

A photograph of Barbara Richards, a woman with short white hair, smiling and standing outdoors with her arms crossed. She is wearing a blue sleeveless dress. The background consists of lush green foliage and a wooden fence.

BARBARA Richards

CEO
of Project 180

*Helping Former Offenders
Reenter into Society*



When passion leads one to a project for which the person has no prior experience in even a loosely related career or industry, the person starts from square one, seeks advice from experts, and constructs a circle of incredibly smart people who volunteer to help through the maze of starting a non-profit organization. Fifteen years as the owner of a renowned Greek restaurant in San Francisco and many years in the wine and food business in Sonoma and Napa Valley was not the ideal background for a start-up non-profit—especially one focusing on prisoners. During eight years working in management for a national restaurant chain, Barbara Richards planned, listened, and in early 2008 founded the non-profit Project 180 to aid prisoners in their reentry into society before and after they leave prison or jail.

“In 1994 I heard a report on NPR that stated that one black student in college equals five black males in prison and one Latino student in college equals three Latino males in prison. When I heard these statistics I felt injustice and for the first time in my life I decided to do something about it. I called the San Francisco Police Department and was ‘hired’ as the volunteer felony men’s support group leader. My first day with the group found 12 men and me in a small room where they listened with respectful attention while withholding judgment. Eventually we bonded. After one year, I realized that the men couldn’t read, so I took a paid position teaching GED and Adult Basic Education.” Barbara says.

Project 180 offers two program in three prisons (Hardee and DeSoto counties, and Bradenton) and three jails (two in Hillsborough County and one in Sarasota County). The CEO Program features volunteer CEOs, hiring managers, and workforce specialists who offer advice on finding jobs upon release since employment is the major influence in keeping prisoners from another incarceration. Barbara reports that some employers welcome previously incarcerated employees and some won’t even consider it due to liability. She says the ideal is for employers to look at the former inmate’s charges and determine if there is any relationship between the charges and the jobs that are available. The Financial Literacy Program is staffed by volunteer industry professionals such as bankers and loan officers who discuss credit reports, loans, credit cards, and checking accounts. Equipping prisoners with skills that will serve them well upon release is the goal of both programs. Project 180 also sponsors a luncheon lecture series Strong Voice/Strong Subjects during April, May, and June that addresses issues facing returning inmates.

Sarasota attorney Adam Tebrugge says, “I met Barbara Richards about 10 years ago. Barbara already had a very clear vision for Project 180 and I have watched her work tirelessly to build the organization. As a community we have to take steps to reintegrate former prisoners into our society. Barbara and Project 180 are the only group working full-time on that issue. I admire Barbara for her talent, her work ethic, her compassion, and her refusal to quit.” Funded by individual donations, grants, and foundations, Barbara is the only staff person with many dedicated volunteers.

Barbara says, “I am outraged at the practice of throwing people out of prison, seeing where they land, and watching them fail. I am also frustrated by the lack of appreciation for unrecognized and undeveloped talents and abilities of prisoners. But my stubbornness will carry on as our dream of opening a long-term, whole-life residential program for men is just on the horizon. A local businessman is purchasing a home and three different companies have agreed to hire our residents. Community members are recognizing the importance of this program and are stepping forward to support

it. Well on our way, two private donors have offered matching funds—one up \$10,000 and a second up to \$25,000.” Receiving calls almost daily from Florida and other states about opening a Project 180 organization for them, she says the Project 180 model is on the cutting edge of criminal justice with the goal of having a number of larger facilities in different areas of the state.

Barbara relates sobering 2016 statistics from the Florida Department of Corrections: an average of seven people return from state prison to Manatee County each week, an average of five people return from state prison to Sarasota County each week, dozens more individuals are released from county jail, 37 percent of state inmates have a fifth grade literacy level or lower, and almost half tested at a sixth grade literacy level or lower. Nearly three-fourths of released prisoners recidivate within five years, between 65 to 85 percent are incarcerated because of an addictive disease, 17 percent were homeless prior to incarceration, and 71 percent do not have jobs or job leads upon release. Barbara presents demographics of the inmates who have attended Project 180 classes: prior to incarceration 17 percent were homeless, 41 percent made less than \$12,000 a year, 36 percent made between \$12,000 and \$36,000 a year, 71 percent have no job prospects upon release, 84 percent have never owned a home, and 51 percent were black.

Barbara attended The Hutchins School of Liberal Studies at Sonoma State University that offered an interdisciplinary approach to issues especially social justice issues. It was during that time that she heard the NPR broadcast. She earned a Master’s degree in Criminal Justice from Florida State University. Her daughter Ioanna lives in St. Louis and her daughter Eleni is a corporate flight attendant in California. Barbara’s father was a District Attorney who was the first attorney to sit on Court on the Judiciary and her mother was a volunteer on a number of boards in Tulsa. One sister is the Executive Director of a state non-profit organization, her brother is an attorney in Tulsa, and her other sister is a financial planner. She credits her family, board members, friends, and colleagues with support throughout the development of Project 180. In her leisure time, she reads, hikes, kayaks, and enjoys dining with friends. She has traveled extensively in the U.S., West Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, England, France, Spain, and Italy—to name just a few favorite travel spots—and plans to continue her international travel.

Barbara remembers the advice that Adam Tebrugge gave her very early in the organization’s development: “Hang out for a while before you ask for anything.” This advice has no doubt helped her grow Project 180 from the ground up to the recognized model for reentry prisoners that it has become. 📍

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