

**Rev. Becca Stevens: Servant Leader, Humanitarian, Impacting the Lives of Thousands**

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### Abstract

*Rev. Becca Stevens* is a highly respected *entrepreneur*, having gained notoriety through her life's long work on a global level. Having experienced sexual abuse as a child, she has committed herself to helping those who have faced similar traumas and experiences. A Nashville, Tennessee, native, Rev. Stevens began her career working as a priest for St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel on Vanderbilt University's campus. Shortly after, she began a *nonprofit* initiative to help women who are sexually exploited, trafficked, prostituted, and suffering from addiction get off the Nashville streets by providing them with shelter, food, and the help needed to overcome addiction. In addition to getting these women off the streets, Rev. Stevens provides them with a holistic recovery model that includes life-long learning skills and education to help them live a life away from the streets. During her 25+ year career in *nonprofit*, Rev. Stevens has raised over \$75 million for justice enterprises, provided over 500 beds for women survivors, and established 13 *nonprofits* across the globe to include locations in the United States, Mexico, Ecuador, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. She has written and published 12 books, and has been featured on PBS NewsHour, TEDTalks, and many other media outlets. Because of these successes, this research will demonstrate why *Rev. Becca Stevens* is a faithful *servant leader* who embodies *active listening* and emotional intelligence traits, falls under the idealized influence concept, and is a great *humanitarian*.

*Keywords:* Rev. Becca Stevens, servant leader, humanitarian, active listening, nonprofit, entrepreneur

## **Rev. Becca Stevens: Servant Leader, Humanitarian, Impacting the Lives of Thousands**

This study aims to demonstrate why *entrepreneur Rev. Becca Stevens*, founder and president of Thistle Farms Social Enterprises in Nashville, Tennessee, among many other accolades, is a faithful *servant leader* who embodies emotional intelligence, *active listening*, idealized influence, and is a great *humanitarian*. The theoretical framework of this study focuses on Rev. Stevens as a *servant leader*. It draws attention to the holistic approach her programs take to helping victims heal their whole selves. The method used for this argument includes reviewing and analyzing empirical studies, a snapshot view of *Rev. Becca Stevens's* background and life's work, and an evaluation of current conditions.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Servant Leadership**

*Servant leaders* provide a holistic approach to putting others' needs before their own, offering their services to serve others better (Aulia et al., 2022, p. 285). They must embody emotional intelligence, practice *active listening*, understand what it is to have the power of idealized influence and strive for humanitarianism. *Servant leaders* work to establish a "set of common values, trust, and norms" within the community that fosters a sense of togetherness and educates on the importance of collaborative work, promotes group spirit, and a shared vision (Aulia et al., 2022, p. 285). *Servant leaders* embody altruism, empathy, and ethics, which are important characteristics in empowering others to grow and obtain positive outcomes (Brierè et al., 2020, p. 65).

Leading with a sense of purpose is built into a *servant leader's* DNA as they combine "motivation to lead with a need to serve" (Brierè et al., 2020, p. 66). They encourage their followers to make their own decisions empowering those they lead (Brierè et al., 2020, p. 67).

Through their leadership, *servant leaders* "build strong relationships with others" by acting with their followers' best interest at heart and encouraging followers to pursue their interests (Dyke & Hurt, 2022, p. 97, Brierè et al., 2020, p. 66).

According to Chen et al. (2013), the servant leadership concept has several elements that include inspiring followers to generate "awareness, trust, learning, and spiritual fulfillment"—demonstrating the importance of practicing tolerance, open-mindedness, patience, optimism, and a willingness to learn, setting an example for others to follow—and practicing a "humanistic-based leadership style that leads by values and beliefs," (p. 419). *Servant leaders* possess several characteristics that aid in promoting an overall well-being lifestyle for their followers. These characteristics include the drive to value and develop people, practice authenticity, and the sharing of power with those they lead (Dyke & Hurt, 2022, p. 94).

### **Active Listening**

The art of *active listening* is an important skill for leading others. To actively listen, a leader demonstrates an element of paying attention and taking time to understand the topic being discussed, whether it is a concern at work or of personal interest (Doyle, 2024, para. 1 & 2). Not interrupting during a conversation also demonstrates *active listening* (Doyle, 2024, para. 2). By listening actively, a *servant leader* inspires loyalty and promotes group development. Followers will experience "individual personality change" as they become loyal to the leader and organization, having felt that their voices are being heard (Mastrangelo et al., 2017, p. 440).

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence is "the ability to accurately perceive your own and others' emotions." It includes five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy for others, and social skills (Ovans, 2015, para. 2, 4, & 5). With these five components, empathy

plays a crucial role in emotional intelligence as it includes three different kinds of empathy: cognitive, emotional, and concern (Ovans, 2015, para. 3). Through emotional intelligence, a leader demonstrates a "positive disposition toward another person," (Ovans, 2015, para. 7). The positive disposition "creates the kind of resonance that builds trust and loyalty and makes interactions harmonious," (Ovans, 2015, para. 7).

