

## **NELI VAZQUEZ ROWLAND**

### **A Safe Haven Foundation**



Neli Vazquez- Rowland is the Co-Founder & President of A Safe Haven Foundation (ASHF). Founded in 1994, ASHF is a vertically integrated eco- system that supports social service delivery along with vibrant social business enterprises in order to create a sustainable environment that fosters positive change in the lives of homeless individuals. ASHF's model is built on public/private collaboration that assesses and addresses the root causes of poverty and homelessness, with a comprehensive approach to social and economic crisis. The ASHF model is a holistic, sustainable, and evidence-based approach that is founded on the principal that housing serves as a form of healthcare which provides the first step in healing for a myriad of other issues. Thus, ASHF's aim is to provide supportive housing to individuals in crisis, offering them access to an assessment-driven, comprehensive and holistic range of services including: individualized case management, addiction treatment, education, and job training, job placement, and life skills coaching to assist with job retention and permanent affordable housing.

ASHF believes in community and neighborhood preservation- which can be accomplished by investing in distressed, abandoned buildings and repurposing properties in blighted communities. Doing so has resulted in the development of award-winning accommodations across the Chicagoland area, thus providing newly renovated or new developments that are safe environments for residents to live, work, and rebuild their lives. ASHF leverages relationships with for-profit entities to provide a robust support system for Chicago's most vulnerable. In addition to Vazquez-Rowland's outreach efforts, ASHF manages four social business enterprises which not only provide needed job opportunities for A Safe Haven's homeless population, but also provide in-demand community services- landscaping, talent resource staffing, a job training academy and catering.

ASHF has impacted the lives of more than 110,000 people, helping them to break the cycle of poverty and achieve financial independence with their pride, purpose, and dreams restored. Vazquez-Rowland is inspiring a paradigm shift in regard to the way our nation addresses the issues of poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse. Rather than treating these issues in silos and thus unintentionally creating systemic barriers to recovery, the model Vazquez-Rowland champions at ASHF connects services and leverages the investment resources of both public and private entities in order to create a holistic path to self-sufficiency for the homeless individuals served. ASHF's model is designed to help people in crisis achieve sustainable self-sufficiency and to achieve the 'double bottom line' of saving money, and more importantly saving lives.

The ASHF model is being implemented across ASHF's network of over 40 housing locations that offer well-appointed accommodations and the appropriate level of care from intense individualized case management services at the transitional location(s) to semi-independent and independent housing options including supportive housing, affordable housing and affordable senior housing. Through ASHF's integrated network they are able to serve more than 5,000 people annually and employ over 400 people throughout the Chicagoland area. Aside from investing in programs to support Chicago's homeless population, ASHF also prioritizes investment in its staff through its in-house professional development training and educational programs. Doing so helps to create a scalable model that ASHF's management team can replicate in other high need communities throughout the country.

Neli is often called upon as to serve as a subject matter expert speaker on issues pertaining to poverty, homelessness, healthcare, mental health issues and substance use disorders, such as opioids. As both a keynote speaker and high-level panelist, she has addressed experts in various government, academic, and business forums. She is a frequent guest on local, national, and international media outlets, where she speaks about ASHF's achievements and shares lessons learned as to how to best address poverty particularly amongst military Veterans, mothers with children, youth and re-entry populations. Her story and the ASHF model have attracted dozens of national and international government delegations to tour their headquarters. It is because of Neli's pioneering vision and unflappable determination to create hope in distressed communities that ASHF has become a point of light for thousands of people in crisis and the gold standard of excellence and aspirational brand for the industry.

## Personal Information

Neli is a first generation American who grew up in Chicago's Little Village community, a densely populated Latino enclave on the city's West Side notorious for crime and violence. As a graduate of Loyola University's School of Business, and the Minority Executive Management program at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, Neli was the first in her family of seven to graduate from college. She built a solid 13 year career as an investment banker, and rose to the level of Vice President at both Bear Stearns and Oppenheimer. Moreover, as President of Chicago-based MYS Development Corporation she participated in overseeing and contributing to the Construction of over \$500,000,000 in construction projects over a ten year period for private and public section projects. MYS client base included the construction of personal real estate development projects; governmental agencies, e.g., U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Army Corp of Engineers, and General Services Administration among others. While at the helm, MYS won several distinguished awards including being named as one of America's fastest growing Latino Minority-owned businesses by *Hispanic Magazine*. She provided governance as a Board of Directors member for Hispanic American Construction Industry Association, one of the nation's leading Hispanic Contractor Associations, representing the interests of small businesses. And, after 10 years, she closed her construction company to focus exclusively on her passion to develop and grow A Safe Haven Foundation and related entities to help solve poverty and address homelessness. She is an avid runner, triathlete, and marathoner; and lives with her husband and A Safe Haven's co-founder, Brian in the Chicagoland area.

