

20TH ANNUAL
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THE WOMAN AT THE TOP

**“Even though it’s a snail’s pace,
we are pushing the envelope.”**

Verna “Vee” Griffin-Tabor, CEO,
Center for Community Solutions

The first thing you notice about Verna Griffin-Tabor is her welcoming smile and easy manner. You’d never guess she works with trauma survivors and heads a legacy organization that focuses on advocacy, healing, and the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault (“Real light subject, huh?”). That org, the Center for Community Solutions, maintains emergency shelters, a hotline, and the city’s only rape crisis center.

Before Griffin-Tabor, known to many as “Vee,” arrived at CCS 21 years ago, she’d earned a bachelor’s degree in criminology and a master’s in social work. Early in her career, she designed treatment programs for children who’d been sexually assaulted. She went on to work with rapists and pedophiles in a federal prison in LA, as well as with perpetrators in a halfway house. The challenging work with the convicted “catapulted me to want to work with survivors.” When she started as CEO and executive director of CCS, its budget was \$700,000 and there were just 17 people on staff. Her job involves a lot of fundraising, while still nurturing a healthy culture at the agency and ensuring best practices. CCS now has 80 staff members, 300 volunteers, and a budget of \$6 million.

With ten locations in San Diego County, they were able to help 22,000 San Diegans last year. What keeps her going is her unassailable optimism, and the knowledge that violence is preventable. —ERIN MEANLEY GLENNY

On the #MeToo effect I’m seeing a shift in people reaching out for help. Two years ago, our hotline calls went up 15 percent, and they’ve gone up again this year. People are less afraid to come forward. When I look at my career, and I look at where we were 30 years ago, even though it’s a snail’s pace, we are pushing the envelope. Things are changing, laws are changing. Public opinion is a slow-moving machine, but I do see changes. Is it fast enough for me? Heck no! But it is changing.

On the importance of recharging Vicarious trauma is real. We do a lot of teaching at the agency around self-care. And for me, honestly, when I get to a problem during the day, what grounds me is, survivors would really like to have this be their problem. When I go home, I have learned how to separate. I ride bikes, I work out, I do yoga. I meditate, and I have a very full life outside of here so I can come back recharged. I had to learn to take breaks. I looked at myself when I wasn’t taking regular vacations. Not only was I not being the person I wanted to be, but I also didn’t give a good message to our leadership team. We have very capable leaders, and they are just fine when I’m not here. As a matter of fact, if they’re not, what kind of foundation did we really build?

On working with boards When I first came in, we had a grassroots board, then we moved to an operational board, I took classes

on the side. Having a challenging experience in a previous job taught me how to set limits for the board about what the role is and what it isn’t in terms of micromanaging, and how damaging that can be to staff. I’ve been fortunate because we spend so much time in board recruitment, we really get to know people. We don’t have the time to have a board that’s divisive or are chest-pounders. People who come to do this work usually have a real commitment to it.

From doing social work to taking a leadership role My social work training actually helps me be a better leader and manage people more effectively because it’s about communication and setting boundaries, and really listening to people when you’re trying to make a decision. [Working with prisoners.] sometimes it was just sitting in a room with them, because so many people had made assumptions about who they were. Being with them, talking with them slowly, over time, would build trust, so that we could start looking at incremental goals.

Explaining her line of work I watch people physically shut down. I can see their eyes glaze over because of the intensity of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. That’s where my social work training and my counseling training helps me figure out if there’s a place where we can have this conversation. Because I’m interested in creating

seeds for change. They may talk over me. I don’t take ownership for that because I don’t know what I’m tapping into with them. I don’t know what their life experiences are, if they’re threatened by it or they just don’t have the emotional bandwidth to tolerate hearing about this issue. I pay attention: Are they engaging? Are they asking questions that invite me in? And then there are some people I can just tell want to get away. I understand. What I want people to know is why there’s every reason to be hopeful, why it’s so important that we lean in on these issues, and that it doesn’t have to be so scary. I want every school to have education on healthy communication, healthy boundaries, and consent.

IN HER OWN WORDS

FIRST JOB EVER:

*Oct age 16 I
waitressed in
a beach eat
Ocean City Maryland.*

FLATS OR HEELS?

Heels

BOOK ON MY NIGHTSTAND:

*Rising Out
of Hatred
by Eli Sussler*

BEST CELEBRITY RUN-IN:

Gloria Steinem

Read more about CCS’s cutting-edge programs, teaching healthy relationships to children, and how to volunteer, at sdmag.com/ccssd.