

**FOUR LESSONS  
YOUR FAMILY  
BUSINESS CAN  
LEARN  
FROM A  
HOMELESS  
SHELTER**

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By

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**MITZI PERDUE**

# FOUR LESSONS YOUR FAMILY BUSINESS CAN LEARN FROM A HOMELESS SHELTER

By Mitzi Perdue, MPA

What can a family business learn from a homeless shelter?

The answer is: a lot! How about developing attitudes that mean a culture for success, responsibility, and giving back? How about providing family members with a better vision of themselves?

*Several Sources Shelters* in Ramsey, NJ gives its residents priceless lessons about encouragement, structure, a supportive environment, and the transformative effect of a family that affirms them.

All these techniques are available, free, to you and your family.

## 1

### #1: GIVE PEOPLE A BETTER VISION OF THEMSELVES

People have a compulsion to live up to (or, alas, down to) the vision they have of themselves. Nadiya is proof of this.

She has an adorable son, a husband she cherishes, and a career she enjoys. Seeing her today, you would never guess what was going on in her life five years ago.

Back then, she was four months pregnant, homeless, and eking out a desperate existence, hiding in Newark's Penn Station. She was homeless because her roommate had skipped out on her, leaving her with rent she couldn't pay. After she was evicted, the one place she could find shelter was the local train station.

The station meant shelter during the day, as long as she could evade the Transit Police. At night, there was no escaping them; she and the other 20 homeless people had to sleep outside in temperatures that were occasionally below freezing.

"It was scary," she says. "I was afraid to sleep because if you've got stuff, there are people who want to take your stuff. And it was cold." The only way for her to keep

warm was to cuddle up against other homeless people.

Nadiya experienced an ever-increasing sense of worthlessness. Day after day, the people she encountered made her feel worse than dirt.

But then something changed. She heard about *Several Sources*, and soon the founder, Kathy DiFiore, invited her to come live in the shelter.

What did the shelter provide that caused her to change from homeless and in despair to someone who is now confident, married, and able to hold a good job?

For her, the biggest thing was being around positive people. She found that when she was homeless and people treated her like scum, that's how she felt about herself and that's how she acted.

At the Shelter, people constantly affirmed her, giving her a better vision of herself. The result was an irresistible need to live up to the positive expectations they were offering her. This new attitude changed her life.



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***Give your family members a positive image of themselves to live up to.***

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# 2

## **#2: TEACH EVERYONE TO SAVE MORE THAN THEY SPEND**

Margarita is now a respected entrepreneur, one who's written a resource guide for navigating government bureaucracies. If you saw her perfect posture, her nicely coiffed hairdo and her fashionable black pantsuit, you'd see a successful businesswoman.

You'd never guess that 21 years ago, she was seven months pregnant, sleeping in her car and certain that her life was hopeless. Her time horizon didn't extend beyond making it through the day.

However, after she was accepted at the shelter, this changed. One of the rules at *Several Sources* is that whatever income the residents receive, usually through social services, 40% of it must be saved for when they leave. This forces them to think of the future.

The goal is never to be homeless again, and that means making savings a non-negotiable habit. “We were taught,” said Margarita, “that the outfit you want can wait, you have no choice, you have to put money aside for the future.”

Saving 40% from her meager Social Services allotment was hard, but it meant that by the time she left, she had a cushion to use for rent, utilities, and a car.

The experience of becoming a saver transformed her image of herself. It made her feel competent and in control of her life.



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***Insist that family members save more than they spend. They don't need extra stuff, but they do need to be future-oriented and in control of their lives.***

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### **#3: MAKE ABUNDANT USE OF LOVE AND AFFIRMATION**

Cecilia Balog has a different story from the two women you've just met. She and her husband Bob are financial supporters of Several Sources, and it was her nephew Roger who was responsible for her involvement.

Her nephew was brought up in affluent circumstances with nice clothes, good schools, and pretty much whatever goodies he wanted. Sadly, even though he was showered with material things, the young man never felt that his parents accepted or loved him.

“He led a difficult life,” reflects Cecilia, dabbing a handkerchief to her eyes as she speaks. “He never married. He had trouble holding a job. His life was short and tragic. There were drugs.”

When Roger died, Cecilia inherited part of his estate. Thinking about Roger's life, Cecilia was struck by the fact that providing material things without love and affirmation led to a life of misery.

In contrast, she and Bob observed that Several Sources, was a mirror image of Roger's life. Women there had lived lives almost devoid of material goods, but at the shelter, they experienced a free-flowing abundance of love, affirmation, and faith. The

women were able to transcend their backgrounds and become confident, productive, and happy.



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***Love, faith and affirmation are crucial for a happy, productive life; material goodies alone are never enough.***

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# 4

## **#4: ENCOURAGE “LOVING THYSELF” BECAUSE THIS MAKES “LOVING THY NEIGHBOR” POSSIBLE.**

Dana has a thriving cosmetology business, but 13 years ago, she was pregnant, homeless, and hated herself. “I was surrounded by negativity,” she said. “It saps your soul and makes you hate yourself.”

Several Sources changed all that. They taught her to value herself, including the boost to her self-esteem that came when they encouraged her to continue her education. She was able to fulfill what became her dream, being a cosmetologist.

Today her sense of self-worth is so strong that she regularly makes donations to Several Sources. She knows that when you are able to love yourself, “It energizes you, and you want to do more for others.”



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***To raise family members who are givers, it’s essential that they feel good enough about themselves that they want to give back.***

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In its 35 years of existence, *Several Sources Shelters* has helped 1260 pregnant women transform their lives while in a residential setting. Of these, 57% have married and 80% hold or have held jobs. .

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*Mitzi Perdue, widow of the late Frank Perdue, is a speaker, author, and businesswoman. To find out more about her programs and services, visit [www.MitziPerdue.com](http://www.MitziPerdue.com).*

*For more information on Several Sources Shelters, visit <http://severalsourcesfd.org>.*