

A Sweet Mission



The Greyston Foundation Bakes Brownies and Builds Lives

by Mari Rich



Dion Drew had plenty of time to think during a four-year prison sentence, which he received for selling drugs in his struggling neighborhood in Southwest Yonkers, New York. There, close to a third of all residents live below the poverty line and more than 40 percent of all adults lack high school diplomas. “I had been dealing since I was 14 and in and out of jail since I was 19,” Drew recalls. “So during that long four-year term I decided I was finally going to stay off of the streets and get a real job when I got out.” Drew knew that upon his release it would be difficult to find legitimate work because of his criminal record. Then he remembered hearing about the Greyston Bakery, a Yonkers-based facility with an unusual policy its management calls “open hiring.” An applicant need only walk in and put his or her name on a list; as soon as a post opens up, the applicant is hired—with no questions asked about work experience, criminal history, substance abuse problems, or past mental health issues.

Soon after leaving prison, Drew, now a youthful-looking 36, put his name on the list, and he was hired as a bakery apprentice two weeks later. He recently celebrated five years with the company and has been promoted several times. “You could say I’m in middle management now,” he says proudly. “I help with research and development, and I’m engaged in training new workers, many of them neighborhood people I used to hang around with.” He continues, “I think it’s ironic in a way that I once took so much from the community by selling drugs, but now I’m giving back to that same community in a very positive way.”

Asked if he might still be dealing drugs if he wasn’t working at the Greyston Bakery, Drew replies, “There is no question I would still be out there getting into trouble. This job has allowed me to take part in what I call a ‘real’ life. I get up every day and come to work, and I earn a living wage that lets me support my family.” The only sad part: after five years on the bakery floor, the naturally thin Drew doesn’t even smell the aroma of brownies anymore. “I take them home sometimes though,” he says, laughing. “The kids love them.”

Dion Drew, who once served prison time for selling drugs, has been promoted several times in his five-year career with the Greyston Bakery.

The Greyston Bakery Story

Greyston's motto is: "We don't hire people to make brownies, we make brownies in order to hire people." But hiring—and the visionary way the company goes about it—is only one of the objectives of the Greyston Foundation, the umbrella organization that oversees the bakery and several other programs. The motto could be: "We make brownies in order to hire people, offer high-quality day care for their children, help them find affordable housing, provide services for those living with HIV/AIDS, teach them to garden, and foster their personal growth in a holistic way." While that might make for an excessively long motto, it only begins to describe the scope of the group's mission.

How that ambitious mission began to be fulfilled involves a cast of characters that even the most creative Hollywood screenwriter might have difficulty imagining. Among them are a former aeronautical engineer turned Buddhist master, a pair of ice-cream magnates, and an award-winning architect.

In 1982 Bernie Glassman, a Brooklyn, New York, native and former aeronautical space engineer who had given up that career for the serious study of Zen Buddhism, borrowed \$300,000 and opened a small bakery in the New York City borough of the Bronx. He hoped that the bakery would provide jobs and income for members of the Zen Community of New York; that group, which he had founded a few years earlier, originally operated out of a run-down donated mansion in the Bronx called the Greyston Estate. (In preparation for the new venture, the aspiring bakers had traveled to the San Francisco Zen Center, whose members ran the popular Tassajara Bread Bakery, to learn about commercial food production.) Glassman, believing that employment was the first and most critical step in solving issues of homelessness and poverty, also recruited local homeless people to work in the bakery. The business was soon supplying a line of cakes and desserts to high-end retail outlets and restaurants—whose owners sometimes intimated to diners that the selections had been made by their own pastry chefs. While it might have been

equally profitable to produce basic, less-upscale confections, Glassman was determined to prove that his employees could not only work at a skilled profession but excel at it. (He was particularly proud when Greyston's cheesecake was named the best in the region by Zagat.)

Glassman later moved his base of operations to an abandoned 1920s-era lasagna factory in Southwest Yonkers. While some Yonkers residents were initially skeptical, thinking that the Buddhists would prove to be proselytizing nuisances, Glassman and his charges slowly won them over, donating food to local soup kitchens, engaging in community service, and—incidentally—baking decadently delicious desserts.

