



The Glide Foundation: A Study in Founder Transition

A legendary San Francisco institution, the Glide Foundation was built and led for over 40 years by two enormously charismatic leaders, Cecil Williams and Janice Mirikitani. In a deliberate and deeply introspective journey that embraced the board, staff, the organization's supporters and its funders, Williams and Mirikitani began the work of transitioning themselves into other roles and the organization into a new era.

In 2007, Willa Seldon was selected as the organization's new CEO and was conferred with responsibilities and titles the founders had held for over four decades. Glide's experience is instructive for other nonprofit organizations and leaders planning significant transitions.

The First 80 Years

Glide Memorial United Methodist Church was founded in 1929 and so, technically, Cecil Williams and Janice Mirikitani are not the original founders of Glide. On the other hand, they have built and dominated what has become a nationally recognized organization around the Church. Glide was featured in the film "Pursuit of Happyness" based on a biographical book of the same name by Chris Gardner about his experience as a down-and-out salesman caring for his son while learning the financial services business. Glide provided Gardner with support during some of his most difficult times.

"When I came to Glide it was a sleepy place... We changed all that," says Reverend Williams. The church itself is located in the heart of the Tenderloin District of San Francisco, a densely populated neighborhood with a rich history and a diverse community. The Tenderloin has also acquired a reputation as the city's center of entrenched poverty, homelessness, drug use and crime.

In the midst of the turbulent 1960's the church experienced a rebirth when the young, determined and socially conscious

minister was selected to take the helm. Williams revolutionized the church's policies and practices, whole heartedly embracing groups that few others would – hippies, addicts, diverse ethnic minorities, members of LGBT communities, the poor and the marginalized. Williams, together with Janice Mirikitani, a noted poet and dancer, responded to the pressing needs of the disenfranchised and powerless by opening their hearts and encouraging others to do so through their message of unconditional love. With their leadership, Glide moved to the cutting edge of anti-poverty, civil rights, HIV/AIDS, recovery, gender equality, tolerance and other battles.

Over the next 40 years, Glide grew and blossomed. Sleepy religious services became celebrations infused with passion and joy, song and art, intellectual discourse and thoughtful introspection. This United Methodist church embraced all peoples, regardless of their religious affiliation. People from around the Bay Area and across the nation were drawn to this special place, so that today Glide counts among its congregants and financial supporters not only Methodists and other Christians, but also Moslems, Jews, Buddhists,

Hindus and a broad range of other religious and nonreligious constituents.

As Williams led from the pulpit, Mirikitani led operationally, and both plotted strategy and reached out to donors. In creating social service programs, they were guided by the conviction that the served and those who serve are in fact serving each other. Glide programs operationally embed this idea into the structure of services provided. As a social justice organization Glide has never shied away from controversy. Instead, they leveraged the power of controversy to drive discourse and positive change. Always a home for the disenfranchised and for those of means wanting to be actively involved in strengthening the community, Glide became a center for social as well as spiritual change.

Today, Glide can be characterized as an activist community organization that embraces all and advances the values of unconditional love, justice, diversity, authenticity and service to fellow human beings. Operationally speaking, Glide has over 150 employees and a \$16M budget that funds an array of programs. These include providing regular meals and health care to the poor; management of supportive housing units; diverse

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services for children, youth, women and seniors; and skills training and other programs that enhance employability, self-respect and self-sufficiency. In addition to managing its programs, the Foundation also operationally supports the Church as it ministers to a diverse community and promotes justice locally, nationally and internationally.

Birthing a New Era

After 40 years of building and leading Glide, Williams, Mirikitani and the Board of Directors began to consider how the organization could remain strong without having its charismatic leaders directly guide every action. Over the next few years, discussion evolved into action. New advisors, consultants and senior staff came to the organization with new ideas. Not all change initiatives were successful – it was not a linear process – but over time the community became engaged in the dialogue and more engaged in the idea of new leadership.

The actual search process for a new generation of leaders started with in-depth education into Glide's history, place in the community and fundamental values; segued into a review of its operational complexities and fundraising challenges; and then focused on governance and the roles and responsibilities of various individuals in the organization.

The leadership transition began with the selection of a new minister to lead the Church, the Reverend Donald Guest. The appointment of Willa Seldon as the new Chief Executive Officer of the Glide Foundation was the next critical step.

