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Lynda Callon is more than up to the task of running the Westside Community Action Network

Lynda Callon makes a quick first impression.

Maybe it's her dubious eyes when she talks about politicians or con artists working the streets. Or her direct language and sharp wit, often laced with unprintable adjectives and adverbs.

Or the way she walks around her neighborhood — with the nonchalance of Huckleberry Hound, the grit of Dirty Harry.

It doesn't take long for you to get the idea: Callon is a tough woman you don't want to mess with.

Underneath that exterior, the chief executive officer of the Westside Community Action Network is actually ... a tough woman you don't want to mess with.

Case in point: One Saturday morning, a guy in a pickup truck shows up near the CAN Center, on the corner of Avenida Cesar Chavez and Jefferson Street, where day laborers await employment under the Interstate 35 overpass.

The driver stops on Cesar Chavez and calls out for some of the mostly Hispanic men to come talk to him.

"This guy's never been here before," Callon says as she sits outside the center she runs, easygoing as Huckleberry.

Several of the guys, eager for work, start to walk toward the truck. Callon bristles. The rule, plainly written in English on several signs, is that anyone looking for labor needs to pull beneath the overpass. The laborers know this because Callon has made it clear to them many times.

"No, no, no! Dammit!" Callon screams as she walks toward the truck, Dirty Harry style. "Get away from him. Get away!"

Soon the man has pulled underneath the overpass.

"We start allowing that, we have people walking in the streets and there's chaos," Callon says. "The rules are there for a reason."

You'll hear from her

Callon has found herself at the heart of one of the country's most toxic debates — immigration. The Westside CAN Center serves mostly immigrants, predominantly Spanish-speakers, some documented, some not.

And Callon has strong opinions about immigration. But the point of the CAN Center is not first and foremost to help immigrants.

"The point is to make the neighborhood safe," Callon says. "Every child deserves a safe place to grow up, to go to school and to play. Before we opened this center, that wasn't possible. Now it's getting better."

So yes, there is a soft side to Callon (who won't disclose her age). She works more than 80 hours a week for about \$1,000 a month because she believes that in this one neighborhood, she can help make life better for children.

Get on the wrong side of that cause, be you poor migrant or powerful politician, and you'll hear from her.

"I would not put her in the category of political activist," says her friend and neighbor Barbara Bailey. "She doesn't want to be involved in politics. She wants a better city for everyone, and she learned how to work within the political system to get that."

It started at the library

Callon has her own immigrant story, though it's hardly recognizable to the men at her center. She was born and reared in Burlington, Ontario, where she says her own childhood was unfettered by concerns about crime and unsafe streets.

"I thought I had a pretty great childhood," she says.

Her family moved to Wichita when she was a teenager so her brother could go to a school that specialized in speech pathology.

After she graduated from high school and took some college classes, Callon wanted to experience big-city life. She spent 10 years in New York City, where she eventually became a sales manager for a TV station. Family matters returned her to the Midwest in 1986.

She decided Kansas City was a good place to land while she helped her brother and his children. She again took a job in TV sales. When the station became financially insolvent, she started working at temp agencies. She also grew more and more active in community issues.

In the mid-1990s, before she even lived on the West Side, she got to know the neighborhood while running a newspaper written by and for teenagers. A dispute over closing the Westside Branch Library (now called the Irene H. Ruiz Biblioteca de las Americas) would change her life.

"I decided I wanted something more than selling advertising," Callon says. "I think I was really sucked into a vortex. Growing up in a small town, the library was my sanctuary. So I said, 'OK, I'll help.' I didn't really know anything, but what the hell."

Battling city hall

The West Side has a rich history and has been close-knit over the years. That an outsider could become a vocal leader for the neighborhood's vitality speaks to Callon's ability to make friends in unlikely places.

"She was accepted here because she had faith in the neighborhood, it's that simple," says Ezekiel Amador III, who grew up on the West Side and is now board president of the Westside CAN Center.

"I first met her when I saw her picking up trash on my block. I thought, I should be doing that. It's my block."

Activists and friends alike say Callon seeks little credit and often isn't even mentioned in connection with many of the neighborhood's improvements.

