

Rubicon Programs



Peggy Day, Rubicon's bakery manager, spread her arms and gazed out of her office, a cozy, glass-walled box at the edge of the production floor. "This is my domain," she said. Less than a year ago, Rubicon moved the five-year-old bakery from a 2,000-square foot annex in the social service agency's headquarters to its new 25,000-square foot home in a former potato salad factory.

Though no relation, Day has a pert look and sunny demeanor reminiscent of Doris Day. Like the movie icon, she gives off an air of con-

fidence, efficiency and kindness that is as soothing as the scent of warm cake batter that suffuses the Richmond, California bakery.

She strode onto the floor, pointing out the high-quality equipment that is the hallmark of a bakery that means to be an industry contender. The 140-quart mixer that is as big as a sitz bath. The vertical oven holding a wheeled rack of 32 cake pans. The mechanical press turning lumps of butter and flour into perfect tart shells.

Day, 60, is even prouder of the men and women responsible for the 500 cakes and tarts

Rubicon Bakery produces daily. Many employees are soothed by the orderliness of baking: if you are careful and follow the recipe, chances are things will go well. This can come as a relief to someone whose life has



been marked by chaos, uncertainty and disappointment.

“There’s a real pleasing result,” Day said. “And we do make beautiful products here.”

Watching a baker load a rack with tarts or a decorator piping bittersweet rosettes, it is impossible to tell who was ever homeless or who is in recovery. As they smooth frosting or weigh lumps of dough, their motions are neat and sure. Most of them are in counseling and are still trying to mend lives fractured by poverty, drugs, and crime.

“We have people who really want to be here,” she said. “They want to get a grip on

their lives. If you don’t have something to do every day, someplace to go, it’s hard.”

Rubicon is named for the river Caesar crossed when he set out on his greatest conquest. The agency provides a myriad of paths for people to journey out of poverty, homelessness and addiction.

“It’s a friendly place, a supportive place, a tolerant place but it’s still just the vessel that contains the people and the process,” said Rick Aubry, Rubicon’s executive director. “At what point are people ready to cross their personal rubicons and change their lives? We’re never sure but we know we need to be there when they are ready to make that leap.”

Frequently, informal mentoring blooms between bakery veterans and trainees who are getting used to being on the job. Because just

about everyone has some personal understanding of substance abuse – either his own or a relative’s – the subject is addressed more readily than it is in mainstream workplaces.

“Sometimes, we’ll just spontaneously have a meeting,” Day said. “As you’re working, you’ll start talking about what is happening in your life.”

Peggy Day

Day didn’t realize that Rubicon’s bakery was part of a social service agency until she was in the midst of interviewing for the manager job.

It couldn't have been a more fortuitous opening. After 18 years spent running bakeries in Southern California, she was ready to return to the Bay Area to be near her grown children.

"I didn't know what Rubicon was all about until I talked with Carrie (Portis)," she said. "A large number of people who come through here are in recovery for alcohol or drug abuse. I told Carrie about my daughter. I saw that I could do something to help people who were going through what she'd gone through."

Several months earlier, Day's oldest daughter, Laura, died of a drug overdose at the age of 38. When Day heard about the people who worked for Rubicon, she felt an echo of her own family's story.

"Laura was a very talented pastry chef but her desire to stay in her field was defeated by her addiction," she said. "She got clean many times. And she gave me many gifts. She taught me about AA and NA. Compassion and kindness are the two most important things Laura taught me. It's so easy to be judgmental."

A bride in the 1950's, Day was a divorcee by the 1970's. "I thought I'd always be at home with my children, just like my mother and my sisters," she said. "I cooked. I upholstered. I made all of our clothes. That was what you did. It never occurred to me I'd ever work outside the home."

