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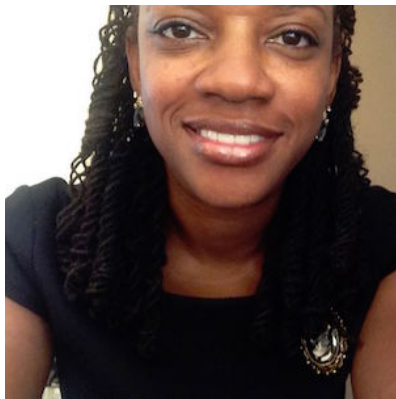
THE GIFT OF THE ASK

Deepening Ministry by Growing Connections

By **Natalie Hart**

“All they can do is say ‘no.’”

Those seven words, said with a shrug, were spoken by a woman who has a gift we don't hear much about in the church: The Ask.



Pastor Denise Evans, Director of the Kingdom Life Ministries Community Development Corporation (<http://www.klmcdc.org/>) (KLM CDC) and Community Liaison for The Deborah Project and Deborah House, is the woman with this gift. To those of us who do not have it, it seems terrifying. KLM's Pastor Doriane Parker-Sims once said of Evans, “I don't know how you do it, but your gift is in asking for things from people who want to give you things.”

She is a big part of how KLM CDC built their ministry from backpack giveaways to support groups for single mothers (The Deborah Project (<https://www.facebook.com/DeborahProject/>)) to providing housing and assistance to families headed by single mothers (The Deborah House (<http://www.thedeborahhouse.com/>)).

When Evans came to KLM, and was at her first Back to School Carnival (the annual event with school supply giveaways, free food, rides, games, haircuts, social service connections), she found out that the church was buying the hotdogs. Some people would've thought of that as an expected cost of putting on such an event, but her response: **“Why are you buying hotdogs? I'll get you hotdogs.”**

This may sound like a small thing, but food for over 6,000 people is no joke, and KLM is not a large, wealthy church. By the following year, the KLM CDC had partnered with the Buist Electric's Community Assistance Center (http://www.buistelectric.com/company_info/community/) and other

anonymous donors, and they haven't had to buy food for their community events again.

Similarly, they needed a stage built for their bi-annual stage production, *Heaven and Hell*, and had been sending letters to Home Depot about donations and a Community Impact Grant

(<https://corporate.homedepot.com/community/home-depot-foundation-grants>), but hadn't gotten a response. Evans walked into her local Home Depot and asked. She spoke with a few people, showed pictures of their event, and talked about their work. They received the supplies and the support.

It was no accident that Evans walked into a store instead of writing another letter. She says that corporations "need to know *who you are*," and for that, you need to show up in person.

"We're following every lead the Holy Spirit brings us."

This is how she describes her strategy, and you can see that in the breadth of leads she follows. She works for Strong Beginnings, so it was natural for her to seek a partnership with them: they provide social services to the single mothers and young kids who are part of the Deborah Project and the Deborah House. But she also went one step up the food chain, to Spectrum Health, the fiduciary for Strong Beginnings, and now they are a partner. The woman who cuts her hair is a gifted chef who also owns Cooking 'n' Heelz

(<https://www.facebook.com/CookingNHeelzCookingClub/>); she donated the food and catered the dinner for 200 at the first Princess Gala, a fundraiser for The Deborah House. She met the wife of a major CEO in a hair salon; they became friends and mostly talked about other stuff, but that relationship opened a door for a new partnership. WOTV's Maranda became involved with them through another unrelated conversation.

Evans says, **"I build the bridges and connections. That's my role."**

Bridges and Connections

To bring the Kingdom Life Ministries vision for The Deborah House to fruition, they needed to build a lot of bridges and make many connections. In The Deborah Project, the participants receive household products, pampering, lessons in financial management, tutoring for the children, and spiritual guidance, but then Pastor Doriane Parker-Sims had a realization: “We were giving them all these wonderful products to help their families and they had no place to call home.”

But they didn’t want to be just landlords--they wanted to provide the education and help these young women needed. But there’s a tension there. Evans speaks as though she’s talking to one of the residents: “We can’t give you everything. We have to partner in such a way that we can move you along, meet your physical needs, but also your spiritual needs.” At the same time, they didn’t want to wear out their church members and overwhelm the church budget.

Which brings us to the bridges and connections. Strong Beginnings (<http://www.graahi.org/Education/StrongBeginnings>) provides the families with wrap-around health, social, and emotional services for mothers and young children. The Grand Rapids Urban League (<http://www.grurbanleague.org/>) helps the women with employment skills. So the church is able to focus on other needs. Evans says, “We want the families to come here and understand what *home* is.”

Effecting Change

This work is making a difference. In just over one year of operation, Parker-Sims says, “We are seeing women raise their credit scores, get good jobs and reliable transportation, we are seeing spiritual lives turning around.” One resident improved her credit score from 400 to 700 in six months, and now she owns her own apartment and her own car. So far, 15 moms and kids have gone through the program. Parker-Sims sums it up:

“They are coming out of desolation and leaving full of hope. I’m seeing change and transformation in ways I’ve never dreamed of.”

Now we’re beginning to get at *why* Evans practices her gift of The Ask: **“We really want to effect change and enhance the quality of life for the families we serve. Therefore, I don’t care about asking.”**

The work she’s doing now is the fulfillment of a vision she had over two decades ago: “When I was pregnant with my son, the Lord told me I’d have a house for mothers.” Moreover, “All of us who do this work were young mothers who went through a period of needing help and may or may not have received assistance. We want to bridge the gap for families to get them off to a healthier starts.”

This is also why she does all of this bridge building and connection making for free:

“I’m watching people’s lives change. I can see how what we’re doing affects lives. There is no administrative overhead for us. It all goes into the house.”

Even so, the growth in the work of the KLM CDC means that the team relies on each person to fulfill their role. As Evans says, “We’re constantly negotiating what’s enough, what’s too much. We have an accountability circle where we serve as the conscience of the other person.”

So it isn’t that Pastor Denise Evans has a personality that makes her unafraid to ask things of influential people, or that everybody she asks always says yes. It’s more that **her passion for her ministry compels her to ask**. God has placed her in a church and in an organization where her gift for asking is given wings by being part of a supportive team, and is fueled by a long-time vision and by her deep desire to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable women and children.

I pray that each of our ministries can raise up people with the gift of The Ask, and support them in a role that draws on their deepest values and visions. Imagine what a difference that would make in Grand Rapids!

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