

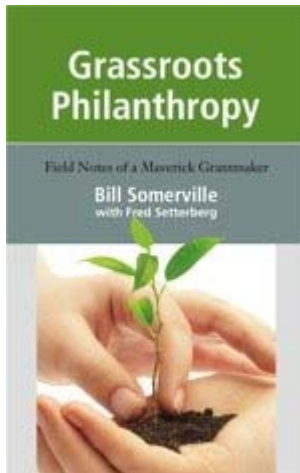
Have Fun • Do Good

A blog for people who want to make the world a better place AND have fun!

<http://havefundogood.blogspot.com/2008/03/i-want-to-be-grassroots-philanthropist.html>

Friday, March 14, 2008

I Want to Be a Grassroots Philanthropist!



Bill Somerville makes the search for innovative funding opportunities sound like an Indiana Jones adventure. Although his book, **Grassroots Philanthropy: Field Notes of a Maverick Grantmaker** (which he wrote with Fred Setterberg), was written for foundations and other grantmaking institutions, I found it personally inspiring. Between the book, and **Oprah's Big Give**, I am ready to go on a philanthropic adventure!

I've never worked for a foundation, but I've witnessed the time-consuming grant application process, tortuously long wait to hear if you've been funded, and the equally time-consuming report writing that needs to be done after the grant is received.

Somerville, who is the Founder and President of the **Philanthropic Ventures Foundation**, offers five principles for reforming philanthropy:

#1 Locate outstanding people doing outstanding work.

Somerville recommends that grantmakers spend at least 30% of their work-week in the

field looking for, and meeting with people who are working to make the world a better place:

"Without good people, great ideas rate merely as words. Management plans, organizational charts, even bulging bank accounts--none of these guarantee success. People run programs, for good or ill, and the quality of their skills and commitment inexorably shape the results."

#2 Move quickly (and shred paper)

The coolest example of this principle at work is the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation's "fax grants." They sent a one-page flier out to all of the Bay Area's teachers offering the opportunity to fax in a request for up to \$500 for a field trip, school supplies, etc. The teachers with the best ideas were mailed checks within 24 hours. The Foundation has given out \$3.5 million in fax grants to teachers, social workers and other youth workers.

#3 Embrace risk

One of my favorite stories in this section was about the Foundation's discretionary grants to juvenile court judges. The judges were given the power to dispense funds to help young people who were passing through the system with things like school clothes, books, musical instruments, glasses, summer camp fees, etc. Somerville reports that the program not only helped the young people, it raised the morale of the justice system staff.

#4 Focus on ideas instead of problems

Somerville feels that, "philanthropy's orientation towards problems disrupts our timing, fatally. We don't take action until a problem bubbles up into crisis."

The Philanthropic Ventures Foundation started a Day Off Program based on a donor's observation that low-income women deserve a day off, just like everyone else. The Foundation asked school principals, social workers and clergy to nominate low-income women who particularly deserved a day off. The chosen women were given \$200 with instructions to use it to, "rejuvenate her mind, body and soul." The program expanded to include teachers and unpaid caregivers for disabled and chronically ill family members.

One program participant wrote, "This is the first time anyone has ever given me anything."

#5 Take initiative

Somerville recommends that grantmakers search for people who are doing outstanding work, take funding risks, and "journey outside our own comfort zones."

As I mentioned, I've only been on the nonprofit side of the grantmaking process, and perhaps there are more foundations and philanthropists living by these ideas than I've experienced, but personally, this book turned my ideas about grantmaking around. I was also inspired by the stories where small donations made a difference.

I will continue to donate to nonprofits who are working towards causes I care about, but I'd like to try being more of a grassroots philanthropy adventurer and keep my eye out for outstanding people who are focused on ideas rather than problems, and give them a donation, even if their idea is risky--maybe straight out of my pocket.

Here are some other bloggers' review of the book:

- * **How Foundations Can Assist Grassroots Movements Even Better . . .** by Arlene Spencer of **Seeking Grant Money Today**.
- * **Grassroots Philanthropy by Bill Somerville and Fred Setterberg** by Phil Cubeta of **Gift Hub**.
- * **Intuition or Prejudice?** by Kelly of **The Nonprofiteer**.