

MON MAR 25 2019

'A Shower Is Transformative:' Lava Mae's Founder on Feminism & Philanthropy

If you don't think of homelessness as a feminist issue, you should. We spoke with Doniece Sandoval, Lava Mae's passionate founder, on how being unhoused affects women differently and the challenges women social entrepreneurs face.



The stats on people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco can be overwhelming: About 7,500 people — including kids, families and people with jobs — are unhoused every night in the city. While the roots of this crisis are deep and wide, restorative experiences for people experiencing homelessness can be really simple, like the chance to take a hot shower. That's what Lava Mae and its mobile showers have provided to more than 15,000 guests since 2013.

We spoke with founder and CEO Doniece Sandoval about how gender factors into her work, both as a female founder and for women guests, and the women who inspire her altruistic work.

SUPPORT LAVA MAE

Why is homelessness an important issue for women?

Homelessness is devastating for all people regardless of gender, but for women the challenges are overwhelming. They are disproportionately escaping violence in the home, often single mothers and once unhoused are at greater risk of assault and sex trafficking. They also grapple with the realities of a monthly period and little access to safe, reliable bathrooms.

No one deserves to be unhoused but we must recognize the added risk and burden faced by women and as work to prevent and solve homelessness.

How do donations make a difference for Lava Mae?

A shower, something so simple that most of us take it for granted, is transformative. It connects us with our dignity and self-worth. It also eliminates obstacles to opportunities like jobs and housing.

To witness our guests as they emerge from a shower is to know how deeply visceral and vital this service is. Billie, one of our beautiful female guests says it best, "To know that I have 15 minutes to myself, in a safe private space where hot water and wonderful soaps wash me clean is the highlight of my day. I reconnect with who I am; I feel hopeful, and find what I need to hang on another day as I wait for housing to open up."

"To know that I have 15 minutes to myself, in a safe private space where hot water and wonderful soaps wash me clean is the highlight of my day. I reconnect with who I am; I feel hopeful, and find what I need to hang on another day as I wait for housing to open up." — Lava Mae guest

What are your biggest challenges as a woman at work?

The biggest challenge is around equal access to funding. One of the funders supporting us recently conducted follow-up research on the social entrepreneurs in its portfolio. They found that organizations lead by men were funded in amounts almost twice what women-led organizations received. When gender bias exists, it makes it supremely hard to sustain, much less scale, an organization that's having a great impact.

In what ways does being a woman become an asset at work?

On the plus side, being challenged in this way means we respond by being supremely nimble and innovative. We embrace the private sector's practice of rapid prototyping, we pivot strategically as needed and collaborate with partners across the sector to magnify our reach and deepen our impact. In short, we do more with less really well. Imagine what we could do if we were really well-resourced?!



Doniece Sandoval of Lava Mae in San Francisco.

Have you noticed any interesting trends involving women in the nonprofit world?

I think women philanthropists, large and small, are on the rise, which makes me incredibly happy. They bring a blend of rational and intuitive thinking to their decision making. According to Stephanie Clohesy of Clohesy Consulting, "they understand that it's nearly impossible to make cause-and-effect arguments to solve complex problems. So they're open to some solutions that are more centered on leadership, the quality of the people and 'off-road' ideas as unexpected pathways through a problem."

Who are your women role models?

I've been lucky to have amazing women in my life. My mother is whip-smart and fierce in all the best ways; she's one of the most resilient people I know. My dad's mom was a force. A truly stellar businesswoman who had incredible powers of persuasion. She could sell anything and believed that 'no' was just the beginning of the conversation.

Are there uncelebrated heroes in the homelessness fight we should know about?

Amy Farrah Weiss, founder/director of [Saint Francis Homeless Challenge](#). Her story as an advocate for people experiencing homelessness was profiled in [The Frisc](#).

Subscribe to ALMA's Seeking Shelter fund to donate to orgs helping people experiencing homelessness, including Lava Mae, each month.



Seeking Shelter

By ALMA • No one deserves to sleep on the streets.

5 Nonprofits • San Francisco • Last donation 1 hour ago

Images by [Katie Weinholt Photography](#)