Neli's vision for A Safe Haven Foundation grew out of her experiences observing the effects of alcoholism on her family as well as her native community; she witnessed firsthand the immeasurable mental and incalculable financial toll social and economic issues can take on an individual and a family in crisis. She grew frustrated observing the lack of efficiencies and high fragmentation of services that resulted in exorbitant costs to society and lost lives. As such, it was during her tenure as an investment banker that she and her husband, Brian Rowland, co-founded A Safe Haven as a way to give back to the community, in 1994. Their goal was to connect the dots for services and to achieve an integrated, comprehensive delivery system for others in crisis to help streamline the recovery process. After five years of investing their own resources, augmented by other high net worth investors, they funded a pilot of A Safe Haven that helped thousands of people in need. The mission of rebuilding lives from crisis became their life's passion. Brian and Neli Rowland decided to take the 'leap of faith' to apply their business knowledge and partner with government and other stakeholders and commit their personal lives to help the homeless become self-sufficient. Since then, Neli and Brian have been widely recognized for their commitment and ingenuity in their approach to addressing substance abuse and poverty. Their work was recognized in a study published in the American Journal of Public Health by Northwestern University in 1999, which reported that A Safe Haven's approach had a superior efficacy rate.

Recent awards and recognition include:

- "2016 Company of Grace Champion of Injustice of Homelessness"; Ignatian Spirituality Project
- "Maestro of Leadership"; 2016 Chicago Maestro Awards
- Director Illinois Tollway Authority Board of Directors and Customer Service Chair
- Illinois Medicaid Advisory Committee
- iHeart Media Advisory Board
- "2015 Unsung Heroes"; National Association for Minorities in Communications
- "CLN Hall of Fame 2015 Inductee"; Chicago Latino Network
- "2015 Miami Real Estate ICON Leadership Award"; Miami Brickell Chamber of Commerce
- "Leadership Excellence Freedom Award"; John Marshall Law School
- "TWO GOLD Awards in Landscaping" Illinois Landscaping Association
- "Independence Award"; Consulate General of Peru
- Co-Chair of the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Human Service –Governor Rauner Transition Team
- "Nueva Latina Estrella Award"; Verizon
- "Service Above Self Award"; Rotary Club of Chicago
- "Enterprising Woman of the Year"; Enterprising Women Magazine
- "Champion of Change"; The White House
- "Humanitarian of the Year"; The Illinois Secretary of State
- "Community Impact Award"; American Red Cross
- "Most Inspiring Mission"; Make It Better Magazine
- "Aiming High - Entrepreneur of the Year"; NYC Legal Momentum
- "Chicagoan of the Year"; Chicago Magazine
- "Leader of Color"; Chicago United
- "Entrepreneur of the Year"; Chicago Latino Network
- "Good Neighbor Award"; Chicago Association of Realtors

- “Social Sustainability Award”; National Environmental Hall of Fame
- “Latina Entrepreneur of the Year”; AETNA
- “Best Marriage of Money & Mission”; National Social Business Enterprise Alliance
- Publicity Club of Chicago – Three Time “Silver Trumpet Award”
- “Golden Trowel Award”; The Yellow Tractor Project
- “Chicago Chapter Distinguished Building Award Citation of Merit for Excellence in Architecture 2017”; American Institute of Architects (AIA)
- “The Fierce 50 Women Revolution”; 2017 Chicago Magazine
- “Orgullo Award”; Univision and Goya
- “Peoples Humanitarian Award”; The Original Chicago Blues All Stars
- “2018 Outstanding Leadership Award”; Bradley University Civil Engineering and Construction
- “2018 Innovations in Healthcare/Healthcare Delivery Award”; Institute of Medicine of Chicago
- “Community Hero Awards: Advocacy”; Harmony Health Plan, Inc.
- Selected as 1 of 17 National “EnVision Centers” by US Department of Housing and Urban Development
- “Silver Award Winner”; 2018 Association of Licensed Architects

Recent Speaking Engagements include: Illinois State Representative LaShawn K. Ford’s West Side Heroin Task Force; Boeing Company Partner Convening; Illinois Municipal League Conference; Women’s Justice Initiative; The Chicago Council on Global Affairs; Harvard University, UN Global Entrepreneur Conference; Miami Real Estate Symposium & Expo; Small Business Advocacy Council; Goldman Sachs Veteran Network; American Parole and Probation Association; University of Columbia, Bogota; Romney Public Policy Institute Bingham Young University; University of Chicago, Norte Dame Mendoza School of Business; Purdue Krannert School of Business; Loyola University Quigley School of Business; Northeastern University; Social Enterprise Alliance-Chicago Chapter; Real Estate Group – Union League; Elite SDVOB Network; International Women’s Day, Kennedy Forum “On the Table’ Event at Northern Trust.

Her work at A Safe Haven is often the subject of leading local, national and international print, radio, television and trade publications. Notably, A Safe Haven and her personal journey was the 10-page feature story in *Rotarian International Magazine*, February 2014 and the featured poverty story on a global news network CCTV with over a billion viewers and subscribers, and Neli’s groundbreaking work has recently been featured in *Negocios Now*, ABC 7 News, *Voyage Chicago*, and *Social Innovation Journal* as well as various online journals, radio shows, town hall meetings and panel discussions.