

## Princeton Resident Named to Gov. Richardson's Task Force

Princeton resident Robert Stack, the president and CEO of Community Options, a non-profit organization that provides housing, support services, advocacy assistance, and locates employment for people with disabilities, has recently been named to New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson's Poverty Reduction Task Force.

The task force is doing analysis, making recommendations, and developing methodologies by which to alleviate poverty in New Mexico. Mr. Stack characterized the condition of poverty as one of "optimistic bankruptcy" where individuals and families are disempowered to the point of despondency.

One way to undo this hopelessness is by reestablishing connections, according to Mr. Stack, who remarked, "The whole thing is about connectivity and looking for a vision of what you can become. Everyone — with disabilities, without disabilities — wants to belong."

Mr. Stack is an advocate for over 1,400 people nationwide with severe disabilities who face discrimination, marginalization, and poverty. People who are poor and persons with disabilities have been conceptualized in a similar manner throughout history, according to Mr. Stack, who said that "if you were sick in the early 1900s, you were either punished or ostracized. Then medicine began to treat the symptoms, and we did the same thing with poverty." He added that the 21st century approach to combating poverty and treating patients has become more holistic.

Mr. Stack noted that Mr. Richardson views poverty as a condition that is changeable given the right resources and an open dialogue, adding that the governor's point of view is that "it's okay to have a vision about what you can achieve and

what you can do.

"That's one of the reasons that I'm involved with this task force," he remarked.

Being a part of the task force involves meetings with various groups and individuals from New Mexico including the unemployed, persons who are poor, heads of local community centers, leaders from Native American communities, educators, housing specialists, ministers, and economists. Various topics like housing, education, transportation, and access to food are also analyzed. The report is due on September 1.

Community Options, the non-profit organization that Mr. Stack founded with others in 1989, has its national headquarters in Princeton. It has since grown to include branches in nine states including New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas.

As an organization whose mission is "to develop housing and employment for people with disabilities," Community Options uses a community-oriented model specific to the various places in which it works, since "the kind of supports that a family might need in Dallas are very different from those that a family might need in Bucks County, Pennsylvania," noted Mr. Stack. "We always hire people who are indigenous to the area since they know the politics, they know the people with disabilities, and they create a nexus, a community, and hook up with folks who are already there to figure out what their needs are."

Reflecting on his own "humble beginnings," Mr. Stack said "my father was a milkman, who probably made about \$6,000 per year, and my mom was a stay-at-home mom, and she had five kids. One thing I told Governor Richardson was that my mother never let us commit the sin of cynicism, and said

that no matter how poor we were, we could do whatever we wanted."

This worldview has contributed to the programming at Community Options and its ethos of empowerment. One of the organization's recent projects involves working with students with disabilities from area high schools in partnership with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in Hamilton. The students have the opportunity to try out various jobs including "inventory, custodial, accounting, and human resources" to see what they like best prior to graduation. Community Options implemented a similar program in Nashville at the Vanderbilt Hospital, where it proved to be effective. "In Vanderbilt, we found that 90 percent of students who tried those jobs, kept the job after we were able to place them," reported Mr. Stack.

In addition, the organization opens its own places of employment where its clients work. Currently, Community Options is endeavoring to open a used bookstore and tea shop on Nassau Street, pending approval.

Expressing frustration with those who see poverty or disability as the fault of individuals, Mr. Stack said, "The most glib, base, obnoxious statement that I hear is, 'Well, just go get a job.'" He added that "a lot more than that," including history and structural inequities, contributes to conditions of poverty.

Mr. Stack also acknowledged the role of employment in contributing to empowerment. "People with disabilities take pride in what they do and the same is true of people in poverty," remarked Mr. Stack, adding that "if you feel that what you do has meaning, and you feel good about it, then that's all that really matters, isn't it?"

— Dilshanie Perera



**EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS:** Robert Stack, president and CEO of Community Options, a locally-based, nationwide organization working with people with severe disabilities to find housing and employment, was chosen by New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson to be part of a poverty reduction task force.

(Photo courtesy of Community Options)