"Glide is a complicated organization – culturally complex, organizationally complex – with diverse voices and a constant dialogue over what is right for the community," comments Seldon, who became the new CEO in mid-2007. "It required a person willing to learn and understand, at a meaningful level, what the organization was about." From the very first contact with Glide, Seldon was clear that to be successful she would need to be patient, observant and open. "I thought long

and hard before taking on the challenge of being the chief executive of an organization built and charismatically led by two such amazing individuals. It was not an easy decision for me."

Willa Seldon has been committed to community service throughout her business and nonprofit career. After holding a range of leadership positions with Salomon Brothers, Williams-Sonoma, AirTouch Communications, and a venture capital firm which she co-founded, she led a turn-around of the Tides Center in collaboration with founder Drummond Pike.

In considering the position at Glide, Seldon comments, "One of the great attractions and challenges for me was the thought of working within an environment that lives and breaths unconditional love. How do you completely honor this value and also advance process efficiency and exceptional management practices? Cecil's and Jan's passionate commitment to their mission was intrinsic to the entire culture. Glide's strong institutional values of inclusion, diversity, and advocacy are embedded in the organization's DNA. Any effective leadership would have to arise from these values and draw on the innate strengths of the organization. Glide is a model for others; it is also a challenging environment to manage."

Of primary concern in the transition of leadership was the role and responsibilities of the founders. "Jan and Cecil are such a part of Glide, and they have been so important to Glide's financial strength, that it was imperative that they continue to play a central and defined role, even while they stepped back. Indeed, the opportunity to work with them was part of the draw for me. That said, I questioned whether they would step back sufficiently for me to truly be Glide's Chief Executive Officer. Finding the right balance has been a process that began well before I was ever approached for this position, and it continues to this day. We have had a lot of assistance in navigating through that process, and my admiration for them as leaders and partners has grown."

The Mechanics of Transition: Planning, Recruiting, Empowering

Although Willa Seldon has been on board for 18 months and clearly holds the CEO reins, the founders' roles are still evolving, "...and rightfully so," according to Seldon. "The organization is still at a point of discernment - we are thinking about what is next and how to serve the greater good in the community."

Williams, Mirikitani, Seldon and the Glide family are engaged in the process of discovery. Reverend Williams' interest in developing housing solutions and advancing economic development, as well as his long-standing passion for the church itself, is finding new outlets. Mirikitani's transition is just as deep-rooted. Over the years this well known artist helped to strengthen Glide operationally by taking on a broad range of management responsibilities. In stepping back from such responsibilities, she brings her distinctive personality and artistic sensibilities to bear as she focuses on Glide's legacy and ways to strengthen Glide's culture. Seldon and her team, meanwhile, are focusing on helping to connect an evolving workforce and client base to Glide's core values, strengthening the organization's internal controls and operating infrastructure, and ensuring that the organization's programs and operations are sustainable over the long term.

"When I joined Glide I wanted to take advantage of the strengths we already had while making a unique contribution as the organization's new chief executive," noted Seldon. In consultation with the Board, Seldon set three major priorities for herself: developing



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a vision for the future, increasing accountability and creating sustainable funding. “We already had exceptional programs that the Glide team had carefully crafted over the years, and which reflected the organization’s values and unique sensibility. Our problem was that the organization’s operating infrastructure, financial controls and strategic planning processes had not kept pace. Operating infrastructure improvements translate directly into an improved ability to serve.” Seldon also spent a significant amount of time in diversifying fundraising. “Over the years, Cecil and Jan have attracted a broad range of donors for Glide. My focus has been on strengthening our relationships with existing donors, attracting new donors and on improving our internal program evaluation and funding processes.”

Seldon spent the first months of her tenure learning about Glide and understanding the organization’s programs, constituents and culture. “Part of my planning process involved choosing what to focus upon and what areas not to spend time on right now,” she comments. “I wanted to be deliberate and thoroughly understand the team and the organization’s needs before suggesting any change.”

With the full support of Glide’s Board, Seldon conducted a search for a Chief Financial Officer “who could help strengthen our financial management practices and also provide a fresh perspective on the operating infrastructure.” Seldon selected as her CFO Kristen Yamamoto, a no-nonsense professional with a CPA, a Stanford MBA, a track record of success in business and nonprofit organizations, and a total commitment to Glide’s mission.

Seldon then conducted a search for a new Vice President of Development and Advancement, eventually selecting Ken Sommer. “My first priority was to find someone, who would fit culturally with the organization. Through the search process, I also came to the conclusion that Glide needed someone who was a strong leader and coach, knew different fundraising approaches, and was also enthu-

siastic about pitching in to get work done at the ground level. Someone who developed strategy and managed execution by others was not what we needed, because our development department doesn’t have the kind of scale to productively support someone like that.” Sommer has a diverse fundraising resume gained through his years of development work with the Recreation Center for the Handicapped, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the San Francisco Opera and the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation.

