

NON-PROFIT GRANTS OR BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS?

It is with complete irony that the initial solutions our non-profit tackled were:

1. being determined not to compete with other non-profits for grants. It seemed immediately against the premise for a non-profit wanting to do good, to spend time competing against another non-profit wanting to do good...and if I may say so, an unethical use of time.
2. to be the solution that was not derived from a hand-out but rather from actually teaching hands and hearts ways to create and work for the funds.

So, if any grant in any way causes another non-profit to be less funded, or “won” just on the basis of who has a more convincing plea, and especially if based on a better track record for how many other grants they were able to secure, I would opt to withdraw from the grant-race.

I would however want to be supported by an organization who clearly sees the value in our particular mission and in the very fact that somewhere through the non-profit world, we need to teach what we ourselves have done.

Surely there is value and a place for social services that give to the poor and provide immediate needs. In many circumstances, just another meal or another bed for a night is the precise mission of a shelter or food pantry. Social services are truly in abundance, if you look around, for the defined needs.

In our mission, we needed to do and be something different. Our mission began with looking for a solution that would teach from the very core of being “in need” and seeing many needs yet To be filled. But it wouldn't do, to be a temporary solution. Long term change and new opportunities had to be part of it. It had to come from the very core of a persons potential, wanting to take part in their own advancement. Running with the ball. Learning to be self sufficient and developing the desire to graduate to any achievement by choosing to try, and being part of something bigger.

If, in our missions, we bypass encouraging and extracting individual potential to become part of the solution-discovery process, we cheat the person and ourselves from achieving the next ounce of courage and the enthusiasm to go another step forward.

While surely sitting behind a desk and asking others for money is much less physical work, without judgment or analyzing, I have to say it feels not much different than the person on the street asking for money. The only difference is the one behind the desk may get the money to possibly fund the shelter or soup kitchen where that man on the street with his hand out will get a hot meal before he goes back on the street asking for money again. And she will go to her desk the next day and ask for more money to feed more people that come in off the street after begging for the day. Bless them all.

I feel a different calling but I'm not sure there are “grants” that can honor this calling. Perhaps it's more of a business partnership, to duplicate the project, so those people

who want to change their lives, and become progressively independent can learn work skills, and take part in creating their own futures. Then, go on to teach others the same. Some where, someone needs to give away the thing or idea that others can use to become self-sufficient. What if it were a business?

One solution for our non-profit was the idea that required young people of many ages, and adults working together, researching, developing, testing, failing, excelling. It required doing an odd job or two to raise money for enough ingredients to test some recipes. It required learning how to do research and test different results. It required market research, talking to people about their experience tasting. Keeping notes. Going back to the drawing board. Doing it all again.

Then how to legally make the recipes. Making the long lists of to-do's to be certified food handlers and managers and finding certified facilities. Learning to partner with the community. Learning to check off one thing at a time from the long list and being grateful to achieve each step. Learning how and where to sell, the ins and outs of packaging, what does and doesn't work. How to apologize when you really goof up. Learning about customer service and to really care that someone is so happy they bought your product. Realizing you weren't charging enough and that you were actually losing money. Trying to explain that you may have to raise the price to a customer and having them give you an extra dollar as they tell you don't you dare stop making this!

So now we have tried and tested and are at that crossroads to do something bigger. It's time for us to duplicate the mission. It's time to buy larger quantities of ingredients to bring our price point down. It's time to train our young people who started in the kitchen, and now through college, to teach the skills at orphan teen homes and others how to make our product and sell it.

It's still a lot of work. More than it needs to be, given we started with an idea, moved through the process to serve a farmer's market, added a coffee shop, then a few more farmer's markets and now supporting a combined staff of (some underprivileged) students, young adults and senior citizens. The only difference is that if our project advances and for any person involved at the 5 year mark, they will become part of a worker-owned cooperative. It's hard to say if or when there will be a profit-sharing opportunity but we can hope! The goal is that each person involved has a passion to share the mission. Not only providing an awesome, tasty product but to know that the opportunity can be available to anyone and they can (learn) to have a hand in changing their life.

How do we get to that point of expanding – which takes money – to where we can organize well thought-out duplication efforts. Now it's time for the group to learn this step and working smarter. Purchasing larger quantities of ingredients allows more of a cushion, but requires a sanitary larger space to store.

Presently our spaces are divided. We have a short-stop warehouse space where all the packaged goods come to get sorted and labeled for the various markets. All those supplies come back and forth to and from the certified kitchen in another part of town. This is all the technical end of the work involved and contemplating on our next step.

Still, when I think of applying for grants, and see the hundreds of others begging for the same “grant money”....I feel in my heart I should just go sell more of the product we developed and talk more about the mission so just maybe one day we'll be able to offer opportunities to those willing to work as hard to do more good and those who desire to teach others how to do the same. Not from a hand out. But a hand helping.

So in this, we offer a Business Opportunity. A Work Cooperative. A Cooperative Purchasing Program, where each customer is part of the business...a part of the mission.

TO BE CONTINUED!