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Transit business soars with unique model

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Najeebah Shareef, president and CEO of ILF Transportation

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ILF Transportation – officially, Inspiring Lives Forever LLC – grew out of a chance encounter.

In 2012, Shareef, a former teacher, was working on a master's degree in nonprofit administration and leadership at Cleveland State University. She said she was on her way to an interview when a homeless man asked her for some change. She asked if, in exchange for that change, he would share his story.

The two went to a nearby cafe where he did just that, explaining that he was a veteran who had fallen on hard times after returning to the United States and was having trouble getting the help he needed.

At the end of his story, Shareef said her "heart hurt" and she was in tears. But, she said, the man used his "military voice" to snap her back into reality, telling her that he didn't need pity; he needed help.

"My whole world changed," Shareef said.

She started a nonprofit, Inspiring Lives Inc., in April 2013, designed to help homeless veterans, both by employing them to fix properties and helping them find housing. But she found it was difficult to get the veterans to appointments. She saw a need for non-emergency medical transportation and filled it by starting ILF Transportation in September 2013.

"I know my purpose, I know what I need to do, and I don't have time to waste. That's what my mindset was all about," Shareef said.

ILF started out in Shareef's home in Euclid, but she said some legal prodding from her neighbors and the city helped push her to the "next level" after a couple of years. She found an office in Euclid, but smoke damage from a fire in the building soon sent her searching once again.

She found the right fit in the space at 16113 St. Clair Ave. in Cleveland. The 15,000-square-foot building is a significant upgrade from the approximately 900-square-foot office ILF had previously rented, not to mention an improvement on the home-based office.

The city of Cleveland provided ILF with a \$44,250 SBA Municipal Small Business Initiative recoverable grant, said Kevin Schmotzer, executive of small business development for the city. If ILF meets the terms of the agreement — mainly, that it's still in business after three years and has created at least two new jobs in the city — the company won't have to repay any of that grant funding, Schmotzer said.

The building cost \$83,000, Shareef said, and renovations and equipment cost \$308,000. Renovations took from about September of 2016 through June of 2017. Most were cosmetic, Shareef said — repainting, cleaning, putting in new floors, new bathrooms and the like. There's a break room where employees can play pool or video games to relax, and showers in the bathrooms in case employees don't have access to them normally.

Shareef aims to hire veterans and people who need "second chances," like those who have been in prison. She makes setting goals — personal and professional — a priority for each employee, and meets with each person monthly to make sure they are on track.

Larry Young, who was originally employed by Shareef's nonprofit before becoming ILF Transportation's first employee, said the company and Shareef gave him a "fresh start." The Army veteran said he had spent some time in prison and had almost given up when he met her. While he has now moved on to another job, Young said he did general maintenance for ILF for about a year and a half while he got back on his feet, getting his driver's license and housing.

"Pretty much anything that I needed, she was there to help me out with," Young said.

Today, ILF has 16 employees, the majority of whom were hired in the past six months.

The bulk of ILF's business is still in non-emergency medical transport, but the company has steadily added other certifications over time, including courier and logistics services. Most recently, ILF earned its Hazmat certification so it can transport chemicals and other products. The company is certified for everything from cars and vans to dump trucks and 18-wheelers, though if a customer needs something larger than a box truck, ILF will lease it.

Shareef expects ILF to make about \$420,000 in annual revenue by the end of 2017, a significant increase from the approximately \$90,000 to \$100,000 it made in 2014.

ILF has entities set up in four states, in addition to the headquarters in Ohio. Shareef's goal is to get satellite offices into at least 15 states in the next five years. She also wants to get the nonprofit up-and-running, and she may look into finishing her master's degree. But overall, Shareef already sees success in ILF and calls the experience so far a humbling one.

"It has been not only my passion, but a business where I can actually help people along the way, as well as they help me," Shareef said. "It's a win-win situation to me. It has been extraordinary."