Discussing her approach to seeking and hiring new leaders, Seldon emphasizes, “Finding just the right person takes time. To us, a candidate’s style and passion for our mission is just as important as their professional accomplishments.” She continues, “Everything we do is focused on building teams to advance our fundamental mission of alleviating suffering and breaking the cycle of poverty. New hires must not only be exceptionally competent and experienced, they must also be a good fit for Glide’s culture. I would rather continue searching than succumb to pressure and hire someone who may not be right. This requires patience. There is something precious about our work, and how we do our work. Preserving and fostering that quality in the management team is of paramount importance to me.”

In an insightful and subtle move to further the productivity of the entire management team, Seldon next added program leaders to the senior management team. Expanding and reconfiguring the management team improved communication and cooperation among departments. “Staff began to see how their individual contributions and their programs integrated into the whole, and there was a burgeoning sense of responsibility and teamwork.” Seldon points out, “It has been beneficial for the whole organization to see that the legacy of the founders has not only been retained and honored, but it has been enhanced as we attract new, energized people into Glide.”

Structure + Empathy = Lasting Change

As part of her program for evolving Glide’s management practices, Seldon is in the process of introducing structured planning, goal-setting and accountability practices to Glide. Her approach, however, is distinguished from similar initiatives that she has seen implemented in commercial and other environments. “At Glide we seek a transformation process that is more deeply rooted. Our transformation does not consist of a set of externally imposed organizing principles, new hires and change techniques such as you might find in any traditional corporate environment that is in flux. Our evolution is just as much about personal transformation as it is about organizational transformation. Everyone is part of the change - staff, volunteers, leadership, the community, me... It’s about everyone really.” This unusual melding of the personal and the structural presupposes that each individual will personally accept responsibility for changing themselves. “We talk a lot about change and our willingness to accept change.”

“We say at Glide that ‘heart smart plus head smart, equals Glide smart,’” notes Seldon. “Balance is the true key to success.”

No one should think that change at Glide is slow; even while strengthening itself operationally and financially, Glide is moving energetically into the future. The organization’s long standing commitment to providing affordable housing solutions was again demonstrated by the opening in October 2008 of 81 new housing units under the auspices of the Glide Economic Development Corporation. Glide’s training and education programs for transition-age youth more than doubled its space located between San Francisco and Oakland on Treasure Island, allowing the program to create a better learning environment and to bring the entire program to one physical location. A new teen center was created, which frees other space for after-school programs. A new health initiative provides primary care and health education for youth. A new rooftop garden project provides a vehicle for teaching nutrition and cooking techniques to young people in the community. Glide is also revitalizing an old tradition of Wednesday night “speak out,” an invaluable tool for community engagement and for helping Glide to understand the ever-evolving needs of the community.

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Remembering the Mission

Seldon views an intense focus upon Glide's core mission and constituents to be critical to the organization's success in undertaking the transition to a new generation of leaders. "When I came to Glide I had to set aside my ego and pride. While I certainly have a healthy regard for my own professional worth, this was not going to be primarily about me. I actively sought feedback and received guidance and a historical perspective that has been invaluable." Seldon admires and appreciates the discipline and balanced engagement that Williams and Mirikitani have shown throughout. "These kinds of changes are never easy, and it is not easy for us. The wonderful thing about Jan, Cecil and the Glide family is that we are all completely committed to listening to each other. We respect each other even when we do not agree, and we all do our best to honor the original intention to advance the transition."

Even through the most difficult of times, the Board, Williams and Mirikitani, Seldon and the other members of Glide's management team, and the community as a whole, are bound together by shared values and a profound respect for each other. "We know that poverty does not stand still, and we feel that justice demands a response. Glide needs to be agile and capable of responding in real time to the changing needs of a very dynamic community. Our job is to keep Glide focused on the needs of our clients first as well as ensuring that we remain operationally strong." A deliberate, honest and introspective transition process has yielded remarkable clarity about what anchors this evolving organization and actions needed to strengthen it.

Seldon credits the Glide community as a whole with helping to position the organization for a bright future.

"Remembering what we stand for keeps us focused. Our commitment to Glide's mission and constituents is a powerful unifying force. Whenever we are distracted by differing perspectives, we think about who we serve and how we should be acting. It is amazing what a group of people can accomplish when they remember what brought them together in the first place." ❁