

Executive Spotlight: Stephanie Berman-Eisenberg, Carrfour Supportive Housing

By Erica Rascon, Contributing Writer



Stephanie Berman-Eisenberg, president & CEO of Carrfour Supportive Housing since 2005, continues to achieve success through this non-profit organization geared toward developing supportive housing for Miami-Dade County, Fla.'s homeless population. Founded by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce in 1993, the now 20-year-old organization has applied more than \$200 million to develop over 1,742 units, which currently house 3,388 residents. It has housed some 10,000 homeless during its lifetime.

Last year's efforts included the \$8 million redevelopment of the formerly distressed Harvard House Apartments in North Miami Beach, utilizing a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Neighborhood Stabilization Program. That followed a similar, \$20 million effort in 2012 with the Hampton Village Apartments. Also in 2012, Carrfour joined with three other area non-profit groups to form Operation Sacred Trust, spending \$1 million from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs to provide outreach, case management, healthcare services and housing support for returning soldiers and their families.

Berman-Eisenberg's work earned her a spot last year on the *South Florida Business Journal's* list of Influential Business Women. A veteran of the non-profit housing organization, she previously spent five years as its vice president of resident and property services.

Relative to that background, while Berman-Eisenberg says she will always place affordable housing at the forefront, she also makes an effort to enhance other facets of community life. Carrfour recently received a \$28,800 grant from The Health Foundation of South Florida, for instance, to fund the Learning Kitchen and Farmer's Market Training Program at its Verde Gardens community. The initiative will help local residents form a 22-acre farm with yields for every season. Residents will tend to the farm, staff the weekly farmer's market and gain the tools needed to begin microenterprises. Through the Learning Kitchen, 145 Verde Gardens households and their Homestead neighbors can simultaneously themselves gain easy access to fresh, healthy produce. Throughout its portfolio, Carrfour provides residents with civic programming, supportive services, job placement, life skills and legal assistance.

Carrfour is continuing its momentum with both new communities and upgrades to existing properties. It is in the process of renovating and upgrading Tequesta Knoll and Hampton Village, which will furnish more than 600 homes for formerly homeless families. Meanwhile, the 89-unit Amistad is planned for completion this year, and the 60-unit Liberty Village is slated to open in 2015.

CPE: What attracted you to Carrfour?

Berman-Eisenberg: I loved the idea of impacting a vulnerable family's life in one of the most meaningful ways possible: by giving them a home. Since most of the families we serve were formerly homeless, I was drawn to the idea of giving them permanent, affordable and well-maintained housing when they were at a crossroads in their lives.

CPE: What's one of the greatest challenges that you've overcome on your path to success?

Berman-Eisenberg: When I started at Carrfour, I found myself in a male-dominated field as a young woman with little background in real estate. My background was in social policy. It took me some time to get comfortable in this new world, but I quickly realized the importance of surrounding yourself with excellent staff and believing in yourself.

CPE: Describe yourself in five words.

Berman-Eisenberg: Committed, idealistic, resilient, persistent, supportive.

CPE: Looking back, what's one piece of advice that you would have given young Stephanie in the beginning of your career?

Berman-Eisenberg: Relax and don't try to plan every moment of your future. Enjoy the moment and the detours your life takes you on.

CPE: Name one of your greatest inspirations in life and share the story behind it.

Berman-Eisenberg: My grandmother, who died several years ago at the age of 104, was my greatest inspiration. She had a very difficult life—having to flee persecution and restart her life twice in two different countries. Despite these hardships, she was always happy and kind to everyone she met. She taught me the importance of perseverance and finding your own inner peace.

CPE: If you weren't in real estate, what would you be doing?

Berman-Eisenberg: I would be at home raising my family. Juggling a career and a family is challenging. If I took a break from real estate, I would take some time off to spend with my family before I embark on the next phase of my career.

CPE: What role does technology play in your daily life as an executive?

Berman-Eisenberg: Technology has become invaluable in my daily life. It allows me to stay connected with our team of over 100 employees, who are working in sites throughout Miami-Dade County. It also enables me to stay in touch with our residents and answer any concerns they have. As the organization

has grown, it has become increasingly difficult to stay connected with all our staff and residents in person. Technology allows me to stay connected.

CPE: Tell us how you feel about social media.

Berman-Eisenberg: Social media has enabled us to get our organization's story out. Through Facebook and Twitter, we can bring to life through pictures and short text the impact we are having on the lives of our residents and the communities we serve. For example, posting a picture of a formerly homeless young resident smiling as she leaves her new home for her first day of school vividly illustrates to hundreds of followers the transformative nature of the work we do at Carrfour.

CPE: What's next for you and your company?

Berman-Eisenberg: We will continue to fund innovative solutions to our community's most serious challenges. In our most recent developments, we have been combining innovative uses with the housing to have a transformative effect not only on our residents but on the entire neighborhood. For example, one of our most recent projects (Verde Gardens) combines 145 homes for formerly homeless families with a 22-acre organic farm and farmer's market. The idea behind this development was to bring green, healthy living to formerly homeless families and the surrounding community while generating new sources of income for the families by teaching them how to farm and giving them a venue to sell what they grow. These are the types of transformative projects we want to continue developing.

CPE: When you're not traveling for business, what's your ideal destination?

Berman-Eisenberg: Any family-friendly destination where we can all just unwind and spend lots of time together. We just came back from an Alaskan cruise that was as ideal as it gets!