

“It’s willingness to turn on a dime,” Neville says of what makes SVdP such a successful enterprise, “to see opportunities and seize on them and act on them almost immediately.”

There’s no doubt that nimbleness sometimes looks like impatience, and certainly McDonald strikes me as the sort of man who doesn’t suffer fools lightly, including this fool.

Speaking with McDonald, I had the distinct impression that he was ready to leave as soon as he was done, as though I were beholding a hummingbird buzzing at the feeder. He was focused and kind, but I sure as hell didn’t want to hold him up.

“If you are a person who likes to stay stuck in a problem,” Palmer observes, “and you just want to repeat the problems and why things won’t work, that is not a good recipe for a good interaction with Terry. ‘Let’s work the problem,’ Terry says.”

When I tell McDonald how often folks mentioned this idea of nimbleness when talking about him, he smiles. “I had not realized I am so transparently impatient,” he says.

Which brings me to my other favorite McDonald story: Twenty years ago, in spring of 1996, McDonald received a phone call from then-Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey. “Homelessness had become more and more of a situation where we were going to have to do something about it,” Torrey recalls, and to that end the city had earmarked money to address the crisis. “And it wasn’t a small amount,” the former mayor says of the funding.

The problem was figuring out the best use for funding that was earmarked to get emergency services to folks on the street. “Terry McDonald, I bet, would have some ideas,” Torrey recalls thinking, and so he picked up the phone and pitched the idea to the executive director. Could he come up with a business plan that Torrey could submit for approval to the city council? By tomorrow?

McDonald said yes. He hung up the phone. The next words out of his mouth were: “Shit, shit, shit, shit.” But typical of his shoot-first, ask-questions-later philosophy of doing business, McDonald immediately set to work, scrabbling together a plan and getting it to Torrey the next day. Hence was the Eugene Service Station brought into existence.

“We though we’d serve 20 people a day,” McDonald says of the ESS, a sort of all-purpose day shelter on Hwy. 99 where folks can come in from the cold for a meal and shower, wash their clothes, access a computer and seek employment and housing advice, among other services.

“Over the years it has worked very well,” Torrey says of the ESS, which served more than 6,400 adults in 2013 alone. He says he has nothing but admiration for McDonald, praising him for the innovative approach he’s brought to running St. Vinnie’s.

“He took that organization and he found ways to meet the mission and at the same time create opportunities for financial resources,” Torrey says of McDonald. “If he had elected not to go into St. Vincent’s and went into business instead, I’m convinced he would have been extremely successful, both as an employer and as an individual.”

Torrey continues: “He must spend nights awake thinking about things.”

It’s easy to see where Torrey gets the idea that McDonald is some sort of insomniac given to ceaseless brainstorming and project building, even though the impression McDonald gives in person is less mad genius than the kindly hardware store operator out of a Frank Capra movie — that small-town chamber-of-commerce guy, plaid-clad and bespectacled, who is quietly wise and unpretentiously connected to every rhythm of civic life.

“Terry would never say this, but I think that he understands that often he’s the smartest guy in the room,” Palmer says. “He’s a bibliophile of the first order. He has a hell of a library in his house.”

Certainly I’ve found McDonald to possess a formidable and far-ranging intelligence. He’s capable of moving at the drop of a hat from a discussion of the anti-democratic impulses of Plato and Nietzsche to the inner mechanics of the old Polaroid with which we took his cover portrait. But there are plenty of really smart people in the world who are perfectly ineffectual in applying their vast knowledge to



ST. VINNIE'S IN-HOUSE ARTIST MITRA CHESTER

PHOTOS: TRASK BEDORTHA

anything but a good barstool conversation. “Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act,” T.S. Eliot wrote, “falls the shadow.”

McDonald refuses to live in the shadow. For him, the space between thought and action, between theory and practice, is sewn tight, leaving little room for the sort of bureaucratic folderol that gums up our national politics. “I don’t have time for that, planning,” McDonald says.