At 35, she began her baking career, making oversized cookies at a small shop in Sausalito. "You have to keep in mind this was Marin County in 1975," she said laughing. "The first question they asked me was, 'What's your sign?'" From there, she went on to run her own bakeshop in nearby Larkspur, before moving to Escondido where she worked for a large bakery that made croissants for fast food restaurants and cookies for mini-marts. From the time she started until she left 11 years later, the company's sales went from \$5 million to \$25 million a year and the number of workers she supervised rose from 50 to 250.

Many successful bakeries run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Although Day wants to increase Rubicon's volume and create more jobs, for the sake of her workers it isn't

likely Rubicon will move to such a demanding schedule. Many of Rubicon's employees depend on public transportation and would have a hard time getting to work at odd hours. Some of them would have trouble finding childcare. And, Day said, graveyard shifts tend to make people more susceptible to substance abuse.

In the two years that she's been at Rubicon, Day's mission has been to get the bakery on solid financial ground. "When I first came here we were not clear about what it was costing us to run this business," she said. "The focus wasn't on the money; it was on training. I've been held to a budget all my life. Now Rubicon has a budget. We're getting a handle on it."

Carrie Portis

Tall and harried, Rubicon enterprise director Carrie Portis rushed into the decorating room to retrieve some sample cakes for a sales presentation. She was running late and filling in for the bakery sales manager who quit a couple weeks earlier. The next morning, she met with a UC-Berkeley business major who might be interested in interning at Rubicon.

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Later that day, she schlepped a new product line — an array of miniature versions of Rubicon's most popular cakes — to the enterprise's monthly meeting with the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund. In between meetings, she had to consider trainees for the bakery, look for a new sales manager, worry about an employee who appears to be in a violent relationship and develop contracts for Rubicon's newest business, the home health care service the agency started at the end of 1997.

“I’m doing three or four jobs right now,” said Portis, 32. “I work by energy and I’m working a lot this week. If I didn’t really care much, I don’t know if I’d be able to do it. But I do care.”

A new hardcover copy of the latest hot foodie book, New York Times restaurant critic Ruth Reichl’s memoir *Tender at the Bone* sits in a bookstore bag on the corner of Portis’ desk, but she says she isn’t really all that interested in culinary matters. She can talk the talk (“Our carrot cake contains ginger – that’s a 90’s flavor. Our customers appreciate the lemon curd in our lemon chiffon cake.”), but what really engages her is the chance to devel-



op a workplace that could change people’s lives for the better.

As a girl growing up in Ontario, Canada, Portis sated herself with biographies of remarkable women like Helen Keller and Chicago schoolteacher Marva Collins.

“I was always struck by people who wanted to make a difference,” she said.

“That’s important to me – finding a way to do that.”

As she speaks of her sense of mission, her tone is neither cool with irony nor hot with righteousness. Even so, she recognizes that what feels natural – running a social purpose enterprise – is hardly normal for a Stanford MBA. Out of 364 members of the Stanford Business School class of 1995, Portis is one of only four who went into the nonprofit sector.

“I struggled in business school trying to decide what I was going to do with this MBA,” she said. After spending several years working with poor people at different San Francisco social service agencies, Portis decided business school was the best place to get the skills she needed to do economic development work. While at Stanford, she had a brief flirtation – a summer internship at Time Warner – with corporate life.

“I cannot sustain interest in those things for more than 45 minutes,” she said. Instead of opting to become one of a legion of corporate vice presidents, she decided to return to the nonprofit sector. She was consulting with one of the REDF’s grantees when foundation executive director Jed Emerson recommended her for the job at Rubicon.

Portis wasn’t 30 when Aubry put her in charge of the agency’s enterprise.

“I have a lot of trust being put in me by Rick and he’s given me a lot of autonomy,” she said. “I feel lucky that I came in when Rubicon was smaller; otherwise, there’s no way I’d have the job I have now.”

Aubry said it is critical for nonprofits to find managers with business skills when they decide to run social purpose enterprises.