In 1987, at a meeting of the then-fledgling Social Venture Network, a group dedicated to connecting business leaders and social entrepreneurs who shared the goal of creating a just and sustainable economy, Glassman met Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, the founders of the thriving ice-cream business Ben & Jerry's. The pair were developing a new ice-cream sandwich and looking for a bakery to provide a thin, chewy brownie for it. Glassman agreed, realizing that a commercial account the size of Ben & Jerry's would allow him to offer work to many economically disadvantaged job seekers.

Jessica Alicea, a Greyston child care worker known to her charges as "Miss Jessica," is currently earning a college degree.



The first shipment of brownies that arrived at Ben & Jerry's Vermont headquarters in 1988, however, had become stuck together in unwieldy hunks. An attempt to excavate individual brownies from the 50-pound blocks only resulted in a crumbled mess. Frantically trying to salvage something from the shipment, workers stirred the crumbled pieces into batches of chocolate ice cream, serendipitously creating one of the most popular flavors in the history of Ben & Jerry's—Chocolate Fudge Brownie.

Today, some 90 percent of the bakery's brownies are used by Ben & Jerry's as "mix-ins" for the Chocolate Fudge Brownie flavor and for Half Baked, a best-selling variety that combines chocolate and vanilla ice creams with brownies and bits of chocolate chip cookie dough. Additionally, the brownies can be purchased via the Greyston Web site, and the company recently partnered with Whole Foods to make the baked goods for that company's Whole Planet line.

Open Hiring Requires Open Hearts and a Pragmatic Mind

The brownies—30,000 pounds a day of them—are produced by more than 80 people who, like Dion Drew, faced significant barriers to employment before coming to Greyston. Mike Brady, the president and CEO of the bakery, which brought in revenues of \$10 million in 2012, explains, "No matter what mistakes some-

one has made in the past, everyone deserves a second chance. That's the philosophy behind our open hiring." He realizes that the work is not for everybody: for one thing, jobs in the bakery—which can require lifting enormous sacks of ingredients and withstanding excessively hot temperatures—are physically arduous. New hires are also sometimes unprepared for the demands of showing up for work on a regular basis and adhering to certain standards of workplace behavior. For that reason, all must undergo a rigorous training program, and their attendance, punctuality, and performance are monitored closely during six- to eight-month apprenticeships. "We are exceptionally serious about quality, safety, and cleanliness," Brady asserts. "So, as you can imagine, we have very strict requirements for our bakery employees."

Some don't come in for a second day of work, and others stop showing up after receiving their first paychecks. Brady takes that phenomenon in stride. "Of course, people like Dion, who remain with us for years, are enormous successes," he says. "But in some respects, everyone who walks in our door and puts their name on our list is a success. They're taking steps to change their lives and we're happy to help them, whatever stage of readiness they're at." If an employee stays at the bakery for the entire apprenticeship period, he or she is eligible to join a union and to receive periodic raises as well as generous

Social Enterprises: Where Mission Meets the Marketplace

In his well-regarded book *Faith and Fortune: How Compassionate Capitalism Is Transforming American Business* (2004), journalist Marc Gunther writes: "Is Greyston's model replicable? In theory it is—[but few of its] achievements have come easily. The bakery is a small workplace that has benefitted from patient, charismatic and deeply committed leadership [and it] has been sustained by the Ben & Jerry's deal. ..." Jerr Boschee, a co-founder of the Social Enterprise Alliance (SEA), respectfully disagrees with those sentiments. "Greyston is a prime mover in the world of social enterprise, but you don't need a charismatic founder or a multimillion-dollar contract to be successful," he asserts.

Boschee explains that the term "social enterprise" refers to organizations that directly address social needs through

their products and services or through the number of disadvantaged people they employ. The revenue earned can be a significant part of a nonprofit's funding stream, which might also include charitable contributions and public-sector subsidies; as Boschee notes, this distinguishes social enterprises from traditional nonprofits, which rely primarily on philanthropic and government support.

