she feels invisible. As a community, we all need to do a better job valuing the wisdom that comes from age and learning from it.

Q. What have been your most gratifying moments?

A. I think about major milestones like the 2003 opening of the 200-unit Potiker Family Senior Residence, which provides affordable housing with supportive services for seniors living in poverty in the East Village area. Opening the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center in 2010, also downtown, redefined a model of service delivery for the rest of country — and it's significantly reducing health care costs.

My favorite gratifying moments involve simply walking through our facilities. Invariably, I will be stopped by a senior who tells me that Senior Community Centers has been a lifesaver. There is no such thing as a "bad day" after one of those moments.

Q. What is your advice to people who want to make San Diego a better place?

A. Let's eradicate ageism from our words, deeds and the media.

For more information about Senior Community Centers, call (619) 235-6572 or visit servingseniors.org.