

BUSINESSWOMAN

Businesswomen Create Social Change

— By Deonne Kabler

WE'RE ALL FAMILIAR WITH THE WORD "ENTREPRENEUR" — many of us live and breathe that word every day. Entrepreneurs innovate, and they generally do so in one of two ways: they create a totally new product or service, like Apple computer; or they create a totally new way of producing or distributing an existing product or service, like McDonald's.

What then is "social entrepreneurship?" This relatively new phrase gives a more specific meaning to that with which we're already familiar. For these innovators, the bottom line is critical, but not more important than their mission to make the world a better place.

Enter the Social Entrepreneurship Incubator (SEI), launched under the auspices of the Women's Technology Cluster (WTC) last year. This cutting edge organization, directed by Amber Nystrom, fits in perfectly with the mission of one of their major funders, the Kellogg Foundation: "To help people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources to improve their quality of life and that of future generations."

The SEI is an incubator program and so much more. Not only do they offer the usual office space and business support services, they provide the "four building blocks" of a successful venture, including coaching, networking, skill building, and assessment and evaluation. Nystrom relates a quote from the founder of RISE, an SEI member: "Temp Keller says, "I know I'm doing good, but am I

doing good, well?"

Bridging commerce and social change, the SEI "builds the business of social interests" by assisting and supporting nonprofit organizations that are innovatively using best practices from both the business sector and the nonprofit world. The incubator currently houses four such organizations.

California State Economic Network (CAL SEN)

CAL SEN is a statewide network of organizations aimed at providing economic empowerment for women and girls. Denise Drawsky directs this network of corporations, government agencies, businesses and nonprofits that "promotes women who don't have a collective voice to impact economic policy."

A nonpartisan organization, they educate women and girls on state and federal policy, and how it impacts their everyday lives — from getting jobs to childcare funding. A true for-profit/nonprofit hybrid, they sell services at market rates with 100 percent of the proceeds going to fund their mission.

One of CAL SEN's biggest current challenges is, like most other fledgling organizations,



RISE

raising money. Drawsky says corporate funding, as well as federal and state funding, has dried up because of the soft economy. "You go from \$9 billion in surplus to \$34 billion in deficit and you're going to have problems. The conundrum is it's a time when we're needed most," she says.

CAL SEN's newest program is SCEWL (Symposium for California's Emerging Women Leaders), which is increasing the number of women in the political pipeline. Drawsky is most excited about this program, as it supports her plan to "weave women into the fabric of California's economy and leadership so that our presence in these roles is no longer a noteworthy exception, but the rule."

Girls for a Change

Niko Clifford, Founder and Director of Girls for a Change (GFC), noticed a disturbing trend while doing research for her previous employer, the Girl Scouts. In major metropolitan areas, the gap between low-income neighborhoods and the wealth and opportunity a big city offers was rapidly widening, especially for young women. She saw them being, "funneled into low wage, low skill jobs. Almost 70 percent of low-wage jobs in Silicon Valley are held by young women."

After recognizing this startling fact, she noted two primary issues — a lack of role models or mentors for these

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young women, and a lack of practice in decision-making, leadership and critical thinking. “They didn’t see any possibility for anything different — that’s all they knew,” Clifford explains.

She has developed a program to help girls become leaders and innovators in their own communities, and connect them with professional mentors to create meaningful and supportive relationships. GFC helps “the girls of Silicon Valley come together to identify and initiate a ripple effect of change within themselves, their communities and the world.”

Clifford herself receives invaluable mentoring through SEI, as well as regular skill-building opportunities. Practicing her “pitch,” she is learning to effectively sell herself and GFC, and says that because of the incubator, her organization has matured by leaps and bounds.

Clifford hopes to ultimately have programs in every major metropolitan area, helping thousands and thousands of low-income girls every year. “In 10 years what will our country and the representation of women look like if we’re training 10,000 girls each year?” We’ll see a veritable army of empowered women leaders spreading across the nation.

Resources for Indispensable Schools and Educators (RISE)

RISE has a simple vision: a quality teacher in every classroom. RISE is making this vision a reality with a three-part approach — build the prestige of teaching through a selective, professional network, help underpaid teachers with financial resources, and place teachers in pre-screened schools that ensure a supportive environment.

Kristin Groos, Vice President of Programs and Development, was inspired to leave her investment-banking career after a stint teaching geography and sports in Kenya. RISE’s mission is to make teaching more sustainable in public schools serving low-income communities, and she hopes to stop the “bleeding of good teachers from the system.”

Over 50 percent of teachers leave the profession in the first five years, says Groos. “Teachers leave for three reasons: unsupportive and dangerous work environments, pay, and lack of prestige. Our founder was a teacher right out of college and he kept hearing, ‘That’s great you’re going to teach — how long are you going to do that?’”

Groos states teaching is the single biggest factor in student achievement and notes that

many teachers are leaving low-income communities for more affluent schools. She believes this growing imbalance will eliminate the equalizing effects of public education. The gap between the haves and have-nots will continue to grow unless we encourage quality teachers serving low-income public schools to get involved with RISE.

RISE’s affiliation with SEI has already had a positive impact on fundraising, and Groos is excited on a daily basis by the exchange of ideas and wealth of contacts the incubator’s members and staff provide.

Women of the World (WOW) Exchange

As an African American woman growing up in Hong Kong and Minnesota, Lauren Travis has been a cultural ambassador all her life. Founder and director of WOW Exchange, she thinks world leadership needs a new face and she has a way to create it.

WOW Exchange is a cultural exchange and leadership development program that supports emerging female leaders from the Bay Area and beyond, providing them with leadership tools and a professional and personal network to last throughout each participant’s career.

Travis arrived at SEI in Feb-

ruary, but already sees the benefits of her growing support network. “In my first month I met two funders — I share a stairwell with them. I know anything is possible within these walls. The whole building is powerful, that’s why we have to be so far out (in Potrero Hill) — so we don’t hurt anybody,” she laughs.

WOW Exchange is a network for a generation of women coming up in a half-changed world. They’ve been raised with a more diverse, accepting worldview, and a much broader sense of possibility. Travis says, “We can do anything we want, but what is that? Do you want to have a family? Do you want to have a career? Is it either/or?”

Travis reiterates the value of experiencing different perspectives: “When you have a friend in Iraq, you’re going to think a lot differently about going over and bombing them.”

As these organizations exemplify, social change and solid business practice need not be mutually exclusive, and SEI and its director Nystrom are here to implement this new model for a new millennium. ✿

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