Boschee does not have to think hard or consult any materials to reel off examples of social enterprises in a wide variety of fields and sectors: "The Delancey Street Foundation, which is based on the West Coast, provides job training and other needed services to former gang members and drug addicts, and they run a dozen businesses, including a restaurant, a car service, and a moving company. Gulf Coast Enterprises

employs more than 1,000 people with severe disabilities such as cerebral palsy and blindness, and they engage in everything from janitorial work to administrative and clerical support. Homeboy Industries, which was started by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest, provides things like job training and legal services but also tattoo removal, because that's a real barrier to employment for the former gang members the group serves. Their motto is 'Jobs Not Jail,' and their social enterprises include a line of salsa and a custom silk screening business. The list just goes on and on."

To read more about the Social Enterprise Alliance, whose motto is "Where Mission Meets the Marketplace," and to learn more about the history of the social enterprise movement, visit <https://www.se-alliance.org/>

benefits. Some 35 percent of those hired successfully complete the apprenticeship process, and Greyston estimates that its open-hiring system saves Westchester County, where Yonkers is located, more than \$1 million a year, thanks to reduced recidivism in the prison system.

The Greyston Foundation, which Glassman founded in 1992, operates with the support of public and private donors including the Detroit-based Kresge Foundation; New York's Gary Saltz Foundation; the May and Samuel Rudin Family Foundation, also headquartered in New York; and the financial services giants Bank of America and Wells Fargo. The Greyston Foundation—which oversees the bakery as well as programs for both employees and nonemployees—also engages in workforce development, training aspirants for a variety of jobs in fields known to have consistent need for employees, such as medical billing, customer service, and building maintenance. Greyston then provides job-placement assistance. Since the workforce-development program was implemented, in 2009, it has helped more than 200 participants enter the work world.

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Making a Path at Greyston

While Glassman knew that having a job is an important element of a meaningful, productive life, he also knew that it is just one element. As a result, Greyston has instituted a program called PathMaking, which involves assessing employees' strengths and challenges to help identify specific issues, habits, and life experiences that aid or hinder positive movement along their individual paths. The PathMaking program helps employees set long- and short-term goals and encourages them to develop unity of body, heart, mind, spirit, and self.

While that may suggest New Age idealism, PathMaking is a decidedly real-world program with tangible results, providing guidance in continuing education, physical and mental health, nutrition, literacy, and personal finance, among other important areas. The Ruth Suzman PathMaking Center at the bakery, named in honor of one of its most devoted board members, features a library and several new computer workstations. “Our goal in PathMaking is to help people become more self-sufficient and self-assured, so they can become stronger participating members of the community,” Steven Brown, the president and CEO of the foundation, explains. “And—whatever you care to call it—that can only benefit the entire community.” An

example of the program's benefits is Celia, who has two young children and has worked at the bakery for nine years. Celia was embarrassed about not being able to read well and wanted to read to her children. Through the support of the PathMaking women's group, Celia was paired with a volunteer reading specialist, who came to the bakery to meet with her for several months during her work shift (on company-paid time). Celia was able to register for classes to receive her Servsafe Certification at Westchester Community College the following year. She is one of four bakery employees currently enrolled in a bakery-sponsored PathMaking/Workforce Development GED pilot program.

The Other Stepping Stones

The remnants of a bagel and muffin breakfast buffet are spread out near the entrance to the Greyston Child Care Center, located just a few blocks from the bakery. “That’s left from the parents’ meeting we just had,” Jessica Alicea (or “Miss Jessica,” as her young charges call her) explains. “We don’t just provide day care and after-school programs. We have general meetings for parents where they can voice their concerns, parenting classes especially for fathers to encourage them to be a part of their children’s lives, sessions where everyone can get advice on child development ... really, anything we can do to increase parent involvement, we’ll do.”