But she is quick to the fight — ready to battle city hall, the police department and anyone else — to get what the area needs.

"I wish I could clone her," says Kansas City Police Chief Jim Corwin. "I can think of three or four more neighborhoods that would immediately benefit from her leadership."

It was Callon's involvement in the library issue that proved she was a natural leader for the Westside CAN. Originally nine Community Action Networks were set up in the mid-1990s, an initiative by the police department to take a community-oriented approach to solving crime problems.

"Traditionally, in community development, the police or the city or the government agencies come in and say, we know what your problem is and we're going to fix it," Callon says. "This was the bottom-up approach."

The model includes having police stationed in the center alongside community activists, working together.

Five CAN centers remain in the city, but the West Side's has been nationally recognized as one of the finest, not only in Kansas City but in the country. It was spotlighted when Kansas City won the All American Cities Award in 2006.

'Like walking the gauntlet'

In the beginning, Callon worked out of a small space on Southwest Boulevard. The group was active in several ways, but the neighborhood's primary problem, one that had festered for 50 years, was not being addressed.

Immigrants looking for work traditionally gathered at the corner of Southwest Boulevard and Summit Street. Many of the men were there legitimately looking for work, but the large group was easily infiltrated by drug dealers, addicts, pimps and prostitutes. But even legitimate workers who hadn't gotten work that day would cause problems.

"We're the only nation in the Western world that does not have a system of public bathrooms in its cities," Callon says. "So apparently we're so advanced, we don't have to use the bathroom in the United States. But that meant we had to hose down the alleys in our neighborhood because it smelled so bad."

Octavio “Chato” Villalobos, now a Kansas City police officer stationed at Westside CAN Center, remembers what it was like growing up in the neighborhood.

“It was like walking the gaunt- let,” Villalobos says. “We lived on one side of the Boulevard, and all the stores were on the other side. You had to cross through it, and it was very scary for a child.”

Callon is direct when diagnosing the problem.

“Men don’t entertain themselves very well when left to their own devices,” she says.

Police would clear the corner from time to time, but there was no permanent solution.

Callon and the two officers assigned to the CAN Center knew something had to be done. In 2002 Callon started to do outreach to the men on the corner. She’d rise at 4 a.m. each day to start cooking them a pot of beans. She invited them into her office and got to know them.

But the space wasn’t going to work. A landlord was convinced to lease the center another building for very low rent. A construction firm helped rehab it.

Soon the Westside CAN Center had done something pretty radical: created a place for men to come look for day labor work — but also to stick around all day if they needed to.

The center has a kitchen where the men cook communally, a bathroom, a shower and a locker room. It has an office for Callon, one live-in cat, one live-in dog and another dog that goes home with her at night. And there’s office space for the police.

A rocky first meeting

Police officer Matt Tomasic says it works because it’s a simple premise.

“If the guys work and stay in the center and don’t commit crimes, we all get along,” he says. “But at the end of the day, we’re here to uphold the law. If they break it, we’re going to arrest them.”

And it’s Callon’s presence, her tough compassion, that maintains the balance, Tomasic says.

“She’s a saint. I mean that — she’s like a Mother Teresa,” he says. “Without her, I’m not sure this whole thing works.”

If she is a saint, she’s not your typical variety. Just ask Corwin. His introduction to Callon “was not a smooth start,” Corwin recalls with a smile.

“I had met him when he was just moving up from a major to a deputy chief,” Callon says. “We started off pretty adversarial. He was speaking at a community policing meeting, and they were talking about all they had done to recruit minorities. They were pretty proud of themselves, too.

“And at the end I got up and said, ‘That’s (bleepin’ bleep).’ He said, ‘Why would you say that?’ ”

She repeated what she’d said, adding, “You know it, and I know it.”

Now they consider themselves friends.

“There’s no doubt that she has the best interests of the city in mind,” Corwin says. “I go get her ideas. I want them, because she sees every day what works and what doesn’t. She’s become a very important resource.”

