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15 Minutes

Robert Egger

Founder, D.C. Central Kitchen

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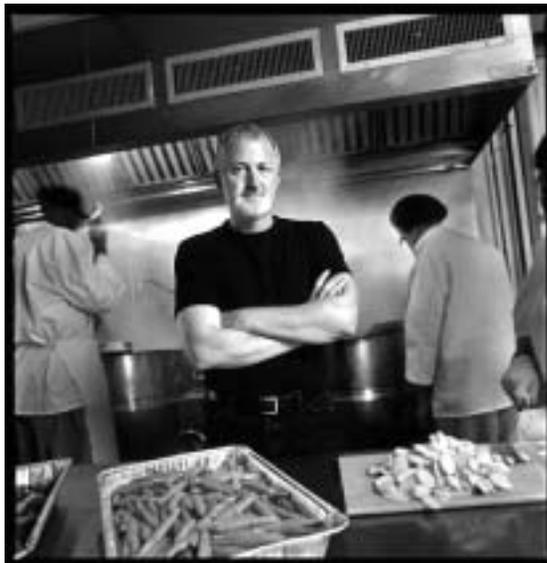
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Founder, D.C. Central Kitchen

In 1989, Robert Egger (right) put aside his dream of starting a nightclub to found the D.C. Central Kitchen, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that collects unused food from local restaurants, caterers, and hotels, and produces 4,000 meals a day. The kitchen includes a 12-week job training program, helping former homeless transients and drug addicts get work at local restaurants. Egger also founded the Campus Kitchens Project, which recently opened six similar programs in college cafeterias across the country. In February, Egger published a book, "Begging for Change," in which he writes that the social sector is "entering one of the most critical junctures in ... our nation's history," adding that donors need to "change the way we give" and nonprofits must "change the way we use what we're given."



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Why is the nonprofit sector at a crossroads?

Historically, it's been so wrapped up in redemption – and often, unfortunately, the redemption of the giver not the receiver – that we've really hesitated to get in and quantify whether a program worked or not. No one wants to say, "Gee, we know your heart was in the right place, but you didn't really deliver." We've reached a point where we've got two million nonprofits slugging

it out with one another for a skeptical donor pool.

Too many of us incorporate Enron-style – but not illegal – accounting, in which we purposely manipulate the numbers to create the lowest possible administrative overhead. Most of us know it's a

really bad barometer, and the public and society are ill-served, but we are terrified to risk the public's ire to confront that.

You suggest that we call a "national timeout," so that everyone around the country can ask themselves what the hell they've been doing and why." What is the result you'd like to see?

There's not one city in America that has any concept of how much collectively it is spending on charity.

I'm trying to raise some money to get three cities to stop and do an "asset map," a computer-based program that any other city in America could use. I think it would cause audible gasps in every community across America. You'd see people saying: "How can we be spending that much money? How can we have this many resources in our community, and still have the problems that we do?" The answer is, everyone's been giving money away with the best of intentions but with zero communication. There's no strategy, no shared common goals.

Suppose you find out that, between private individuals, foundations, corporations, and government support, the Washington, D.C., community is spending – as you suggest – a total of \$13 billion a year on charity. What's the next step? What will this enable you to do that we can't do now?

It would spur a moment of clarity, a realization that too much money is being spent without quantifiable big-time results. You look at Washington, D.C., and we are at the top of the list for everything that's bad – infant mortality, AIDS, whatever it is – yet we have one of the richest

cities, and the most generous communities in the country. How can that be? Once people see that we have that much money, there would almost be a demand for coordination. That's what I'm after – the catalyst that spurs that moment in which everyone says: "No more. Today we do something new."

Then what you are really after is coordination, so that resources are spent strategically?

In a big fat way. Most communities have a philanthropic summit or the business philanthropy gathering. Many of them are running out of steam. There's a sense of "OK, now what?" I'm hoping they'd say: "OK, now we are going to develop a crew that will spend the next year developing the broad-range community attack. Let's define our priorities." Once you identify those things, you can start to create a series of steps, and then you systematically attack.

