

# CITIZEN

NO WASTE GOES TO WASTE ON TERRY MCDONALD'S WATCH

# TERRY

BY RICK LEVIN

**S**tanding in a cavernous St. Vincent de Paul warehouse on Chad Drive, executive director Terry McDonald and I survey stacks upon stacks of identical cardboard boxes, each one the size of a watermelon crate. It's quite a sight. The stacks tower toward the ceiling and stretch horizontally wall to wall, and their Lego-like arrangement creates the shadowy alleys of a deserted city at sundown.

All told, the boxes contain more than one million pounds of used books.

McDonald tells me matter-of-factly that St. Vinnie's receives about 30,000 pounds of books a day. The discarded books are sorted and priced and placed and sold, each one turned for a small profit that eventually circles back as some form of help for the community's needful — as housing, clothing, food, jobs.

A forklift whizzes past. Over at the sorting station, two women are busy scanning the endless river of literature that pours forth, dumpster-style, onto a conveyor belt. It's the best dream Henry Ford never had: turning industrial mechanization into assembly-line philanthropy.

In just this way, McDonald says, St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County processes, on average, around 25,000 pounds of books a day — sorting, pricing, getting them on the shelves.

I do some quick math (30,000 in, 25,000 out) and point out that, eventually, McDonald will find himself completely swamped by used books. "Yeah," he says. "I'm going to have to start working a little harder." He pauses a moment, then adds: "It's a great problem to have."

This, then, offers a clue to the exhaustive approach McDonald has taken toward running St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) for the past three decades: *It's a great problem to have, and I'm going to have to start working a little harder.*

Specifically, McDonald looks at the Sisyphean mountains of garbage piling up in our consumer society — discarded appliances, ratty mattresses, tattered clothing, all that crap typically tossed into the dump — and he sees nothing but opportunity.

In McDonald's world, no waste goes to waste — not even the mite dust that falls from recycled mattresses, which St. Vinnie's bags up and ships to a company in Washington (\$110 a pound) to be converted into allergy test kits. At one point, McDonald admits, "I was saving human hair" in the hopes of finding a use for it.

## PLAY THE GAME

Under the leadership of Terry McDonald, St. Vincent de Paul has become a veritable powerhouse of benevolence throughout Lane County. The list of the organization's contributions are staggering when you stack them together: more than 1,100 units of affordable housing, including a townhouse complex of 40 units that just opened in Junction City; emergency services ranging from rent and utility help to donations of food, medication and clothing; homeless services including the Egan Warming Center and the Eugene Service Station; vocational rehabilitation and help to veterans; actual manufacturing, including a glass foundry, mattress recycling and, yes, the creation of upcycled retail fashion. Then there's all those St. Vinnie's thrift stores seemingly everywhere, with book selections that rival most used bookstores.

In its 2015 annual report, St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County's total assets — land, buildings, cash, equipment, etc. — are listed at more than \$72.6 million, up from \$58.9 million the year before. Total revenues were \$32.5 million, up from just under \$25.5 the year before, with retail earnings alone at \$16 million. And the money flowing back to the community in 2015 totaled nearly \$30 million in services (up from \$26.2 million in 2014), with more than \$7 million going to housing alone.

Such growth would be noteworthy in any corporation, much less a nonprofit whose sole mission, as listed on its tax returns, is to "provide assistance to the needy."

"We take a very entrepreneurial approach to things," McDonald says. "We treat this as a business. We treat our people in need as our stockholders. Business needs to provide dividends. It's basically a full-circle economy."

No corporate CEO or Wall Street banker ever spoke more frankly about the need to maximize profits through growth, expansion and renewed investments. In this instance, however, the relentless progress and profiteering of the machine is being diverted downward, right at its sweet spot, back to the people at the bottom of the food chain. In this world of one-percenters amassing more and more dividends at the tippy-top of the economic pyramid, such a radical redistribution of wealth is what disingenuous politicians, with varying levels of star-spangled failure, have been promising for years now.

"I don't get involved in politics," McDonald tells me. "I do get involved with how you're going to deal with capital and how you're going to get involved with resources for the benefit of the community. I can only do so much. What you

can't do is ignore the fact that this is going on," he adds, noting that, over the past 25 years or so, more and more people in this country have been shoved down from the "robust middle" into poverty.

"The best you can do is change who holds the capital and protect assets for the benefit of the many," McDonald adds. "I have been cheerfully trying to find as many ways as I can to create a capital base that can be used for a social good, as fast as I can."

Hearing anyone, much less the head of a nonprofit, speak so frankly about capital is unusual these days, and refreshing. Capitalism has become such a loaded word — less a simple designation than a linguistic cudgel synonymous with abuse and corruption. And since we're speaking of capitalism, why not just say it? Terry McDonald is an unrepentant capitalist. I mean that with all due respect. His take on economic redistribution reminds me that capitalism is not a political system but an economic one, and that there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it such. Thinking, and acting.

Rather than struggling against the imperial impulse of capitalism and bemoaning its juggernaut of harm, McDonald is turning it into a boon. And St. Vinnie's does this by positioning itself like a grease trap at the bottom of the free market deep-fry, ready to capture all the runoff nobody seems to want. This is trickle-down economics at its finest — garbage into gold.

## CAPITALIST JUNK MAN

Waste is an unusual natural resource, if one can call it natural at all. It's certainly renewable. Dumps aren't going anywhere anytime soon. And McDonald seems to have a particular genius for applying good old Yankee ingenuity to the trash heap. In essence, he looks at the dump and yells: "Thar's gold in them thar hills."

"I'm a second-generation junk man," McDonald tells me. McDonald's father, Harold Colin "Mac" McDonald, was the first director of SVdP in Lane County, working there from 1955 until his death in 1984. Terry was brought on board in '71, taking over as executive director after his father passed.

McDonald, who graduated from the University of Oregon with degrees in history and political science, says that what he really wanted to be when he grew up was a Byzantine historian. But, as a young man lending a hand at St. Vinnie's while "trying to figure out what to do with my life," McDonald stumbled upon his true calling.