

Q&A with Jason Shaplen, CEO of Inspirica

By Elizabeth Kim

Inspirica is the largest provider of services to the homeless in lower Fairfield County, which happens to be home to some of the most affluent communities in the country. Is that a difficult paradox for people to wrap their heads around when you go out and talk?

It is and it isn't. There is a statistical measure known as the Gini coefficient that measures income inequality. Fairfield County ranks number one in the nation among more than 700 metropolitan areas as having the worst gap in income inequality. A handful of outliers -- mega billionaires -- can actually impact the number in today's world. But even if you account for that, a statistic that doesn't change is that Stamford is the nation's fifth most expensive city and the Stamford-Norwalk area is the nation's third most expensive housing jurisdiction. The cost of living here has simply priced all but the wealthiest out of the market -- and into homelessness.



Q: Has the gradually improving economy made your job easier?

A: In some ways the improving economy has helped, but it has actually hindered more. For sure, the economy has seen the unemployment number drop, but it hasn't led to wage growth, which is a more important economic indicator. Put another way, the improving economy has largely benefited people at the top-end of the economic spectrum, but it hasn't affected people at the lower end or middle of the spectrum. They haven't seen wage growth while at the same time the cost of living has increased. It's a nasty situation.

Having said this, if the people who invest in us are doing better, they might invest more generously.

Q: You've certainly had an interesting career. Before going into the nonprofit world, you worked as a journalist at Newsweek and Dow Jones. You were also a speech writer on Bill Bradley's presidential campaign, a management consultant, a senior executive at a communications firm, and an appointed diplomat negotiating with the North Koreans! How did those experiences inform your world view and your current role as an advocate for the less fortunate?

Continued on next page . . .

A: First, let's get things straight. All that means is that I'm a jack-of-all-trades, master of none!

I grew up as an expat in Asia when expats lived a nice life. But my parents always made sure that we understood not only the world around us, but also that we had an obligation to give back, to help those less fortunate. As an adult, I continued to travel and work around the world. I've seen poverty one can't begin to describe in North Korea, and many other places. I simply can't sleep at night knowing it exists and I'm not doing my very small part to help address it, whether that be within the United States -- where one out of three people live in or near poverty -- or elsewhere.

Q: So what advice would you give to the next presidential candidates?

A: I think politics today is broken. We can't seem to talk with each other or work together anymore. Success is defined by tearing people down rather than jointly building or creating a solution to a problem. The causes are myriad and complex. But we won't get anywhere until we restore civility to the process. It's asking a lot of the next two presidential candidates to do this -- but each night I go to bed distressed that my daughters are growing up in a society where we spend more time tearing each other apart than genuinely working together. It's why I left politics to do what I do now. I hope next year's candidates can do their part to reverse the situation and perhaps even encourage compromise.

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