This is what I find most striking about McDonald’s character and his business acumen, which at times seem inseparable. Unlike so many people confronting the apocalyptic realities of the modern world, McDonald neither resists nor rejects our sorry state of affairs but, instead, accepts it for what it is, and goes from there. At a time when apathy, cynicism and paralysis are becoming not the exception but the rule, McDonald has decided to simply get shit done.

“I like to move fast,” he says when I ask him if he’s ever considered political office. “I like to get stuff done and that’s not how it works in politics. If you’re lucky, you’re in consensus mode or you’re in a destruction mode, like today.”

“Terry knows a thousand different ways to get to the destination,” Neville says. “I’ve learned a huge amount from him. This is a life lesson in practical applications. It’s one thing to sit around and write editorials about what people should do,” he adds, referencing his previous experience at the *Register-Guard*.

“He’s a visionary,” Neville says of McDonald. “He is a master at strategy and scheming for good, and if this man were a ruthless profiteer, he’d be worth billions. That’s true — he would.”

So in a broken country where a petulant, selfish, yammering corporate prick like Donald Trump can tap into the angsty admiration of the very people he systematically screws over in order to garner a presidential nomination, here we have a man who puts the ultimate lie to our hypocritical myths of heroism: McDonald literally plays Robin Hood to Trump’s opportunistic skullduggery, seeking to unscrew the poor by ruthlessly profiteering on their behalf.

THE ART OF HELPING

Neville praises “Terry’s gift for hiring people who come from a broad variety of backgrounds, including people who’ve served time for felonies. They’re the best employees we have,” he adds.

“One of the things that’s really pretty delightful about working for Terry is he recognizes talent all up and down the organization,” Palmer says. She explains that when it comes to bringing talent aboard at SVdP, “Terry sees a diamond in the rough.”

Convicts, reporters, fashionistas: Perhaps the most inspired and downright unprecedented move McDonald has made, in terms of hiring, is bringing aboard Mitra Chester as SVdP’s own in-house art and fashion designer.

Housed in St. Vinnie’s former headquarters on 7th and Seneca, Chester has an entire floor of operations to herself. It’s here that she takes the scraps of yesterday’s fabrics — used strapping, shredded denim, old burlap, samples of high-density foam, shrunken wool blankets — and turns them into next season’s hip apparel.

“He took a chance on me,” Chester says of being hired by McDonald in October 2013. “That’s something no one has ever done before, just up and hire an in-house artist. Neither of us knew what that was when we started.”

What began as a part-time position has blossomed, over the course of three years, into a one-woman industry operating under the rubric of St. Vinnie’s. Chester isn’t just recycling used clothing; she’s creating new lines of designer goods, from record-vinyl earrings and hip dog collars to cut-off shorts and wallet cuffs.

This is the way the McDonald pattern replicates itself throughout the culture of SVdP: Talent meets opportunity and turns itself toward the twin engines of profit and service. Kind capitalism. Business as unusual.

Chester says that, on a more personal level, she values the lessons she’s learned, and continues to learn, working under McDonald’s leadership. “Over time he’s grown to be a mentor to me, and someone I respect more than almost anyone on this planet,” she says. “I’m in awe of the human being he is. He’s present and authentic with all people.”

Chester says she particularly admires the combination of courage and humility with which McDonald runs St. Vinnie’s. “He’s definitely a businessman,” she says, “but his business is helping people and saving the environment. And he does what he does not for attention.”

And here Chester offers her own Terry story: “The first thing he said to me is, ‘Mitra, don’t be afraid to fail. Even if you try ten different things and only one of them succeeds, you’ve learned from all 10 things.’ That was a hugely empowering thing for me to hear at that time in my life. That’s something that pushes me along every day still. It takes away this fear of trying things,” she says.

“I’ve never met anyone like him before in my life,” Chester adds. “He’s a real human being, man.” ■