She’s ‘Mamá’

Callon arrives at the CAN Center between 7:30 and 8 every morning. Her first order of business is a walk through the neighborhood with her black Labrador named Negro (Spanish for black). This is more than a constitutional — she walks to pick up trash.

Afterward she starts in on the business of the day, running an organization that sponsors various events (see box, facing page) and overseeing day-to-day shelter operations. She doesn’t get involved in negotiations between laborers and those looking to hire unless she has to — if either side complains to her, for instance, or there are language barriers.

She leaves sometime after the shelter closes at 6 p.m. She does this Monday through Saturday.

But Callon is not a one-dimensional person, says her friend Barbara Bailey.

“She enjoys art, she loves to travel, she is very funny,” Bailey says. “She’s a wonderful friend.”

But would she be more effective if she showed her softer side?

"No way," Corwin says. "That's not who she is. When you're dealing with Lynda, you know what you're getting. She doesn't have any pretense."

Most of the men at the CAN Center call her "Mamá."

"This is a good environment, a good place to be, if you are a good man, a hard-working man," says Sergio De La Cruz, a 46-year-old roofer from Juarez, Mexico.

"Lynda helps the men who are here to work and do the right things for their family. The way that she thinks, if we keep ourselves busy, have some food in your stomach, you are a happy man and you just go home at night."

Understanding their plight, seeing their humanity — but not tolerating behavior that harms the neighborhood — has earned Callon their respect. And it makes her uniquely qualified to address the immigration debate.

No anonymity

"Immigrants have been sent a mixed message," says Callon, who says she speaks "Lynda Spanish" with the men.

"On the one hand, they're told to come and work, usually for bad pay and bad conditions. On the other hand, they're told it's illegal if they don't wait for the proper papers. And those can take years (to get)."

Callon says it's no coincidence that the explosion of immigrants came right after the North American Free Trade Agreement was ratified between the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

"We sent jobs out of the United States, which hurt our poor, but we also flooded (Mexico's and Central America's) market with food and other items that ran their poor out of business," Callon says.

"So they did what anyone would do for their family — they went where the work was. But it's not as simple as it sounds. There aren't people clamoring to hire you. You're alone, a lot of times you are illiterate, it's easy to fall into drugs and alcohol."

But understanding does not mean tolerance.

"We look at it as if we're a second chance," she says. "If they want to get their lives together, they can do that. If they don't, there are consequences. Any inappropriate behavior needs anonymity to succeed. We take their anonymity away."

Late last year the Westside CAN Center's building was sold, and the new landlord wasn't interested in keeping the rent low forever. The center exists on two grants that total \$30,000, plus donations — including expected donations from the men who use the center on days they get work.

"We can't seem to convince foundations that what we're doing is more than you can quantify in your annual report each year," Callon says. "We need for the city and the community at large to step up."

The recent crisis was averted with help from city staff, and now the Kansas City Council is working to find a permanent location. But donations are still necessary for operating funds and salary.

"We know that you just don't throw money at problems," board president Amador says. "But we're not asking people to do that. We're asking them to throw money at solutions, proven solutions."

Callon is, as usual, unfazed and philosophical about the potential closure of the CAN Center.

"People ask me what will happen if we close," she says. "I ask them, 'What happens to a field of weeds if you don't mow it?' The weeds grow back." ★

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MORE THAN THE CAN CENTER

The Westside Community Action Network does more than run the CAN Center. Here are other ways the organization has an impact on the West Side:

- Maintains two community gardens.
- Sponsors WOW (Walk on Wednesdays), which encourages neighbors to take a stroll with CAN staff and community police officers.
- Sponsors a back-to-school pep rally at which 700 school supply sampler bags are given to students in the neighborhood.
- Sponsors the Westside Family Urban Campout, which gives families the chance to experience the great outdoors in Observation Park, 21st and Holly.

- Sponsors a fall festival.

HOW TO HELP

Last year the Westside CAN Center nearly lost its lease. It still faces serious financial issues and is looking for benefactors.

To learn more, call 816-842-1298 or e-mail westcan@crn.org. Or visit www.westsidecan.org.

The CAN Center's mailing address is 2136 Jefferson St., Kansas City, Mo. 64108.

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