

**Michelle Heritage Ward, LSW**  
**President and CEO**  
**St. Vincent Family Centers**

*Michelle Heritage Ward is the president and CEO of St. Vincent Family Centers, a family service organization that provides a range of services for children with emotional and behavioral challenges, and children and families at high risk. Serving more than 1,200 in the community, the organization helps to develop children, strengthen families, and sustain communities.*

*Ward is responsible for the fiscal and organizational health of the center. Her leadership has resulted in growth from \$6.5 million in 2002 to more than \$10 million in revenue today. Along with the board and executive team, she works to establish and implement strategic direction through strategic planning, and helps to implement excellence in organizational culture for the 200 employees.*

*She serves on many boards and committees in the Columbus community, including the Ohio Council of Behavioral Healthcare Providers, United Way, the Professional Advisory Council Steering Committee, and the Groundwork Group.*

**You work for an organization that comes face-to-face with some very personal, emotional, and challenging situations. What made you choose this career?** When I was growing up, I would see homeless people and wonder, "What happened along the way that caused them to be in this situation?" I've always had a natural curiosity about understanding and helping those that are in need. **So you knew at a young age what you wanted to be when you grew up?** Actually, I went to college to be a doctor. I prepped for medical school and wanted to get a Ph.D. in molecular genetics. I found the science classes to be very boring; I wanted something more challenging. **Molecular genetics wasn't challenging?** Well, I wanted something that challenged me personally and professionally. I wanted the light bulb to go off; something needed to click. It wasn't until I took a sociology class that I realized my calling. I earned my bachelor's degree in criminology from The Ohio State University and later earned my master's in counseling from the University of Dayton. **What were some of your first experiences in the professional world?** One of my first roles was with an organization called Fairfield County Children's Services. I worked to keep these children in the community, close to their families. It was a very high-stress job; a lot of decisions had to be made quickly. It's hard to make quick decisions when dealing with a child and their future. I also worked with sex offenders and helped to prosecute some of them, too. One of the next roles I took on was with the House of Hope, a facility for boys. I was asked to run their adolescent residential program. A lot of these boys came to me in handcuffs from the juvenile justice system, and they all had substance dependency problems, too. It was very challenging work, but it was also very rewarding, too. **At what point in your career did you start to get exposed to leadership roles?** I went to the Prevention Council, a drug, alcohol, and violence prevention center, as the CEO. I really liked my work, but I missed the exposure I had with the kids and the families. I did, however, work with a board and learned the ins and outs of financials, organizational structure, and how to lead a team. It was a wonderful time for me to learn about being a leader. A few years into my work at the Council, I received a call from St. Vincent Family Centers and they asked me to run the organization as the Chief Operating Officer. **Talk about your transition to St. Vincent Family Centers.** When I arrived, the agency was in the throes of a financial crisis. I quickly learned to have the integrity to face the people I was responsible for — the staff and our clients. The key to leadership, I've discovered, is your integrity — without it, you have nothing. Within a year, I was serving as the president/CEO and the clinical director. Because of this, I saw all sides of the organization and was able to more clearly relate to and understand the organization. I'm proud to report that my staff and I have taken St. Vincent Family Center from a \$6.5 million organization to a \$10.4 million agency in seven years, with a sea change in the culture to optimism and innovation. It's been very exciting. **Why did you decide to take on such a challenging role?** I took this job in the face of financial ruin to do three things: The number one reason I took on this challenge is that I thought I could turn the organization around financially. The second reason is that I believed I could change the organizational culture from one of fear and mistrust to one of optimism, innovation, and trust. And, three, I wanted to develop and strengthen the internal communications of the organization. Within our first year, we showed profit. **What defines you as a leader?** I like to think that I'm a visible leader. I encourage staff to share their ideas, openly address concerns, and form their own solutions. I believe my role is to help people achieve their highest and best and to facilitate their brilliance. I also have learned that it's crucial to have accountability as a leader; I take the blame and share the credit. I've learned that I can read all the books and journal articles in the world and try to know as much as possible, but ultimately some things just come down to a gut check. I've learned to be okay with that. No matter how hard I work, I cannot know it all. I've learned to be okay with that. I have learned to say, "I have done my best." **What advice do you have for professional women?** Don't ever be afraid. Talk to other people constantly and ask questions. **Any regrets?** Not really. I firmly believe I'm here for a reason.