We've got these different splinter groups out there doing their own thing, whether it's housing, hunger, addiction, AIDS, the elderly. We are an \$800 billion a year industry, we employ 11 million people – more than are involved in construction in America – but we are weak, and we are disorganized. We need to come together to clearly define what a good nonprofit is. We owe it to the public. This is why I started cooking up the idea for a "Congress."

What would this Congress look like?

Right now, there are two tracks that have been suggested. One is that you develop a group of big hungamunga nonprofits to give credibility to the concept through their endorsement: the Red Cross, the United Way, America's Second Harvest. But I

worry that they have too much vested in their machines to take risks, so they would water it down, and it would be impossible to get the kind of really bold statements we need. The second would be to find people within corporate America who realize that the future for them is an endless barrage of proposals begging for money to do more of the same, and whether they would

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be willing to underwrite it. Then it just becomes a come one, come all. We could develop a "social nutritional label," something that indicates to the public this meets the standards of a national coalition of nonprofits. We could say, in effect, "To get a seal of approval, you need to define what your strategy is."

You describe taking your community kitchen concept to a Midwestern

community and being told by a local anti-hunger activist that they didn't want you "stealing their hungry people."

That's what's crazy about this. That's unfortunately what people think they need to raise money – they need "their hungry people." They need their pity-based thing.

There's this notion that, "If it wasn't for us going out and feeding people on the streets, heaven forbid they'd starve!" No they wouldn't. They'd probably do just fine without you, quite frankly. Often you hear people saying, "If the nonprofit sector disappeared, what would our community look like?" Tomorrow would be a drag, but we'd adjust pretty quickly. Ask a poor person what would happen if the nonprofits went away. Their world wouldn't change that much.

Should there be fewer nonprofits?

Yes. If there were a quarter less nonprofits we'd be a stronger, more vital sector.

Why?

The money is too scattered. There are two million nonprofits. There are 25,000 in D.C. alone. If the average salary for the executive was \$50,000, that would be \$1.25 billion just to pay executive salaries in D.C. We can't have that many nonprofits out there doing their own thing. It makes no sense. A friend of mine in New York City is often quoted as saying, "Our 1,000 soup kitchens and pantries are at crisis level!" Everyone gasps and says, "What are we going to do!" And I stop and I look around and think: "One Thousand? It's a freaking 24-mile island! How come there are not 300 really powerful programs?"

Is it realistic to think we can ever get away from this? Is there an alternative?

Charity is still the way that many donors think about philanthropy. How do you change their attitude? Corporate cause-based marketing. It's an existing but underutilized resource that could be a perfect vehicle. Business has to have a role in the local community. They are not satisfied with the amount of money that's being made vis-à-vis corporate marketing. But they're in too deep to back out. In front of them, what do they see? It's like "Dawn of the Dead" – a million nonprofits surging at them wanting more money. They're looking at each other saying, "Whoa, this does not work!"

If corporations have a cause they truly believe in, wouldn't it be in their best interest to advertise their participation, explaining to the public *why* they have decided to support this group. If it's done well, they are going to get a significant amount of people saying: "Dang, I never thought of that. This company is a good steward of profit, and I now understand the *reason* they give, so I'm going to give to that same nonprofit." In effect, the company creates a new revenue stream to the nonprofit, decreasing the long-term demand on their corporate philanthropy. But more importantly, the public starts to realize, "I can make much better decisions about my money." What you get is a leaner, meaner nonprofit sector.

And corporations can enable that?

That's the best place to experiment right now. It's the most fertile ground.

Would corporations be part of this Congress?

I think it could be corporate-funded, but it's imperative that the sector talk to itself. Nonprofits can't solve poverty or hunger, just like corporations, foundations, and government can't. We've got faith groups, business, government, nonprofits, and the public. Independently, they're all just fingers, but together, it's a fist.

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And right now, government's on the sidelines.

Habitat for Humanity is a brilliant program, but they are never going to build enough housing in any community – not even remotely close. So while it looks good, sounds good, and feels good, if we've got \$800 billion out there, the questions should ultimately be: "What does each of us do really well? What can we each contribute to the larger effort, so we are being as smart as we can be with everything we've got?"

You call for nonprofit leaders to be more resourceful, more entrepreneurial, and more creative in finding

new and better solutions to social ills. Do you think that nonprofit leaders who have been doing it for 10, 20 years can be roused to change their approach?