### **Idealized Influence**

Several key contributing factors exist for establishing a leader as an idealized influencer. According to Afshari (2022), leaders must achieve the following:

- Gain followers respect, trust, and admiration (p. 806)
- Appeal to followers' sense of purpose (p. 806)
- Demonstrate determination to achieve goals (p. 807)
- Act as an example for followers (p. 807)

Idealized influencers improve their environment by increasing followers' engagement and reinforcing positive attitudes. They are viewed as "powerful, charismatic, and confident individuals" (Afshari, 2022, p. 807).

### **Humanitarianism**

*Humanitarians* seek out a need and dedicate their life's work to bringing attention to, providing aid for, and helping to eliminate that need by serving those who need assistance. They hold an "every person counts" mentality and practice doing "singular acts of care" regularly with the intent of "effecting change in a wider society," (Fechter, 2023, p. 14). For the *humanitarian*, the belief is that every "life has value in and of themselves," (Fechter, 2023, p. 17)

Driven by purpose, the *humanitarian* spirit embodies regular people who want to take action to eliminate human suffering, whatever that may be. They dedicate time to establishing a

wide range of aid projects, including, but not limited to, after-school educational centers, food banks, and soup kitchens. They also provide support for those with disabilities, create programs to improve disadvantaged neighborhoods, and create training programs (Fechter, 2023, p. 15).

### ***Entrepreneurship***

*Entrepreneurs* are of fundamental importance to society as they impact all things economy, such as economic and job growth and social transformation (Kaiser, 2023, p. 279). *Entrepreneurs* are “driven by a desire for social justice who emphasize social change instead of profit” (Mastrangelo, 2017, p. 438). They see a problem within the community that needs to be addressed and rectified, and they work to establish a solution for correcting this problem, ultimately providing a solution that is “financially, organizationally, socially, and environmentally sustainable” (Mastrangelo, 2017, p. 438).

### ***Culture and Environment***

*Culture* is “a collection of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that is reflected in organizational practices and goals,” (Shao, 2019, p. 97). According to Aulia et al. (2022), culture can also be described as a place for togetherness and practical communication that establishes trust and norms that “influence the way of thinking, feeling, and behavior towards others,” (p. 284). The environment is determined by how individuals view the culture and surroundings in which they are while being encouraged to take on “new responsibilities, develop new skills, take initiative, and create more,” (Briere et al., 2019, p. 67).

### ***Sex Trafficking and Addiction***

Strega et al. (2009) state that many enter a life of prostitution and sex trafficking out of economic necessity (p. 43). Usually, the need for money, food, shelter, and to feed a drug addiction are the causes behind sex exchange. Because of the overwhelming overlap between the

drug markets and the sex markets, substance abuse, and sex trafficking go together as those in prostitution will use as a way of escaping the mental and physical trauma they are living on a daily (Sallmann, 2010, p. 115). Empirical studies show that a significant number of sex workers begin to self-medicate through the use of drugs as a coping mechanism to "block the physical and emotional pains or make it easier to work" (Sallmann, 2010, p. 117). As a result of the hard life these individuals live, Sallmann (2010) states that these individuals have "poorer mental health outcomes, higher levels of anxiety, depression, and lower levels of self-esteem (p. 17). They also experience thoughts of suicide and commit self-harm (Sallmann, 2010, p. 119).

Sex trafficking victims typically have experienced economic adversities that include traumatic backgrounds, factors of race, gender, and social class, trouble exiting the industry as many enter it at a young age, 16 and younger, and an unstable home environment (Sallman, 2010, p. 132 & 133). Attempts to leave the sex trafficking industry and practice sobriety have been challenging for victims as the experiences with social services have not been promising. Often, when entering one of these services seeking help, the victims are made to feel shame and are blamed for the work they do rather than treated as victims. They experience stigmatization and marginalization and are sexually objectified (Strega et al., 2009, p. 44 & 46).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Rev. Becca Stevens and Servant Leadership**

*Rev. Becca Stevens* demonstrates the servant leadership style of leading in everything she does. Having experienced sexual abuse as a child, she has made it her life's work to help others who have experienced sexual abuse trauma, and because sex trafficking and substance abuse typically go together, Rev. Stevens established a community that focuses on a holistic approach to assisting and preparing sex traffickers for a life away from the streets, "women who are using

substances to enable them to cope with prostitution might not be able to stop using alcohol or drugs if they are economically dependent on prostitution,” (Sallman, 2010, p. 134). She and her team provide a haven for victims and their children where they can receive respite, build their skills, practice sobriety, and take their lives back. Kaiser (2023) describes a *servant leader* as someone who “focuses on the community and on a ‘we’ rather than an ‘I’ culture,” which Rev. Stevens has established through Thistle Farms Social Enterprises and her *humanitarian* initiatives (p. 278).

