

"Reinventing Public Housing—Deborah Ann Flach at Home with SAHA"

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If Deborah Ann Flach could turn back time, she'd say she didn't see it coming.

As a young adult, she had no idea one day she would rise to the rank of senior vice president of operations for the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA), a feat she reached in June 2007.

In fact, the only thing she saw coming at the tender age of 23 was her infant daughter, a fading marriage and plenty of unwelcome uncertainties. How would she and her baby get by? Where would they live? Who would care?

By the grace of God and her grandmother, who opened her tiny house on East Houston St. to Flach, her sister and an aunt, she had someplace to go during a turbulent time. Today, she's helping thousands of others including single moms and elders who don't.

"Integrity times three" is how Leticia Martinez, former inner-governmental relations manager for SAHA, encapsulates Flach. "Deborah knows her job and does it very well, and is in my opinion one of the best in the country," Martinez says.

"What I do gives me a feeling of completeness," says Flach. "How many people can say they go to work and impact someone's life every day? We can't help everyone. But we can offer options, even if it's temporary shelter or transitional housing."

One such option involved a woman and five children who lived in a car. "She came to us during the holidays," Flach recalls. "Those kids had no place to bathe or sleep. We weren't able to help them immediately with long-term housing, but we did get them into the SAMM Shelter."

Flach's first taste of real estate came when she took a job selling bricks to builders for the American Brick Company and got hired six years later as an inspector at the Bexar County Housing Authority, where she earned promotions to housing counselor and later to executive administrator, which includes running the county's voucher program. In 1996, Flach entered SAHA as a supervisor. She spent the next 12 years working in nearly every operational area of the organization and later was promoted to her current commanding role—a success she says she achieved thanks to her bosses and the people who have worked for her along the way.

Flach is one of three key spokespersons for her current boss, SAHA President and CEO Henry A. Alvarez III, the SAHA Board of Commissioners, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and others. Primarily, she helps develop and implement strategies that enable SAHA to increase its effectiveness and commitment to its historic duty to public housing and to reinventing and improving the industry.

Included in her watch are the Housing Choice Voucher and Public Housing programs and Real Estate Services. Altogether, these initiatives provide thousands of public and private multifamily and single-family homes for people in need. And more are on the way, compliments of forward-thinkers like Flach who believe in contemporary solutions to old problems.

A good example is the "mixed-income" community. A growing trend in big cities, such as Dallas and Atlanta and underway in San Antonio, mixed-income housing integrates lower-income families with higher-income families in both public and private housing communities in the hope that the business professionals and working families will serve as motivational role models.

"The old adage, 'you are who your friends are' rings true in housing communities," says Flach, who strongly believes in the concept. "This program can work wonders if we can overcome unfair stereotypes. In striving to bring 20 percent of eligible housing clients into mixed-income areas, we are working to move society away from the outdated model of 'warehousing people.' "

The once-despondent 23-year-old-turned-housing-executive is petite in stature, but big in optimism and gratitude. She is quick to tip her hat to the "wonderful staff" who works for and beside her each harried day. One minute she is face-to-face with the media; the next she is reaching to answer an urgent telephone call from one of her properties. "I love the unpredictability," Flach says. "That's the beauty of our business."

She has learned success doesn't come without risk, and calculated risk-taking is what Flach's boss instills in her on a daily basis. "Henry teaches me that you have to take risks in life and in business," she says. "Some may work; some may not work. But when you make mistakes, you learn from them and move on."

The energetic executive didn't always know her destiny rested in public housing. She aspired to other things initially, everything from "mortician to beautician," she says, even before selling bricks. But when she landed in housing, she knew she was home.

Amid capricious workdays; completing her bachelor of business administration degree; maintaining a myriad of real estate and housing licenses and certifications; staying involved

in a half-dozen associations and committees; and carving out time for her uncomplaining fiancé, Detective Jaime Rene Aleman of the San Antonio Police Department, and a pair of female labs, Flach says there's still much more to do.

Rudy Gonzales, assistant chief of the San Antonio Police Department, has worked with Flach for 15 years, largely on matters involving police patrols of housing districts. "Deborah is exceptionally easy to communicate with," Gonzales says. "She is a good-natured person who is willing to help anyone, but she is a serious professional whose job is her top priority."

Flach's rewards are buried like treasure within the everyday challenges. The most challenging for her is not being able to serve the needs of everyone who walks through her doors, and wanting to see people less dependent and more self-sufficient. "One day, I may want to run a public housing agency or work with HUD," says Flach. "That will be the pinnacle of my career: to oversee and improve our public housing programs."

SAHA Facts

- SAHA's subsidized housing programs include more than 12,000 housing choice vouchers, 6,300 public housing units and 3,000 market-rate units.
- Its Real Estate Services division handles more than \$200 million in new construction and mixed development to produce another 2,300 units, 400 of which are public housing.
- SAHA owns and operates an estimated \$500 million in assets and provides \$70 million in payments to private landlords through its Housing Choice Voucher Program.
- The SAHA of today is very different from the SAHA of yesterday. The mixed-income developments create premium living at an affordable price. Developments, such as Artisan at Mission Creek, Primrose at Mission Hills and Victoria Commons (formerly Victoria Courts), are prime examples.

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