

# WSJ.

June 10, 2010

## Higher Ground

Rosanne Haggerty has found a way to use good design and business savvy to take the blight out of the city



Most homeless shelters don't have ballrooms. Walking into the elegant lobby of New York's old Prince George Hotel, with its richly hued woodwork, feels like you've entered some Merchant Ivory movie, not a residence for displaced individuals. It's the surprising creation of Rosanne Haggerty, founder and director of the nonprofit Common Ground. Her organization creates similarly attractive facilities across the city—some elaborate renovations like this one, some built from scratch. The goal is a benign and inclusive form of gentrification. In the ballroom, Haggerty points out the marble mantel above the fireplace and the restored coffered ceilings by gilded-age architect Howard Greenley. "Why not? Good design doesn't have to cost more than bad design, and it benefits the whole neighborhood," she says.

The tool she counts on most is empathy. "You can comfortably walk past a nameless guy in Harlem, but once you know that it's Ed, a Vietnam vet with cancer, you can't be comfortable anymore," she says. She humanizes her appeals—for everything from grants to zoning variances—by giving real names, real faces and life stories. "All our problems are interconnected. Nothing's tidy."

Haggerty, 49, grew up outside Hartford, Conn., and at 17 had to help her mother take care of her seven younger siblings after her father died. As an undergraduate at Amherst College, she majored in American studies—her senior thesis was on Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and social critic. After graduation, she volunteered at Covenant House—the homeless teens' charity—on 43rd Street in Times Square. There was a massive, derelict hotel next door that she couldn't get out of her mind. "The Times Square Hotel was so big and so visible," she says. "My mind was drawn to what could be done with it." For the next seven years, she worked with Catholic Charities, learning, among other things, how to apply the new Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) while working on a housing project in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood.

LIHTC became a key ingredient in a funding drive to redevelop the Times Square. "Part of it was timing," she says. "It was a new program and not a lot of people knew how to use it." She launched Common Ground in 1990 and pulled together a group of investors that ran the gamut from J.P. Morgan to Ben & Jerry's. Her biggest collaborator was Paul Crotty, a lawyer who had served as New York City Mayor Ed Koch's commissioner of housing preservation and development. "He thought I was a bit of a crank at first," she says. "But he understood that the city needed new strategies for homelessness."

By the time the Times Square Hotel reopened in 1993, Common Ground had turned the 652-unit building into a state-of-the-art homeless and low-income housing facility. It was "supportive"—in that it had onsite counseling services to help residents turn their lives around—but it also had a garden roof deck, a computer lab, a library and an art studio. It became a showcase for doing things differently.

Haggerty went back to Columbia for a master's in real estate to improve her entrepreneurial skills and is now working toward a PhD in sociology at New York University. Along the way, she picked up a MacArthur "genius" grant of \$500,000 for her innovative work. But none of this has distracted her from her vision. "Rosanne has a strong Roman Catholic social justice background," says Mike Gecan, senior organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of community organizers. "Her commitment is deeply rooted. It's not a fad. It's in her makeup."

Her street experience and continuing education enabled Haggerty to try out more sophisticated strategies—to renovate the Prince George Hotel and turn it into a residence, she knit together 10 funding sources, including JPMorgan Chase, Fannie Mae, the Corporation for Supportive Housing and Deutsche Bank, to buy the building through a foreclosure and bankruptcy process

When the Prince George reopened in 1999, it offered job-training counselors, health services, psychologists, therapists and even acupuncturists. "We make it easy for people to succeed," Haggerty says. And that luxe ballroom? "We organized a job-training collaboration with four other not-for-profits who restored the space," Haggerty says, explaining that this reduced the cost to \$1.5 million. The ballroom now generates \$800,000 in annual rentals.

"Rosanne takes conventional wisdom and turns it on its head," says Alexander Gorlin, an architect who designed the recently opened The Brook in the South Bronx, a housing facility built on a former cockfighting venue at 148th Street. "People on the street stop by and ask, 'Is this a new condominium building? How do I get in?'" Gorlin, who is best known for designing high-end homes in the Hamptons and Manhattan, gave the shelter open-air terraces, a community vegetable garden and a shared green-roof landscape

Instead of polarizing neighborhoods, Common Ground's facilities become anchors of stability and cohesion. "Supportive housing is not reducing the long-term value of neighboring properties," says Ingrid Gould Ellen, director of NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, who co-authored a study that demonstrates the positive impact this type of housing can have on the surrounding neighborhoods.

In a way, all of this has been in preparation for the group's biggest challenge to date: the Brownsville Partnership—taking on one of the most blighted and seemingly hopeless neighborhoods in New York. This is not a single building with a few hundred residents. This is 13,000 people living in a dysfunctional housing project in a crime-ridden section of Brooklyn. "Can you imagine what it takes to raise a family there?" asks Haggerty, who admits trepidation about the sheer scale of the undertaking. The project is still in the planning stages, but Common Ground will collaborate with a variety of city agencies, including the Department of Health and the Department of Housing Services, to rehabilitate the four crumbling buildings, adding 300 units using capital investments of more than \$100 million over the next four years.



"Brownsville is another example of Rosanne's tenacity and focus," says John Feinblatt, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's chief adviser for policy and strategic planning. "You can't play one-note here. She recognizes the interdependencies of all the problems. She understands you have to have a wide lens."

Common Ground's approach in Brownsville is preventive: to create safe, neighborly environments, to stop homelessness before it occurs. Still, it builds on many of the lessons they've learned along the way.



"There's no silver bullet. We're using many of the same ideas that worked in our smaller projects," Haggerty says. "You have to know everyone by name and localize what you're doing." She and her staff attend weekly coffee klatches in the neighborhood, where locals can share their concerns, and they've already begun helping families at risk of eviction get aid.

Once again she's enrolled architects, landscape designers and planners to envision what the future might look like: to improve circulation, foster connection and help to heal old scars. A master plan by architect Gorlin projects a giddily hopeful vision, built upon the ruins of the crumbling 1950s/1960s infrastructure. He shows the grim brick buildings transformed into a lush green utopia with rooftop gardens, wind turbines, solar collectors and urban agriculture in the common areas. Is this real or is this science fiction? "Alex did it as a way of starting a conversation," says Haggerty of the speculative plans. "Ultimately, it's about getting the community involved in engineering a new kind of neighborhood."

The insight that runs through all of Common Ground's work, its buildings and now the Brownsville Partnership, is that taxpayers are spending a fortune to maintain a broken status quo in neighborhoods like Brownsville, and that it is possible to fix these problems with practical investments for no more than what we're spending to maintain them.

"Each of the 205 evictions we've prevented in the last two years among families on the verge of homelessness saved taxpayers \$32,000 for the cost of sheltering a family in the NYC shelter system," Haggerty says. "In the end it's actually cheaper to do the right thing. It costs less to solve the problem than maintain this vast system of emergency services."

Haggerty and Common Ground are now partnering with 19 other U.S. cities, helping them organize their own resources to house 100,000 vulnerable homeless cases over the next three years. (To reach that goal, they'll eventually need to expand the program to 200 cities.) "She's driven. She's engaged. She's always reaching out for another idea," says David Panagore, COO of the City of Hartford, who has worked with Haggerty on the development of the Hollander, a 70-unit residence in downtown Hartford. "And she's a closer."