

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Nonprofit Created Its Own Fundraising Pipeline

By Eden Stiffman | APRIL 6, 2021

Most young people don't grow up aspiring to be professional fundraisers. One reason: They don't know the career even exists.

The All Stars Project, an organization that uses the performing arts to help young people develop their potential, has worked to change that through its Activists for Social Development Fellowship program.

For nine years, starting in 2010, the nonprofit recruited a diverse class of as many as 10 recent college graduates for an eight-week-long summer crash course on the nonprofit world.

Participants were based in the New York office and learned about program management and fundraising through classes and hands-on experience. They set up tables and talked to people on the street to raise money for the organization. During the group's telemarketing campaigns, they called small donors to thank them for their support and ask for another gift. Participants met with senior leaders and asked them questions about their careers. For a few years, fellows were also assigned to projects with the organization's New Jersey team.

Some participants came into the program already interested in fundraising, while others were more curious about program work, says Jenny Zak, vice president for development, who co-founded the program. "We met plenty of people through this program who weren't necessarily interested in fundraising but became exposed to it — and also had a proclivity for it — so that actually helped influence their track to pursue fundraising."

The program helped groom a pipeline of up-and-coming fundraisers for All Stars. The nonprofit often hired two full-time staff members out of each fellowship class.

Zak and her team spent a lot of energy making sure fellowship applications reached students and recent alumni from diverse backgrounds, including alumni of All Stars Project's youth-development programs. In addition to posting the fellowship on Idealist, a job board for social-impact careers, for example, they also posted it on the career pages of historically Black colleges and universities. That attention to inclusive recruitment — which the All Stars Project applies to all of its job searches — continued through the interview and hiring process, when staff focused on creating diverse fellowship classes, Zak says.

Career Launchpad

As a college sophomore, Dwayne Dixon, had a work-study position as a receptionist at the All Stars Project. During that time, he learned about the nonprofit's programs. After graduation, he applied and was selected as a fellow in 2014.

The experience doing street fundraising was transformative, he says. Fellows would walk out into Columbus Circle and talk to everyone they saw. "As a young Black man from New Jersey, this seemed like an



All Stars Project's Fellows in the Activists for Social Development program raise money in New York City.

impossible task," he recalls thinking at the time. The first time he went out to talk about the nonprofit's work, he met an older white man who listened to his pitch and made a \$150 donation.

His fundraising experiences during the fellowship appealed to him. Wealthy, powerful people asked him what he thought. "It taught me that I do have something to say," he says, "and maybe I'm a person that can do this."

Dixon says he wasn't aware that fundraising could be a profession when he started at the All Stars Project. But when his fellowship concluded, he was hired as a member of the development team, working on prospect research and marketing.

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Since then, he's moved into program and community outreach roles. Dixon says the fellowship taught him "how fundraising makes everything else the organization does possible." His understanding of fundraising helped him move into leadership, his colleagues say. In his current role as associate director of youth and community development at the All Stars Project New Jersey, Dixon regularly talks with board members and supporters, accompanies fundraisers when they meet with potential donors, and helps them ask for money.

'A Vocation'

The fellowship program is currently on pause. The last class was in 2019.

"It was a very good early-career pipeline program, and after a while our department was in a place where we had a strong team early in its career, and we needed some more seasoned talent," Zak says. "It's been a really strong model for us that I certainly see us coming back to when the time is right."

Chris Street, who started the fellowship program with Zak, has been with the All Stars Project for 25 years. He is now president of the organization after having led its fundraising efforts.

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— Chris Street

His experience joining the group as a young person has influenced the importance he places on developing the next generation of leaders — particularly those who have been marginalized due to their race, sexual orientation, or a disability.

"I've oriented my whole career to trying to develop talent and invest in people as I was invested in," he says. "As I've grown as a leader in development, that's always included young people of color, showing them this is actually a vocation."

So much ink is spilled about how careers in hedge funds, venture capital, management consulting, and the like are supposed to be smart economic pathways, Street says. He wishes fundraising were seen in a similar light.

"This field is an amazing step up for young people from poor and working-class communities," he says. "This is an amazing career where you can make six figures at some point in your career — or faster if you're really good at it. And that's a great middle-class lifestyle that many, many people could really benefit from."

There's an unfortunate division in the nonprofit world where professional roles in areas like finance, fundraising, and senior management are not as diverse as they should be, and program roles are primarily held by people of color, he says.

Program staff are deeply involved in fundraising at the All Stars Project, and some have shifted into development roles. But getting young people and others with transferable skills up to speed and ready for fundraising careers requires commitment and investment from the top of the organization, he says.

"It's expensive, but we're a development program — that's what our mission is," he says. "We try to lessen the distinction between how we relate to our staff and potential staff members versus how we relate to young people and families coming up through our programs."

The All Stars Project fellowship is just one kind of effort needed to make development more inclusive, Street says.

The nonprofit world needs to do a better job of being inviting to and investing in young people of color — and including them in fundraising. "We know how to bring young people into this field, so let's not act like it's a mystery," he says. "We know how to do it, so let's just do it."