

EDUCATING DETROIT



Diane Renaud

By Claire Charlton
Photo courtesy of St. Vincent
and Sarah Fisher Center

While property developers and corporate executives debate about what Detroit needs to prosper, Diane Renaud and her team work at ground level to get Detroiters on their feet.

As executive director and CEO of the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center in Detroit, Renaud breaks generations of resistance to education.

"In Detroit alone, 230,000 people need a GED. In other words, one-third of the city doesn't have enough education to get a job," says Renaud, whose nonprofit organization provides supplemental education to at-risk students, both adults and children, at four Detroit campuses.

"The reality is Detroit is a factory town. Those who came here in the 1960s and '70s were able to get jobs on the line without any education. Now, four generations later, their family culture doesn't embrace education," says Renaud, 46, of Harper Woods.

"Everyone is working hard to change the school system, but until you change the mentality of the parents who raise the kids, education will never be a priority."

In addition, such barriers as lack of transportation, food, heat and electricity reduce the priority of even the most basic level of education in Detroit. "If your basic needs are not being met, you are not focused on 2+2=4,

and that's the reality. It supersedes everything," she says.

Renaud, the daughter of two educators and youngest of six children, learned through her education at Wayne State University and years of experience in finance and marketing that nonprofits must take cues from profitable corporations to find success. "The market is increasingly competitive, so nonprofits need to think like corporations and be more business savvy," says Renaud, who has been with the center since 2010.

Reaching Out The St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center began as a kindergarten for orphans in 1844. With a small staff and budget of less than \$1 million, the center provides personalized, individual tutoring for adults and children in first, second and third grades.

With an 83% increase in student population over 2011, the center receives no government funding other than state support for an after-school meal program, which it supplements with an on-site urban garden built with a donation from The Home Depot.

But Renaud and the center's efforts help boost their students' likelihood of passing the GED from 25% to 85% on the first try.

"We have students who drop out of school at 16 because education simply is not a focus at home. One student we helped just got his GED, and he came to tell us his mom is now getting hers," says Renaud, sharing what she calls "a moment you don't get from a paycheck."

These moments boost Renaud to keep her focused on the future for her students and for the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center.

"We know that someday there will be a perfect world, and a need for our service won't be around," Renaud says. "Is it going to happen in my lifetime? Probably not. In the meantime, we keep reaching out. This is all we do; it's our core focus. And we are good at it." □

Volunteers can contact The St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center at www.svsfcenter.org or 313.535.9200.

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