Alicea not only works at the center—which is free of charge to all bakery employees and provides affordable care to other Yonkers residents—she is the mother of two preschoolers who attend it and a seven-year-old who arrives in the afternoon for an after-school program. All three have been coming since infancy to the center, which is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). “This is like a second home for them,” Alicea says, “and it’s that way for many of the children. I’ve been here since 2000, and I’ve gotten to see several of our students grow up. Some of them I met originally in the infant room are teenagers now!”

The center is licensed to accept 96 children, from ages six weeks to five years, and it provides a variety of programs, including art and music and movement. The vast majority of those who attend go on to pass the Creative Curriculum Assessment, which gauges their readiness for kindergarten.

“Knowing that their children are in good hands makes it much easier for parents to find and keep jobs,” says Alicea, who is earning a college degree in addition to working and raising her own brood. Greyston estimates that in 2012 alone, parents who were able to work because their children attended the child care center earned almost \$800,000 collectively.

In addition to jobs and child care, the foundation is active in the movement for affordable housing and now has almost 300 units

in its portfolio, including a new \$32 million, multifamily development with 92 modern, energy-efficient apartments. Half of Greyston's housing stock is reserved for the formerly homeless, who receive ongoing support services whenever needed. As of 2012, more than 200 formerly homeless tenants had been housed in Greyston units for longer than two years.

The organization has also taken on the mission of serving and housing those living with HIV/AIDS at its bucolic Maitri Adult Day Health Center and Issan House complex, located on the site of a former convent overlooking the Hudson River in Yonkers. The Maitri program, which takes its name from the Sanskrit word for "loving kindness," is the only adult HIV program of its type in Westchester County; its wide range of services (meals, counseling, and educational programming among them) has resulted in vastly better medical outcomes for attendees, including reduced viral loads and fewer infections. The apartment units in the Issan House are fully handicapped-accessible, and its residents have access to comprehensive medical treatment that encompasses both traditional and complementary therapies. Greyston estimates that having a health care facility directly on-site saves more than \$100,000 a year through avoided emergency room visits for Issan residents, many of whom suffer from substance-abuse or mental health issues in addition to HIV/AIDS. There are also other, less tangible benefits. "Meditation at Maitri cleans my mind, counteracts the damage my meds do, gives me calmness in the midst of a storm," says Lloyd. "I am calm because I know that Maitri has my back," he adds. "The nurse answers all my questions and reminds me of questions I need to ask my doctor, and the Health Education and Nutrition groups teach me everything I need to know about my condition and my body." Lloyd also attends the Coping With Loss group run by Brad Fritz and a clinical staff member every week. "It helps me to deal with the murder of my sister by her son," he explains, "because it gives me a safe place to vent, a safe place to cry, and a place to cry out. I am comforted. Everything I learn at Maitri makes me stronger and more able to face the world outside."

Can Brownies Be Green?

The bakery, which needed to expand because of steadily increasing demand for its goods, is now located in a 23,000-square-foot facility—not far from the Yonkers waterfront—that was designed in 2000 by Maya Lin, the architect best-known for creating the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was built on a former brownfield site contaminated by decades of industrial waste and pollution, which Greyston chose in large part because of the role the cleanup would play in revitalizing the entire area. The building, which officially opened in 2004, features several innovative energy-saving features, as well as

a rooftop garden where employees can go to relax. Plans are underway to incorporate the vegetables that are grown there into employee lunches as a way to encourage good eating habits. Extending that mission to the general community, Greyston also runs an ambitious community-gardens project, which has resulted in the greening of several formerly empty lots.

Certiably Beneficial

In February 2012 New York State began to authorize Benefit Corporations (sometimes referred to as "B-Corps"), entities that are required by law to create a "general public benefit," which is defined as "a material positive impact on society and the environment." That month Greyston Bakery became the first business in the state to register for the new designation.

"We don't claim to be healing the entire world," Mike Brady says, "but we do try to help every person who walks through our doors, and that seems like a very good start." ■



Preschool children participate in Reading Time at the Greyston Child Care Center.