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Richmond-based program helps homeless regain self-worth



Shapalo Johnson, right, takes part in a training workshop at Rubicon on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2017, in Richmond, Calif. Rubicon Programs two-week long Foundations Workshops helps Bay Area residents with social, financial, and health skills. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

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RICHMOND — In the 1980s, Theodore Oliver Sr. served time for possession of drugs, assault with a deadly weapon and grand theft. He was shot six times. In the 1990s, he was convicted of domestic violence.

He had trouble holding jobs. Homeless for most of the past 15 years, Oliver said his “aggressive body language” and his drinking “didn’t help.”

Today, Oliver, now 53, has his own place, a rental room in Richmond. He holds two jobs, as a maintenance assistant for a Richmond nonprofit and as an ambassador for Safety1st, an Oakland nonprofit organization

In between, Oliver found his way to the Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland; went to Homeless Court in Oakland to clear his background; and most recently, in January, enrolled with Rubicon Programs.

Rubicon, whose stated mission is “to transform East Bay communities by equipping people to break the cycle of poverty,” put Oliver through an intensive, two-week

“Foundations” workshop, followed by two weeks of “electives” such as resume writing, civic engagement and leadership, then helped him get his finances in order and referred him to transitional employment.

But perhaps more important, “They restored my self-confidence,” Oliver said. “That’s what Rubicon gave me.”

“And most importantly,” he added, “I regained trustworthiness — with my family, my church and my employers.”

Rubicon has received funding this year from Share the Spirit, an annual holiday campaign that serves needy residents in the East Bay. Donations support programs of more than 40 nonprofit agencies in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

Rubicon was founded in Richmond in 1973 with an emphasis on mental health. In 1989, Rubicon added Project Independence, which helped people find permanent and supportive housing. About 1987, Rubicon founded a landscape company, and in 1993, a bakery; the latter since spun off to provide clients with job training and work environment experience and a source of income to fund program services.

In 2016, Rubicon stopped offering long-term mental health and wellness services and started referring clients to other mental health programs, both governmental and nonprofit.

“While we were extremely proud of our more than 40-year history of helping people meet their mental health needs, we knew that we could best achieve our vision of an East Bay without poverty by focusing our services on our program participants who were seeking to enter, or re-enter the workforce, with the ultimate goal of earning self-sufficiency wages,” Chief Development Officer Lisa Dyas said in a blog on the Rubicon website.

Today, Rubicon Programs has five locations: two in Richmond, the others in Antioch, Hayward and Oakland. Rubicon’s operating budget this year is about \$18.4 million. Government contracts account for 51 percent of revenue; business activities, including the landscape company and property rentals, 41 percent. The remaining 8 percent is from grants and other contributions, according to a financial statement.

Rubicon has a program staff of 150 and annually serves about 1,750 clients, who fall into two main groups: people who have been incarcerated or on probation in the past 18 months, and low-income parents of children under 18, said Communications Manager Jonathan Bash.

The cycle of poverty that Rubicon seeks to break is “intergenerational,” said Chief Talent Officer Adrienne Kimball, and the model to change it, starting with the Foundations workshop, has four components:

- Income — helping participants find employment for their short-term needs, prior to setting long-term career plans.
- Assets — teaching financial literacy and consumer rights, and training in building savings, repairing credit, budgeting and investing.
- Wellness — including counseling and referrals to address participants' emotional and physical health.
- Connections — forging relationships and community networking on the way to building a career, raising a family, and advocating for oneself.

At an Oct. 17 Foundations session moderated by workshop coordinator Evelyn Fabian, participants engaged in lively conversation on themes such as “What drives/shapes your behavior?” discussing a gamut of influences: fear, phobias, shame, drugs, mental health, family, kids, pets, the environment, self-awareness and the drive to self-improvement.

The session eventually evolved to a discussion of self-sufficiency and the barriers thereto, then to empowerment and wellness.

On Oct. 27, Rubicon held a certificate awards ceremony for 15 participants who most recently completed the Foundations workshop, attended by top Rubicon officials and dignitaries, including representatives of U.S. Rep. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord, Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia and Richmond Mayor Tom Butt.

“Part of what makes this program special is that it is the embodiment of a philosophy, a philosophy of redemption and restoration,” said Robert Rogers, an aide to Gioia. “All of us believe that past obstacles are just that, in the past. They aren't barriers; they are opportunities — opportunities to better our neighborhoods and our families.

“You've overcome barriers by being here today,” Rogers continued. “Hard times are always ahead, but the hardest is probably behind you. Not only are you a better person today, but you have a deeper team around you.”

After Foundations, participants get up to three years of coaching — at weekly one-on-one meetings or phone calls with an “impact coach.” There is also a weekly men's group and women's group, and a periodic “Lending Circle” to help participants build credit through social networks, Bash explained.

Also present at the ceremony was Oliver who, since coming to Rubicon, has earned a California forklift operator certificate, an OSHA 10 safety certificate and state hazardous materials, CPR and AED certificates — “That makes me more valuable to a company,” he said. And he will enter Contra Costa College in the fall — “I'm a semester away from an A.A. in sociology.”

These days Oliver attends the weekly men's group at Rubicon and is learning to become a substance abuse counselor as well as a youth counselor.

“You have to invest in yourself before people will invest in you,” Oliver said. “Think that way, and you’ll get a better return.”

SHARE THE SPIRIT

The Share the Spirit holiday campaign, sponsored by the Bay Area News Group, serves needy residents of Alameda and Contra Costa counties by funding nonprofit holiday and outreach programs.

To make a tax-deductible contribution, clip the coupon accompanying this story or go to www.sharethespiritbay.org/donate/.

Readers with questions, and individuals or businesses interested in making large contributions, may contact the Contra Costa Crisis Center, which administers the fund, at 925-939-1916, ext. 408, or sharethespirit@crisis-center.org.