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## What Works

**Bettering Beantown: A Boston organization brings home the best  
of the country's nonprofits**

By Betsy Haley

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## Bettering Beantown

A Boston organization brings home the best of the country's nonprofits *by Betsy Haley*

Duncan Campbell was once one of the kids he now tries to help. He grew up in a rough neighborhood in northeast Portland, Ore., with an alcoholic mother and a father who was in and out of jail for writing bad checks.

In 1993, Campbell returned to his old neighborhood with \$1.5 million of his own money to start Friends of the Children, a nonprofit that pairs professional mentors with at-risk kids from kindergarten through high school. Today, there are eight Friends chapters across the country.

Cloning an organization is never easy. Each site has its own unique hurdles. But when Campbell visited the newest Friends affiliate in Boston last spring, 18 months after its launch, he was struck by how well it mirrored the original site: "It was incredibly encouraging to find that they had replicated everything that's great about Friends."

The start-up success, he says, is due to a local philanthropic project called the GreenLight Fund. Created in 2003, GreenLight is a nonprofit catalyst. The organization identifies a local need, scours the country for the most innovative program to meet it, and then establishes a Boston chapter. GreenLight next helps hire an executive director and build a board, and then gives the organization \$500,000 to \$600,000 for two to three years.

For co-founder John Simon, GreenLight is the natural extension of his dual careers – one in venture capital at General Catalyst Partners and one in social innovation at the Steppingstone Foundation, a support program for inner-city students. (See the Summer 2005 issue of *SSIR* for a case study on Steppingstone.) In 2002, Simon helped Boston-based Steppingstone open a Philadelphia chapter, during which time he hatched the GreenLight idea. "If we wanted to have a systemwide impact in Boston, we needed a new, purpose-built entity that could support replication," he says. In the summer of 2003, Simon met Margaret Hall, then a fellow at the Center for Effective Philanthropy, and they teamed up to create

### CLONING INNOVATION

- Identify high-priority community needs
- Cast a wide net for programs that meet those needs
- Plan for sustainability from day one



On a Saturday last September, a busload of Boston-area second-graders set out to pick apples in rural Massachusetts with their Friends of the Children mentors.

an organization that would help successful nonprofits locate affiliates in Boston.

### Make New Friends

Friends-Boston was GreenLight's first venture, and its story highlights the key elements of GreenLight's strategy. Each project begins with an intense community assessment. GreenLight turns to resources that report on civic issues like housing, education, workforce development, or healthcare. It also interviews nonprofits, asking them to identify both entrenched and emerging community problems. "By finding gaps in services provided," says Jeff Bradach, managing partner and co-founder of Bridgespan, "GreenLight prevents needless redundancy in the community, and meanwhile creates opportunities for partnership with local agencies."

With input from local business, nonprofit, and philanthropic leaders, GreenLight develops a set of targeted priori-

# what works

Strategies, Approaches, Developments



ties. In the case of Friends-Boston, these included early intervention and education for young kids, workforce development for youth, and services for low-income families.

GreenLight then casts its net in search of innovations. Before the organization decided to replicate Friends of the Children, it solicited suggestions from venture philanthropists and social entrepreneurs nationwide. The result was a list of more than 100 programs. In the first round of evaluation, the organization used public information from [Guidestar.org](http://Guidestar.org) and the candidates' Web sites to narrow the list to 20. In round two, the staff interviewed experts who were familiar with the organizations and the fields in which they worked. Staff then cut groups that overlapped with existing programs in Boston, lacked proven results, or seemed unable or unwilling to expand.

GreenLight next interviewed the management of the remaining organizations, as well as their clients, funders, and board members. Using this information, local nonprofit leaders and funders then examined how each organization would fit in Boston's existing mosaic of services.

On the basis of that feedback, GreenLight pared its list of candidates to five. Despite the fact that Boston already had many strong mentoring organizations, Friends of the Children stood out because it targets high-risk children at a young age, before they have an opportunity to get into serious trouble. And recognizing that these kids desperately need consistency, Friends also makes an unprecedented 12-and-a-half-year commitment to them.

Paid mentors spend a minimum of four hours per week with each child until he or she graduates from high school. Whereas most social workers have caseloads of up to 100, Friends of the Children mentors oversee just eight children. A good salary and benefits mean that most mentors stick with the program for a long time, nurturing their mentees' social and emotional development and good decision making.

GreenLight also liked Friends because it was proving to be effective. The program has three long-term goals for its kids: stay out of court, don't become a teen parent, and graduate from high school with a positive plan. Results from the Portland site are compelling: 10 of the 14 kids in the program's first class graduated from high school, and more than 90 percent of current mentees have avoided negative paths, such as gang activity and drug and alcohol use.

In the final round of the selection process, GreenLight considered how well it could work with each candidate. "We wanted to understand if the management team was fully committed to making this partnership work," says Hall.

Friends became the obvious choice.

## The Greenbacks

For Campbell, launching Friends-Boston through GreenLight was different from all of his other experiences with new chapters. The three priorities in replicating his model were a strong, experienced executive director; high-quality mentors; and potential donors. In Boston, each of these was in place before the chapter even opened.

"The resources they provided up front were unique," says Campbell. For instance, the start-up board was the best Campbell had ever had. "It would've taken us three years to build it on our own," he says.

GreenLight hired an executive director with several years of experience from the Friends national office. The chapter decided to start slowly with just two mentors, rather than rushing to hire three or four. After 18 months of operation, Friends-Boston has already surpassed its initial growth targets, currently serving 32 children with four full-time mentors.

Both Hall and Campbell agree that true success will come when Friends-Boston can stand on its own, without support from GreenLight. To that end, they are busy building a strong funding base. In 2005, GreenLight formally introduced Friends-Boston to the community at its inaugural "GreenLight Gala." GreenLight covered the costs, and all proceeds – \$285,000 – went to Friends-Boston. Similarly, GreenLight and a local fine jeweler hosted "An Emerald Evening," which raised \$90,000 from individual donors.

"Our hope is that innovation will expand the philanthropic pie in Boston," says Hall. "We want to engage the next generation of philanthropists and get them excited about what's going on in their own backyard."

In the meantime, GreenLight has already completed its second assessment and due-diligence cycle, and launched the Massachusetts chapter of Raising a Reader. The program is an early literacy initiative that has helped 80,000 to 100,000 children read since it started eight years ago in Menlo Park, Calif.

Simon and Hall hope that GreenLight's success will inspire similar work in other cities. Andrew Hahn, a professor and director of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, believes GreenLight offers a practical and powerful model for social change: "It sheds light on where philanthropy and nonprofits need to go in the future to reach scale for evidence-based initiatives."

Indeed, GreenLight is already fielding calls from philanthropists nationwide who are curious about community-driven venture philanthropy. Campbell would encourage them. "Every city should have a GreenLight Fund," he says. □