“Every agency I’ve known that’s had a social worker running their business has tended to fail,” he said. “You can evaluate and screen for an MBA who is going to be patient and compassionate. You can’t screen for a social worker who might know something about running a bakery.”



In the three and a half years since she's been at Rubicon, Portis has started a home health care agency and increased the bakery's annual sales. Projections for the company indicate that it could grow to a \$10 million business with as many as 200 workers.

Today Rubicon is one of the largest suppliers of high-end cakes and tarts to Northern California groceries and supermarkets. The Rubicon icon is a chef leaping gaily while holding aloft a pie in one hand and a cake in the other. A legend in small type on the side of the box is the only clue to the bakery's larger agenda.

"We don't highlight our social mission when we market our products, even though it's why we're here," Portis said. "We don't hide it but it's not something that has significant value to our customers. They want a delicious cake they can confidently serve their friends and families. That is what we want our brand to represent."

In part, the bakery's losses are underwritten by the oldest Rubicon business, the buildings and grounds service run by Don Waxman. Rubicon Buildings and Grounds employs 70 mostly fulltime janitors and grounds-keepers and did \$3.5 million of business in 1998. Although Waxman's division is the agency's most successful business – and the biggest moneymaker in the REDF portfo-

lio, the bakery is the face of Rubicon. Behind the buttery tarts and the smooth chiffon cakes are thousands of messy, painful and ugly challenges that everyone involved with the bakery must address to keep that face attractive.

Because Rubicon, the social service agency, offers vocational counseling, mental health care services and affordable housing, Portis can leverage critical support to help keep bakery employees in their jobs. "All the things we do here at the bakery are wonderful but what makes a difference is what we can do to help people in their lives outside of here," she said.

Mary Gaona

In the decorating room, half a dozen women in spongy white hairnets chat and tease and joke while turning naked cakes into elegant desserts. The dance of their cream and copper and coffee-colored hands – waving a palette knife, twisting and lifting a pastry bag, cradling a cake and dusting it with ground nuts – is as beautiful as any of the work that will leave this building in a Rubicon box.

Mary Gaona, 63, puts a small chocolate turtle cake on her turntable and, with a few passes of her palette knife, coats it in chocolate frosting. Spinning the turntable, she carves three circular wells in the top of the cake. She fills the wells with caramel and

uses the knife to stretch the caramel into a spider web design. This is her favorite cake.

"I could do turtles all day," she says, a smile crinkling her big brown eyes. While she works, she jokes with Cris Gonzalez.

"She's like the daughter I never had," Gaona says.

"She's like the mother I never wanted," Gonzalez cracks back.

Gaona, who was hired at Rubicon in the fall of 1998, completed a 6,000-hour baking course while serving a five-year sentence in a federal prison. Although she was well trained in baking for large, institutional settings, she has only learned the fine points of decoration since she's been at Rubicon.

"On a good day, I can do about 120 cakes," she says. A tiny, birdlike woman, she seems to swim inside her turquoise Rubicon tee shirt. Sometimes arthritis in her hands slows her down. "I tend to be a perfectionist. I'll take the top off and do it again if it doesn't look right."

Before she went to prison, Gaona worked as an optician. A violinist, she'd also run the

box office and worked as a stagehand in theaters. Nearly retirement age when she was paroled, she didn't know how she would support herself on the outside.

"I was really frightened," she says during a break. "It's very hard. I had nothing left. A lot of women who are in prison have a husband or a family waiting but not at my age. I felt really fortunate to get this job."

Gaona makes \$9.99 an hour at the bakery and receives medical and dental benefits. When she first got out of prison, she was living in a halfway house in Oakland where she shared a room with four to six other women. Now, she pays \$572 a month for a two-bedroom apartment owned and subsidized by Rubicon.

Having a place of her own, a living wage and honorable work are some of the things that make working at Rubicon precious to Gaona. But feeling like she belongs makes it more than just a job.

"It's almost like a family here," she says. "People are interested in each other. I know this doesn't happen in all places."