

Inside Track



JOHNNY QUIRIN

Before taking over the lead of Guiding Light Mission, Stuart Ray was the franchisee of 42 area Burger King restaurants.

From restaurateur to rescue mission director

Paul R. Kopenkoskey - Special to the Business Journal
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Stuart Ray has tasted his share of success in life and knows the emotional anguish of unresolved personal issues. Somewhere between those two extremes, Ray has developed a clear-eyed vision for helping homeless men secure a better future for themselves.

For 30 years, Ray was the franchisee of 42 Burger King restaurants in West Michigan, which collectively earned \$60 million in revenue annually. But through those years, Ray learned it's healthy to keep a loose grip on those things near and dear to his heart, and that includes the restaurant business.

"It was just time to get out of the business



JOHNNY QUIRIN

Stuart Ray believes the Bible supports him in encouraging the homeless residents of Guiding Light to "return to the community and work."

because everything has a life," said Ray. "Burger King had run its course with me. The last 15 years I was with Burger King, I was heavily involved in trying to find solutions to community issues, particularly work force development."

When it became clear to him that Burger King no longer fed his soul, Ray decided his volunteer involvement with work force development initiatives might just pave the way to a new career path.

Two-and-a-half years ago, Ray assumed the helm of Guiding Light Mission, a rescue mission at 255 S. Division Ave. in the Heartside District. Guiding Light provides homeless men with temporary shelter, substance abuse counseling, employment assistance and biblically based mentorship programs.

Services include providing 40,000 beds in 2011. Guiding Light can accommodate up to 68 men per night, as well as additional bed nights for its 40 long-term substance-abuse program participants. Residents' average length of stay is 23 days, with 20 percent of them living at the mission 30 days, usually because they require intensive care management.

If it seems incongruous to have a former restaurateur working as the administrator of a rescue mission, Ray doesn't see it that way.

"I have a set of administrative skills," he said. "I operated a \$60 million business. I know I can run a \$2 million mission."

After thinking about it a little more, he said that there is some crossover between his years with Burger King and what he wants to achieve with the men seeking help at Guiding Light.

"I probably had the lowest turnover rate with any franchise in the world," he said of his years with Burger King. "I always focused on human capital development. This work is no different than what I've done in the last 15 years serving on various boards, when I started to identify issues and work collaboratively to fix things."

But that collaborative attitude goes only so far. Ray acknowledges that some Heartside agencies consider his goals a bit off the rail.

"We've made it too easy," he said. "The good news about Grand Rapids is it's very philanthropic. The bad news about Grand Rapids is it's very philanthropic. Often times, we're not finding community solutions but instead are keeping them unemployed. I don't always have friends here."

It's apparent that Ray is not naïve and that he is committed to Guiding Light's quest. He considers that a wise and healthy combination.

"The average life of an executive director is about a year," Ray said. "I never imagined I'd be involved in a ministry of this nature. I cried for two months after I hired on, listening to the struggles and barriers. There are things you and I take for granted that have become fairly large mountains for some to overcome."

Overcoming those mountains requires Ray to eschew the status quo for Heartside residents, meaning he works toward helping homeless men become more self-

STUART RAY

Company/Organization: Guiding Light Mission

Position: Executive Director

Age: 60

Birthplace: Troy, N.Y.

Residence: Grand Rapids

Family: Wife, Anne; children Jonathan, Alison and Kristen.

Business/Community

Involvement: Steering committee member of the Coalition to End Homelessness; board member for West Michigan TEAM and Reentry Employment Resource Center.

sufficient by gaining job skills and learning how to save money and not purchase things simply because they want them.

"This is not a 'woe is me' rescue mission," said Ray. "This is about you having gifts and talents — now giddy up. If we are really doing our job correctly, we'll find a way to take this mission out of business, to find strategic solutions."

He finds the Bible supports him in that aspiration.

"Christ expects us to work," he said. "God gave us gifts and expects us to use those gifts. If a man falls into hardship, we'd like him to not only fall to his knees (in prayer), but to return to the community to work."

Ray attributes some of his firm belief in a work ethic to the calloused hands he developed working two years while in high school on a neighbor's farm in upstate New York. He earned 25 cents an hour at a job that required him to milk cows and operate farm equipment.

"I learned how to work," said Ray. "I appreciate the value of work."

He also appreciates the fact he's still breathing. He had a close call while driving a tractor that was pulling a wagon that nearly flipped over. "I could have killed myself," he recalled. "The farmer took the cost to repair it from my check."

Ray said he understands that many of the men that come through Guiding Light's doorway are looking for a lifeline that takes different forms. Sometimes it's finding a way to help with a prescription co-pay; other times it's getting free from a long-term drug habit. And with others, it's establishing priorities, learning good work habits and how to be courteous when the natural inclination is to lash out.

"What I try to do is find resources and ways to give a sense of optimism and hope," said Ray. "That's what I did at Burger King — teaching people to learn team work, crisis management and how to talk to a customer, all those things our men here need to learn to gain employment."

Ray likens the innate need men have to feel connected to the 1980s sitcom "Cheers" bar where "everybody knows your name." Ray wants the men at Guiding Light to develop a healthy sense of community, and it's found in houses of worship, he said.

"We work real hard to connect men to churches," he said.

When he comes to issues that strike closer to home, Ray isn't as connected. His parents divorced soon after he graduated from high school, and his mother has since died. He has not talked with his father, who lives in South Carolina, in 10 years, even though Ray mails him a Christmas card every year. His father has never met two of his children.

"I had to hire two private detectives just to find him," said Ray. "At the end of the day, every family is dysfunctional. Mine would be a normal dysfunctional."

He counts three mentors who made a difference in his life, among them his grandmother.

"She taught me to love and hug unconditionally, and that's what I try to do here (at Guiding Light), how to make them self-sustaining members of the community, not takers," said Ray. "The blinders come off and they start living life differently."

Even when I discipline guys here, at the end of the day, most say it was the right thing to do.”

And he’s learned to appreciate the value of being green.

“I’ve learned to leave things in better shape than what I found them in,” said Ray. “That drives my need to recycle, conserve gas. As long as I’m a giver versus a taker, I’m doing OK.”