I believe so. The staff can get together and go en masse to the nonprofit leader and say: "We need change, we're struggling. We came here because we wanted to make a difference and we feel like we've gone astray. You've been a great leader, and we want you to stay, but we need movement – or we need a new leader." I'd love to see volunteer groups rank nonprofits. If nonprofits feel like the volunteer sector is talking and volunteers are exchanging info about which organizations are all talk versus which ones really rock, that'll put a goose up a lot of people.

How would that work?

It might be a part of the local volunteer center database. We could ask volunteers, "How was your experience?" and compile a list of the top 20 nonprofit experiences in town. We could then ask, "What made your experience so good?" so that other programs could learn.

You borrow this great term from your nightclub days – "guerrilla showbiz" – to advocate "guerrilla nonprofit management." What would this look like?

A few weeks ago we were getting 20,000 pounds of salmon donated, and somebody said, "Wow, that's a good story, let's call the media!" The reality is, that's just a blip in the newspaper. So we asked, "What volunteers do we have today?" We realized we had two middle schools coming in. "OK, what can they make out of the salmon? Hey, we had

some red peppers donated yesterday. Let's make salmon cakes!" Now you've got the visuals that are going to get the media. And when the media comes they see us stretching food as far as possible, they see a beautiful product, they see kids and homeless people working side by side. Guerrilla management is a commitment to looking at what you've got every day and realizing you have to be an efficient, lean, mighty, roaring machine, and you need to show people what you're doing.

I mention in the book that we baked cakes for the Clinton inauguration. Our goal was to have people wake up in Des Moines and say: "Wow, homeless people baking for the president! I have to think differently now." The enemy is the stereotype.

What is the stereotype?

If you're hungry in America, you're lazy; you're a bum. Well-intended nonprofits call themselves "soup kitchens." Ask a 10-year-old kid: "What does somebody who's waiting in line at a soup kitchen look like? What kind of clothes are they wearing?" What you'll find is an amazing deep-rooted image in our country of this disheveled man standing in line. That's not who's hungry in America. It's the woman working with kids who's hungry in America. Using words like soup kitchen demoralizes everyone. It demeans the volunteers. I've been around the country, and I've never once seen a "soup kitchen." Everywhere I go I see people who are working to put a decent meal together for their neighbors.

Too often, we try to make our case by sounding somber. I'm not

interested in that. I want to know: "What's the plan? What are we going to do tomorrow to make this happen?" Too much of what we do is wrapped up in trying to get credit for seeing the problem.

How have people responded to your book?

What I hear most is: "Hallelujah, brother! I'm glad somebody said it out loud."

How's the Central Kitchen doing?

Everyone thinks: "Oh man, Robert's

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got a book! He's rich! He doesn't need our money." Everyone says, "Let's help another new nonprofit get started," and my reaction is: "No! Not another one!" This is what you're up against. You're punished when you thrive. No one looks at you and says, "We've got to keep that one alive because that one kicks ass."

We have an addiction within the foundation community historically – it's either, "Let's start a new nonprofit," or saying to an older nonprofit, "Well, we don't want to give you money for just what you're doing now; you've got to come up with something new." So what you

have are nonprofits constantly morphing to do new things and then they can't pay for what they were originally supposed to do. That's why I'd like to see the nonprofits come together – so they can collectively say, "Here's what we need to have to survive."

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At the end of your book you talk about creating the world's first nonprofit nightclub. What's that going to look like?

I'm doing the business plan now, bro. This has been my dream since I was a kid. I grew up believing in the power of music, theater, art, and dance. I want this place in D.C. that employs graduates of the kitchen or other programs. I want a program where all the money goes to opening kitchens around the world. I want to demonstrate that you can employ people that society views as unemployable, on the fringe, or dangerous. And I aim to give people the best show they've ever seen. At the end of the night, people will say, "Man, we had a great dinner, and we saw a great show, and we danced, and all the money's going to these kitchens around the country!" To me, that's that moment when people will realize, "I can do good, and I can have a good time doing it!"

Doing a good deed is too often perceived as the ashes and sackcloth stuff. I want to break free of that. I want it to be something that's joyful and purposeful and profitable – all at the same time. □