

This nonprofit walks the talk when it comes to diversity

By Lisa Bertagnoli April 19, 2017

What kind of organization would want to make a \$42 million construction project even more challenging? A 148-year-old social services agency that helps youths who have suffered trauma.

When Ucan began planning its **Drost Harding campus** eight years ago, it decided from the start to give minority- and women- owned businesses a prominent role in the project. More specifically, it decided to hire businesses from North Lawndale, the very community in which the 7-acre campus would be located. "Much of the community often feels they are left out when projects come along," says Claude Robinson, executive vice president of external affairs. "When we heard that, we saw that as an opportunity, not an obstacle."

The city of Chicago provided \$2.5 million in tax-increment financing funds for the project, and also arranged for a 99-year closure of Fillmore Street between Central Park Avenue and Independence Boulevard. When the city participates in projects, it requires 24 percent minority-owned and 4 percent women-owned enterprise involvement in the project. Ucan decided to more than double the city's minimum, to half of the construction spend.

Through competitive bidding, Ucan selected Gilbane Building Company, a Providence, R.I.-based construction firm with offices in Chicago, as general contractor. For help in finding minority- and women-owned businesses, Robinson called Joan Archie, executive director of construction compliance at University of Chicago Medicine.

Archie has headed several U of C projects that made good use of minority- and women- owned business enterprises. Robinson asked Archie to serve on Ucan's diversity advisory council to help establish and meet goals for the project. "I didn't have to convince them that diversity is a good thing," she says, calling Ucan's commitment to diversity a model for other nonprofits. Archie handed over U of C's bid list, which included majority-, minority- and women-owned firms that have the staffing, bonding and other capabilities necessary to bid on, win and complete a project. Construction began in July 2013.

During construction, Ucan encountered a few hurdles. One business ran into serious financial trouble during the project; Gilbane worked with the firm to resolve the issues. Ucan also had to step in when several subcontractors tried to quietly hire unapproved second- and third-tier subcontractors. "We had to maintain control, oversight and tracking," no easy task with dozens of companies working on the site, Robinson says.

Over the life of the project, 60 percent of spending went to minority- and women-owned business enterprises, including engineering and architecture firms. More than 60 MBE and WBE firms worked on the project, and women and minorities accounted for more than 70 percent of the total hours worked. Ucan also hired 59 people from the community to work on the site—22 union construction jobs and 37 nonconstruction jobs. Without those hires, and the overall attention to minority businesses, "we would have run up against significant protest," Robinson says. "But we had none."

The \$42 million project opened in stages, with the Diermeier Therapeutic Youth Home opening in 2015 and the John D. and Alexandra C. Nichols Center, which serves as **Ucan's headquarters**, in July 2016. The

campus opened on time and on budget.

Funders like the finished product as much as they praise the way it was built. "It's gorgeous," says Alexandra Nichols, a member of Ucan's President's Board and, with her husband, John, a longtime Ucan supporter. Diversity is "important, and it's a struggle," adds Nichols, who serves on a half-dozen boards around town. "It brings such strength to an organization."

On June 28, Ucan will demonstrate to funders like Nichols how the Drost Harding campus and its other initiatives help change lives. The Youth Leadership Awards dinner will honor five program participants "who have demonstrated leadership and are on the path to success," says Zack Schrantz, CEO. It will also recognize Chicago banker **Harrison I. Steans**, whose Steans Family Foundation has been a major contributor to Ucan. The dinner is expected to draw 500 guests and gross at least \$825,000.

Meanwhile, its devotion to diversity in North Lawndale continues. Ucan spends at least \$200,000 a year in the neighborhood, from security services to food products and T-shirts. That doesn't include what the 300-person staff and 60 residents at the Diermeier home buy at Walgreens and other neighborhood retailers. Ucan has become the sixth-largest employer in North Lawndale, and has also expanded offerings to the community, among them job readiness and violence intervention and prevention programs and mental health services. The organization has five times more program participants now in North Lawndale than it did five years ago, Schrantz says. "We are here for the long term."



LISA BERTAGNOLI

UCAN YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARDS DINNER

When: 5:30 p.m. June 28

Where: Four Seasons Hotel Chicago, 120 E. Delaware Place

Dress: Business attire

How much: Individual tickets \$500

More info: 773-588-0180 or

UcanChicago.org