## Method

### Empirical Studies Review

Empirical studies from scholarly journals were collected and reviewed for the evidence they provide on servant leadership, *active listening*, emotional intelligence, idealized influence, and humanitarianism. Data was sourced from these articles that offer significant evidence to support the argument that *Rev. Becca Stevens* is a *servant leader* who adequately follows the idealized influence concept, possesses *active listening* and emotional intelligence traits, and is a great *humanitarian*. The findings provide evidence that *servant leaders* put others' needs before their own. They embody altruism, empathy, and ethics and are driven by a sense of purpose and a need to serve. They are relationship-oriented and strive to empower others. *Servant leaders* are skilled at *active listening* and emotional intelligence. Idealized influencers are a concept that often falls under *servant leadership* demonstrates determination to achieve goals and act as an example for others to follow. *Humanitarians* are also *servant leaders* who continuously conduct singular acts of care.



**Rev. Becca Steven's Background**

Rev. Becca Steven, originally from Connecticut, grew up in the church as the daughter of a reverend. The family moved to Nashville when Rev. Stevens was four and joined a new church. It was at the church in Nashville where she experienced sexual assault as a child. The abuse began around the age of five, shortly after her father was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. The abuser was the head pastor of the church her family attended and took advantage of the opportunity to target Rev. Stevens as her mother was now a widower raising five children.

Shortly after entering a career in service as a priest at St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel on Vanderbilt University's campus, Rev. Stevens opened the Magdalene House in 1997 and started Thistle Farms Social Enterprises, which includes gateway jobs for participants and graduates of the Magdalene House program. Thistle Farms' storefront offers home product lines and a café. The Magdalene House is a shelter that provides a two-year program for its residents. The program uses a holistic approach for healing sex trafficked survivors. Following is a brief bio for Rev. Stevens retrieved from her website <https://beccastevens.org/>.

Becca Stevens is a *nonprofit* leader, *entrepreneur*, priest, survivor, and founder and President of Thistle Farms. She has founded 12 *nonprofits* and justice enterprises, mentored another 70, and has raised over \$75 million to support them. Becca has authored 12 books and sold over 300,000 copies. She has served as chaplain at St. Augustine's Chapel on Vanderbilt's campus for almost 30 years. Becca has been featured on PBS NewsHour, The Today Show, CNN, ABC World News, named a CNN Hero, and White House Champion of Change, and holds six honorary doctorates. Drawn from 25 years of leadership in mission-driven work,

Becca leads important conversations across the country with an inspiring message that love is the strongest force for change in the world.

### **Evaluation of Current Conditions**

Rev. Stevens challenges social norms and inspires individuals to step up for each other with love and compassion. In her 25+ year career as a *servant leader* and *humanitarian*, she has established 12+ *nonprofits* and justice enterprises, mentored 60+ organizations and justice initiatives worldwide, raised over \$75 million for funding these initiatives, and provided over 500 beds. As a book author, she has written 12 books with 300,000 copies sold, and the Thistle Farms Residential Program is worth \$12 million. According to Goebel (2022), the Thistle Farms program has a success rate of 75% of graduates living successful and sober lives after completing the two-year program.

### **Results**

#### **Driven by Purpose**

A true believer that hope and love can heal and establish a community of trust and empathy, Rev. Stevens uses the tagline "Love Heals" for all Thistle Farms' promotional and marketing initiatives. This line can be found throughout the storefront and café on merchandise, including all over the Thistle Farms' website. She undoubtedly demonstrates a drive for serving "intrinsic motivation and shared purpose," "wholeheartedly, trusting and empowering" those who follow her teachings, and she regards serving as "the highest responsibility" (Chen et al., 2013, p. 419). Through her entrepreneurial initiatives, Rev. Stevens has created workplaces that offer positive cultures and safe environments for working, developing, and fostering authenticity.

The community Rev. Stevens has created has had a positive impact on helping sex traffic and substance abuse survivors to live a life of love and healing by empowering these survivors to

trust in themselves and the new community they are now calling home. Through humility and authenticity, Rev. Stevens accepts survivors for who they are and without judgment and works diligently for "the good of the whole" (Dyke & Hurt, 2024, p. 96). Rev. Stevens expresses confidence in survivors and strives to see them reach their full potential (Dyke & Hurt, 2024, p. 97).

### **Conclusion**

Empirical studies demonstrate the characteristics, concepts, and qualities of a *servant leader* and Rev. Becca Stevens checks all the boxes for consideration as a *servant leader*. Through her entrepreneurial initiatives, she has built *nonprofit* organizations that has provided sex trafficked survivors with a holistic approach for healing and built safe working environments with empowering cultures and established communities of love. Rev. Stevens' achievements are only possible because of her ability to actively listen and practice emotional intelligence. It's because of these two skills, among many others, that Rev. Stevens has established an impeccable reputation and built trust among those she has helped sex trafficked victims establishing her as an idealized influence. Helping others and advocating for change to protect the less fortunate is in Rev. Stevens DNA making her one of the greatest *humanitarians* in the twenty-first century.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that this study be taken a step further by conducting qualitative research that includes interviewing those who are closest to Rev. Becca Stevens, whether through the church, *nonprofit*, or personal family and friends. Having those who know her best speak on her behalf would provide the most precise picture for considering Rev. Stevens as a faithful servant leader who embodies *active listening* and emotional intelligence traits, falls under the idealized influence concept, and is a great *humanitarian*.

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