

Thistle Farms: A Community with a Hands-On Purpose

Over the summer, I was an intern for Thistle Farms, a social enterprise based out of Nashville, Tennessee. The enterprise offers employment, job training and support to forty residents and graduates of the Magdalene program. Founded sixteen years ago by Sewanee alumna and Episcopal priest Becca Stevens, the Magdalene House provides housing, food, medical care, dental care, counseling, and a variety of other necessities to women who have survived lives of abuse, prostitution, prison, and life on the streets. Each workday, Thistle Farms' women work to create all-natural healing oils, bath and body products, candles and thistle paper, soothing their hands as they experience healing in many aspects of their life. As someone who curious about the concept of empowerment, I was thrilled to begin this work I might want to continue beyond one summer. I signed on to the department of Public Relations and Development, not entirely sure of the extent of my responsibility or what development was at all. My assigned tasks included adding to and managing Thistle Farms' donor and contact database, assisting with blog posts, publicizing the first annual national conference WELCOME TO THE CIRCLE via e-mail and blog posts, writing thank you notes, and sending out tax acknowledgments to donors monthly.

I must admit I was nervous about seeing the nitty-gritty guts of a non-profit organization. Thistle Farms and the community of Magdalene seemed, from the outside, an untainted fortress of support and acceptance. My fear was that seeing the dollar signs and everyday tensions and squabbles of an office environment may maim the purity of Thistle Farms' undertakings. On my first day at Thistle Farms, I was immediately greeted with a hug from my new boss and given an intense training pamphlet about DonorPerfect, the

system Thistle Farms uses to house the entirety of its contacts and donations. While at Thistle Farms, I was given an enormous amount of responsibility regarding the donations. I handled the majority of the checks and grants that came to Thistle Farms and Magdalene, Inc., recording them into our system and ensuring that the donation would be tax-deductible. To my delight, seeing the financial portion of Thistle Farms did not cut me off from the emotional and spiritual side of the enterprise, as I had feared it would. Each day, I was able to participate in a meditation circle with all the inspiring employees of Thistle Farms. Their happiness and welcoming, strong spirits always greeted me. The everyday particulars of nonprofit work didn't ruin the integrity of the enterprise for me—my experience was enhanced as I realized how many people—volunteers, employees, graduates of Magdalene—dedicated their lives to helping women discover a life not of violence and abuse but of grace and healing.

In addition to my duties in the PR and Development office, I added two days per week of work at the brand-new Thistle Stop Café next door. Here, I found what was perhaps my most rewarding experience. Thistle Stop also provides employment and training to Magdalene women, but its opening correlated almost perfectly with the beginning of my internship. During this time, Thistle Stop was extremely malleable. I spent the majority of my time organizing the café, talking to customers, and serving food and tea, but I found that my suggestions to the manager were more readily accepted than they may have been at a more well-established project. For example, I wanted to make use of wasted space inside a deli case in the café that had been broken for weeks. I proposed to the manager that I could take some extra teacups in the café and pieces of paper with the

values of the café—love, healing, grace, bravery, story—inside. The manager was immediately excited about the idea and told me to go forward. The display was popular and I was proud of my work. I also helped change the way we presented the food—shifting from a deli presentation to that of a fancier restaurant. While I did not anticipate having this experience at the Thistle Stop, I found that I thoroughly enjoyed the days when I got to be at the café, on my feet, talking to people, managing their issues coolly and with clarity, and bonding with a staff of inspiring individuals.

I was given a lot of responsibility at Thistle Farms, and I at times felt slightly overwhelmed. I also found myself wishing that I had more experience in the fields of psychology or social work so to truly understand the lives and mentalities of the women I for whom found myself caring. Nevertheless, I did not want to leave Thistle Farms by the end of the summer. I realized that I will not be completely fulfilled by a career in which I do not strive toward some higher goal—whether it be female empowerment or some other social good. Interestingly, my time at Thistle Farms also brought out a more extraverted side in me. I found great enjoyment in winning people over, making them feel comfortable and explaining why I was passionate about the organization. Thistle Farms gave me confidence that I can be fluent in the language of an organization and communicate clearly core beliefs and pillars in off-the-cuff conversations. I believe that I could see myself in a career managing donations, in public relations, or in management of an organization similar to Thistle Farms. I found myself reflecting on the crucial principles I would want to incorporate into my everyday duties at a job—encouraging others, believing in their potential, relating to their life story and passions, and organizing to enable life change.