

# From the Desk of

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What if you had a way to end youth violence but didn't have the time or skills to share your idea? What if you knew how to market an idea but hadn't found a meaningful use for your talent?

These are not hypothetical questions. (I'll share the story in a second.) They're why Social Venture Partners (SVP) was founded: to connect people with diverse skills and shared passions, and allow each to have a greater impact than he or she could alone.

With more than 2,100 members, SVP is a global network of philanthropists with affiliates in 25 cities across North America and Japan. Since 1997, we've given \$40 million and hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours to strengthen nonprofits that are improving the lives of children and protecting our environment. Social Venture Partners International (SVPI) helps SVP affiliates share information and best practices.

Here's what SVP looks like.

## The SVP Model

When the Seattle-based Metrocenter YMCA's Alive & Free program was selected as an SVP grantee, it had just two staff members, a meager budget, and an innovative approach to ending youth violence. The program treated violence like a disease—a curable disease. The shift was subtle but meaningful.

Children who are violent are often labeled *bad*, or something to be thrown away. When you separate the

disease from the children, however, they begin to see a way to heal. The program's middle school students were able to identify risk factors associated with violence, such as alcohol, guns, and destructive language. After 6 months with Alive & Free, 7 out of 10 participants had eliminated at least one risk factor from their lives, and they were sharing what they learned—reshaping the community around them.

The program was very small, though, focusing on about 25 children. Expansion would require new grant dollars and partnerships with other schools. Although the dedicated staff members were deeply engaged with the children—and knew the program was working—they didn't have time to demonstrate and communicate their results.

Through SVP, Alive & Free accessed volunteers such as former Goldman Sachs executive Ron Tanemura and former journalist and Microsoft marketing specialist Carol Ryan. In partnership with Alive & Free staff, Ron and Carol used their business and marketing expertise to help evaluate and communicate the program's results to potential funders. They also packaged the Alive & Free program so it could be replicated in partner schools. Most important, they helped the staff see the potential that existed all along.

During its 5-year partnership with SVP, Alive & Free grew to a staff of nine, quadrupled its budget, and received a Washington State grant to replicate the program and help more children defeat the disease of violence.

As Executive Director Jennifer Parker put it, "In 25 years with the YMCA, working with funders on more than 180 grants, I have never experienced the kind of

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transformational support that SVP provided to Metrocenter YMCA.”

This is just half the story, however. Volunteering is a two-way learning street. Yes, Alive & Free was able to tap into the expertise of volunteers, but SVP volunteers were also exposed to the nonprofit sector, learning about community issues and how they can have the greatest impact.

Carol used the experience to build her résumé and eventually transitioned from the corporate to the nonprofit sector. Ron also found that he had just as much to absorb as to share. “Whereas I like to think that I have been helpful to Metrocenter,” he says, “I know that I am better for what they have taught me.”

This is just one example among many. Each story is different and, of course, not every partnership with a nonprofit ends with such clear results. Over the past 14 years, I’ve seen relationships thrive and falter enough times to call out the following observations (please forgive me if they seem obvious):

- Financial restrictions and reporting cannot replace a relationship built on trust.
- Strong nonprofits deliver better results.
- Volunteer time and talent are worth their weight in grant dollar gold.

## Trust and General Operating Support

At SVP, we don’t just want to support nonprofits. We want to help make them stronger, which means we ask a lot of them. We ask them to show us where they’re weak, where they need help. It’s not usually the side you show a funder, and it requires something that is often hard to establish between funders and nonprofits: trust.

We know change won’t occur without trust, but power dynamics can get in the way. It takes time to break down those barriers, which is why SVP gives multiyear grants, and there has to be a two-way street.

SVP is also not in the business of telling nonprofits what their missions should be or what their programs should focus on. We put our trust in their expertise. Likewise, they know where they need to spend their money. That’s why we give general operating support.

I realize arguments exist for giving restricted grants and for asking nonprofits to report on how that money was spent. How else can you be sure that your investments are having the desired impact? SVP initially used this same approach—until we realized it didn’t guarantee results.

What impact is the organization having on our community? Can it be demonstrated? Have we built a relationship based on mutual trust? These are the questions we focus on now. If the answers are solid, how the organization spends its grant dollars is irrelevant.

## Strong Nonprofits, Better Results

“Organizations that build robust infrastructure...are more likely to succeed than those that do not. This is not news, and nonprofits are no exception to the rule.”

In “The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle,” Ann Goggins Gregory and Don Howard made this seemingly obvious statement that, in fact, challenges the way our philanthropic and nonprofit sectors operate.

Sound financial systems, effective leadership, up-to-date technology, and the like are not the stuff rallying cries are made of, but they can mean the difference between serving 25 children in need or serving 100. This is why SVP focuses on capacity building and encourages other funders to provide similar support.

## Volunteers Worth Their Weight in Gold

In annual surveys, our grantees consistently indicate that volunteer time and expertise are as valuable as the grant dollars they receive from us. The actual consulting time is an asset in itself, but the relationships often go beyond the initial engagements.

Many of our volunteers become regular donors and provide ongoing volunteer support. They’ve had the opportunity to witness the work of the nonprofit firsthand, and, with that additional knowledge and commitment, they are more willing to give at significant levels. Some volunteers also join the nonprofit’s board, diversifying the skill sets represented among board members and guaranteeing continued contributions of time and energy.

## So, in Short...

Get to know the organizations you fund. Find out what’s keeping them from reaching their full potential and provide support, whether in dollars or time and expertise. Trust their judgment. They’re closest to the work, and they know where to invest funds. And ask them to report on the results of their programs. That’s when you’ll know the investment was worthwhile, and you can celebrate—together.

*Learn more about SVP at [www.svpseattle.org](http://www.svpseattle.org) and [www.svpi.org](http://www.svpi.org). Also feel free to contact SVP Seattle’s Executive Connector Paul Shoemaker at [shoe@svpseattle.org](mailto:shoe@svpseattle.org) and 206-374-8757, ext. 20, or SVPI’s CEO Ruth Jones at [ruth@svpi.org](mailto:ruth@svpi.org) and 206-728-7872.*