



Photo by Kate Philbrick

## Shalom Odokara: Paying It Forward

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Bethany Hutchinson

Shalom Odokara doesn't see herself as a leader. “I'm just Shalom,” she says. With humility and quiet confidence, Odokara describes her role as founder and director of Women in Need Industries (WINI), a resource hub for women seeking to better their lives and the lives of their families. Because these women face difficult hurdles—financial distress, language and cultural barriers, domestic violence, and drug addiction—Odokara often works seven days a week, including Christmas and New Year's. She knows that those who contact WINI can feel particularly vulnerable during the holidays and

says, “If it were me making that call on Christmas Day, I would want someone to answer.”

Though the need is great and the hours long, Odokara says, “The work itself drew me.” Raised with African values by her Nigerian immigrant parents, she believes that when you help a woman, you help a village, and she has dedicated her life to doing just that. Many of the women, or angels, as Odokara calls them, who receive services from WINI reciprocate the kindness by helping others. One woman, for instance, paid the rental deposit for another woman who could not afford it. And when a

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social worker recently contacted WINI regarding a number of pregnant women in need of baby supplies, the angels were quick to respond, donating cribs, clothes, diapers, and other necessities. "From a young age," Odokara says, "I've been astonished by the strength of women, particularly when they connect with one another and work together." WINI's angels are no exception.

Because she recognizes the power of community, Odokara tries to foster a sense of fellowship with those who work for other organizations in order to better serve the women who turn to WINI. Her efforts paid off this winter after one woman's residence went cold because her application for home heating oil assistance did not follow her when she moved to a new county. When Odokara got the call for help, she turned to the director of the servicing agency, with whom she already had a working relationship. An hour later, the once frosty house was warming up with the arrival of emergency oil. "The help that comes from such connections cannot be touched," Odokara notes.

For Odokara, this holds true both in and out of work. She says raising her son as a single mother was the hardest job in the world, but she did not go it alone; rather, she reached out to those around her. The experience showed her not only what it's like to be in need, but also the good that comes when you ask for help and your community responds. "People stepped up," Odokara recalls, "and they became more than mentors and neighbors--they became family." Knowing firsthand the benefits that community brings, Odokara wants women in need to have social networks that they can rely on. When a woman first connects with WINI, she has to provide a contact's phone

number as well as her own. "You have to have support," Odokara cautions. So if the woman is unable to name a friend or family member as a go-to person, Odokara will help her begin to cultivate community.

Ultimately, many of these women circle back as angels, giving where they once received and working to strengthen themselves as well as WINI. While Odokara's life reflects her belief that to whom much is given, much is asked, so do the lives of the people WINI touches. From angels to Portland's mayor to those who simply want to help, community members contribute in various ways, all sparing what they can. Odokara talks of the "widow's mite," a small contribution from one who has little, sent in thank you cards or slipped under the office door, with a mixture of gratitude and awe for people's giving spirit.

Because she wants women in need to thrive and pay it forward, Odokara's organization supports the creation of other businesses that pay a livable wage. The most recent WINI-supported startup is EZ Foreclosure Cleaning Services, which employs all women, mostly refugees, to clean, restore, and clear out repossessed properties. They then donate the goods and a portion of the proceeds to WINI. With a down economy, Odokara expects even more female-led businesses to crop up. She thinks these are the best of times for female entrepreneurs to demonstrate their mettle, asserting, "Throughout history, women have risen to the occasion when things got tough, and we'll do so again."

How are you rising  
to the occasion?  
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