

## *Biography*

### **Brenda Palms Barber**

As CEO of the North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN), Brenda is responsible for day-to-day operations, as well as development activities, human and financial resources and programming. Since becoming NLEN's founding Executive Director in 1999, Brenda has grown the organization from two to 14 employees and has generated an annual budget of \$1.5 million. Annually, NLEN serves 1,200 men and women, placing 75% in unsubsidized employment and placing others in its transitional jobs program, referring them to entrepreneurial tracks or helping them to secure additional skills and education.

NLEN's mission is to improve the earnings potential of residents in North Lawndale, one of the most severely economically disadvantaged communities in the city of Chicago. Because of the lack of job opportunities available to NLEN clients, Brenda developed an innovative social enterprise and job creation program called Sweet Beginnings, LLC. A wholly owned subsidiary of NLEN, Sweet Beginnings is a transitional jobs program that provides green collar jobs producing honey in an urban neighborhood setting and manufacturing and marketing honey-based personal care products under the Beeline label.

To help accomplish her goals, Brenda secured the assistance of corporate volunteers from The Boeing Company to develop a new business plan and simultaneously leveraged the support of executives from Ben and Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream Company. Having facilitated two distribution contracts with Whole Foods on Ashland Avenue and their flagship store on Roosevelt and Canal, in Chicago, Brenda anticipates rapid growth for Sweet Beginnings, which will enable it to employ up to 100 people a year. This endeavor will provide NLEN with earned income, supporting Brenda's long-term vision of a diverse funding base for the organization.

Under Brenda's leadership, NLEN received one of the first Mac Arthur Foundation Awards for Creative and Effective Institutions, the Shore Bank Community Impact Award for 2007, She was selected as a 2007 Aspen Institute Ideas Fellow, and just received the Social Venture Network – *2007 Innovative Ideas that Can Change the World*, award, and the federal Going Home Pilot Program in partnership with the Illinois Department of Corrections. Martin Temple AME Zion Church awarded Brenda the 2007 Women of Distinction Award.

NLEN has received national attention – most recently from CBS Evening News with Katie Couric. In an informative and heart-warming story, CBS reporter Cynthia Bowers profiled the Sweet Beginnings program and interviewed several of the men while at work in the apiary and mixing ingredients for the Beeline body lotion. Representing the views and experience of NLEN, Brenda has been called upon to consult with U.S. Illinois Senators Dick Durbin and Barack Obama, presidential candidate, to discuss pressing workforce development challenges and re-entry solutions for the nation.

She is also the organization's spokesperson at forums designed to influence the systems and policies affecting employment and economic opportunity in North Lawndale. These forums include the State Workforce Investment Board Ex-Offender Employability Committee, Seventh District Congressman Danny Davis' Policy Committee on Ex-offenders, the Executive Committee of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich's State Re-entry and Public Safety Committee and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley's Policy Caucus.

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Working with former Cook County Commissioner Bobbi Steele, Brenda was instrumental in helping the Commissioner craft and pass an ordinance promoting the employment of formerly incarcerated individuals with the County. Brenda also serves on the board of directors of the Lawndale Business Local Development Corporation and the advisory committee of St. Leonard's Michael Barlow Employment Center. She chairs the Social Justice and Political Action Committee at her church and is passionate about justice, equality and human rights.

Recently, Brenda had the honor of being named a Fellow of the Aspen Institute – a think tank comprised of veteran thought leaders who address social issues on a global level. Brenda has extensive experience in developing tools for job retention of disadvantaged and economically isolated workers. Prior to joining NLEN, Brenda served as the Associate Director of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's and Piton Foundation's Denver Workforce Initiative (DWI). This initiative was formed in 1996 to create a labor force in metro Denver that met employer needs, supported economic growth and broadened work opportunities for residents of the city's low income neighborhoods. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Management from the University of Phoenix.

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