

NONPROFIT

SHOWCASE

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How Tenacity, Determination, and Faith Drove The Will To Thrive.

The first time I tasted leadership was in 1st grade when Ms. Rodriguez gave me a red pencil to grade others' papers. She was trying to keep me quiet! My favorite book in 3rd grade was "Little Miss Bossy," so this was another early indicator. Fast forward a few decades, and I now have the treasured privilege of leading world-changers – at work and at home.

I founded Chosen in 2009 and led the organization through a significant evolution in our mission. We went from funding adoptions to helping children heal from trauma by strengthening their families. I have a passion for foster care and

adoption, which was awakened in me in 1995 when my brother entered our home via foster care. His adoption took four and a half years to complete. My eyes were opened to the fact that a system designed to protect children could actually do harm. This marked me forever, fueling my desire and quest for systemic transformation.

After witnessing so many foster and adoptive families struggle with the effects of trauma, we designed a telehealth model of care to address mental and behavioral health needs and equip caregivers, so they don't quit.

To date, 100% of families who have worked our program have not dissolved their foster or adoptive relationship.

Our success generated rapid growth and we started scaling nationally, which is impossible to do with philanthropy alone. As we entered 2020, one of our organizational goals was to diversify revenue streams. We intended to do that by adding a fee-based structure and getting credentialed for Medicaid and ultimately accepting insurance. Then, our world shut down on March 13. Giving ground to a halt. PPP wasn't yet on the horizon. Major fundraising events were canceled. For the first time,

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I was jolted into wondering how long I could make payroll.

I remember thinking how important it was to lead myself first. I had to dig deep and come into a place of faith that we were going to get through this and that God would somehow provide.

I did two critical things that would ultimately fuel our growth. One, I refused to back off our diversification goal, which still required philanthropy to accomplish. I called every major funder and shared with them that we could not afford to back off – that diversifying revenue streams was essential so that we wouldn't be in the same position one year from now.

Everyone was prioritizing “essentials.” I urged them to consider that those we serve would become the people who needed housing and food if we did not address the underlying trauma that was impacting mental and behavioral health.

Two, I shared a faith declaration with my team: less than 10% of organizations grow through a crisis. I told them we would grow. And we did. Our staff actually doubled in size and we served 50% more individuals last year.

Why?

Some ingredients that were necessary included: resolve, determination, perseverance, endurance, and grit. As a former marathoner, I could flex some of those muscles. And of course, teamwork was essential. We worked quickly to stand up two new online programs that brought value to our clients.

I faced the same challenges that many of you did. My 4 kids were now finishing out their school year at home. We all needed to stream all day, every day. In addition to my full-time CEO hat, I was now playing referee, coach, teacher, and cook. For the first six months, I struggled to find space for any healthy transition time from one role to another; everything was fluid.

I overcame these challenges with very practical steps that involved spending more time outdoors, prioritizing exercising, and intentionally expressing gratitude. That probably sounds cliché. Honestly, working outside on my porch gave me a much greater appreciation for blooming nature and watching the birds; it helped me slow down tremendously. Less time commuting and running kids every which direction helped deepen our relationships and gave me more time to think, which is often an under-utilized gift for executives.

The flip side of less driving time meant that eventually, I found myself in more and more meetings. This is something I am undoing now. None of us were designed to sit in perpetual meetings all day, every day. Learning to carve out the appropriate reading, reflection, and strategic thinking time is not only vital for my role as a leader but also for my sanity.

As we moved into year two of the pandemic, I learned about the changing nature of philanthropy. Because we are in the greatest transfer of wealth from one generation to the next, there is also a generational change in leadership.

In short, I believe three things helped our nonprofit grow through the most challenging years of my career. One, we demonstrated resolve. We knew that our vulnerable families were suffering and our devotion to developing relevant, meaningful solutions was paramount in our response.

Our leadership team moved quickly to engage our team and start up two new programs. One was creating micro-content. We created 75 bite-sized videos in 137 days and released them 5-7 days per week. We called it “Coffee with Chosen,” implying that you could get a 2–4-minute boost of helpful guidance every morning, as you embarked on the new homebound journey of Covid work and parenting. At one point, more than half of our team was involved in content creation and distribution. While not our core business, this served as a rallying point and demonstrated extreme commitment to offering our families very real-time, relevant content to meet their felt needs.

Two, our commitment to core values. Culture boils down to core values and the known, expected behaviors tied to their expression. In the face of enormous adversity and uncertainty, we doubled down on recognizing, reinforcing, celebrating, and hiring to core values.

As CEO, one of my most critical functions is as Chief Reminding Officer. Intentional reinforcement of cultural expectations tied to core values was and still is non-negotiable. Organizational toxicity or health can absolutely be tied to core values.

In child welfare, direct care staff turnover is at least 40% across the country. In spite of the Great Resignation, ours is less than 5%. When people are tied to the mission where they see lives transformed daily and are locked into a healthy, hopeful culture, they don't leave.

Three, we committed ourselves to innovation in response to our clients and the changing times. While PPP was a lifesaver for so many of us, this is not a long-term strategy for health. Expecting any bailout is a death trap. My driving question was how do we grow the organization to a place of health such that we are never again reliant on one primary source to operate?

In a thriving culture, innovation is birthed from adversity. “Pivoting” – the most overused word during the pandemic is simply not enough.

In the nonprofit sector, I believe that one of our largest stewardship obligations is ensuring that the mission continues beyond our tenure. And this requires relentless intentionality. ■

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