



interview with **jen sobeck**
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HEALING BY DESIGN

Interior design can bring a touch of personalization to a space or a home. It can also change lives. One Chicago-based nonprofit, Designs for Dignity, does just that by offering pro bono design work to fellow nonprofits. Designs for Dignity CEO Jen SobECKi explains how the organization succeeds in its mission to empower lives through design.

How did Designs for Dignity get started?

We were founded in 2000 by a local interior designer, Susan Fredman. Our first project was the Zacharias Center. They were in a dilapidated shelter, and clients didn't want to visit. They had raised all the funds to build a brick and mortar but had no idea what to do about the interiors.

So Susie called upon her vendors and contacts to see if we could get donated furniture, carpet, paint, tables, chairs, you name it. People answered that call, and the entire 12,000-square-foot facility was outfitted with discontinued items, donated items, and a few pieces purchased at reduced pricing. That was really the impetus for trying to do this for every nonprofit throughout Chicago. Two hundred projects later, here we are.

Do you venture out to neighboring states?

We've done work in northwest Indiana, southwest Michigan, Milwaukee, and as far as Boston and San Francisco. But we primarily do work throughout greater

Chicago and neighboring states. Our goal right now is to meet the needs in our own backyard, which we're doing with a staff of three. As we grow more support, we can look at maybe opening an East Coast division and a West Coast division down the line.

How much of a financial impact has Designs for Dignity made for nonprofits?

We've tallied over \$7.5 million worth of donated furnishings, materials, and design hours. We've also impacted about 640,000 lives through the years—and that's not even taking into account the many staff members who are affected by the transformations that take place. When people work in an environment that's been revitalized, it helps them feel valued and appreciated.

What do the designs provide to the people using such places?

One of the sayings we have is "The healing begins at the front door." Whether it's the vaulted ceilings in the entryway, the soothing colors, the material selection, or the way the furniture is laid out, it can make someone feel welcomed. People are landing in an unknown space, so if that space is fresh, with good lighting and comfortable furniture, it helps. For example, abused children's trust is broken. So after working up the courage to walk through the door and meet with a counselor, the minute they cross the threshold, they feel safe.

We believe that everyone should have access to good design. Creating dignified environments can help quicken healing and motivate people to get back on their feet and get a job or a home again by reminding them they matter and belong.