The GreenLight Fund: Proudly Not Invented Here

What is the best way to help proven nonprofit models spread to new cities? John Simon tried several possible tactics, then invented a new approach.

The Bridgespan Group

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While in college at Harvard, John Simon volunteered for the Massachusetts Special Olympics, and became thoroughly motivated by its mission. But when he moved to England in the late 1980s as a Rhodes Scholar and sought similar volunteer work, he was surprised to find that there was no equivalent to the Special Olympics in the UK.

Wanting to fill that niche (even if only on a modest scale), Simon organized "KEEN" ("Kids Enjoy Exercise Now"), a local effort to teach tennis to kids with disabilities. Working alongside local parent Kryzia Gossage and marshaling his friends as volunteers, Simon drove the program's early success. When Simon left Oxford, he transitioned leadership of KEEN. Ultimately, Simon's friend Elliot Portnoy drove broad expansion of the organization; in the early 1990s, KEEN made its way across the ocean; it now has affiliates in eight cities in the United States. The work was immensely rewarding, Simon recalls, but he found himself equally excited by the idea that a powerful philanthropic concept can be "replicated."

Hanging out a shingle

After returning to Boston in 1988, Simon went into the private equity business, first with Charles River Ventures and then with the newly formed Highland Capital Partners. Then, after a few years in private equity, he founded a medical device company, UroMed, which eventually made him a considerable fortune. Simon was tremendously busy with his corporate work. But the itch to serve persisted, so he and his roommate—Michael Danziger, a friend from Oxford who was then about to graduate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education—began looking for another good idea to adopt and, perhaps, adapt.

They soon focused on a New York City-based program called "Prep for Prep," which provided extensive wraparound support to late elementary and early middle school-aged kids to help them prepare for and gain admittance to the city's elite private schools. With encouragement from Prep for Prep's founder, Gary Simons, Simon and Danziger in 1990 set up the Boston-based "Steppingstone Foundation," which faithfully reproduced many of the elements of the successful New York program. Steppingstone's program soon proved

itself, and Simon and Danziger began looking for ways to expand the concept into additional cities. The first spin-out was established in Philadelphia and the second in Hartford.

Replicating the program wasn't as simple as hanging out a Steppingstone shingle and turning on the lights in a new city, of course. In each new location, Simon and his colleagues met with local leaders and government officials, assessed community needs, interviewed and hired staff, and cultivated donors to build a funding base. Even so, the team found it difficult to develop the strong local knowledge and relationships necessary for the new organizations to succeed. As a result, it was five years before the Philadelphia program delivered results on par with the Boston operation; what's more, the strain this growth model was imposing on the Boston staff and organization was evident. Steppingstone Boston staff were exhausted by the frequent travel and stymied by high turnover in leadership positions at the new site. In addition, the team was finding it very difficult to secure the funding they needed to build strong organizations in the new locations, much less sustain operations there.

In short, cracks were showing in the organization's expansion plans. "We started to notice that we were outrunning our supply lines," Simon recalled. "In the for-profit world, if your business model is successful, you can easily expand. In the not-for-profit world, if your model is successful, you need more money, not less, and it's difficult to expand to new locations, because your fundraising base is local. So it became clear that this beautiful model was not going to get to other cities." While the Steppingstone branches in Philadelphia and Hartford are still going strong, the team decided further growth was not sustainable.

An idea importer?

What to do? Simon realized that much of the work of replicating programs was ensuring that their communities would foster their growth. He reflected on all the inefficiencies in bringing the same program to new places, that "all the people we met with in Philadelphia, all the things we did to insert ourselves there," represented a repeated learning curve, and the light bulb went off: What if he shifted gears and began helping proven programs take hold in new cities, and facilitating the transition?

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"That started to crystallize in my mind the idea of a systematic 'idea importer,'" Simon recalls. "If a city had one of those, it could change in a quantum leap, over a period of years. And what if that organization then replicated itself across many cities? That could revolutionize the whole way that nonprofit ideas spread."

By 2003, Simon was ready to implement his next "replication vision," and to that end, he set up the Boston-based GreenLight Fund.

One of the first challenges Simon encountered with GreenLight was finding someone who had the right combination of skills to run this new enterprise on a full-time basis, since Simon himself was still working 80-hour weeks at his venture capital firm. Because GreenLight would be open to the best programs from across the sector, the new executive director would need strong generalist and analytical skills to assess programs: Which programs deliver the most impact and are the most cost-effective? Which are the most innovative? Which will fit the Boston context best? Simon knew that the executive director would need to be a good judge of talent in order to recruit the right leadership for each newly imported organization, as well as to hire and manage a small staff at GreenLight itself. As Simon explained, "Every time we brought a new organization to Boston, we'd need to build a mini-coalition, so we also needed someone with charisma and coalition-building skills, someone who would inspire trust in our donors and partners."

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It was a tall order, but Simon networked in the Boston nonprofit community and found Margaret Hall, who had twenty years of nonprofit experience and the right skills for the task at hand. Simon and Hall decided that GreenLight's model would be to provide critical support to the "imported" organization for its first four years of existence, including startup funding (typically ranging from $600,000 to $800,000, depending on need), assistance recruiting a strong staff and board, and help with strategic planning, community outreach, and general operational issues. For her part, Hall made a big bet on Simon: that he would be able to drive funding to the organization.

Having finalized the model, Simon and Hall began looking for their first "importable" idea. Deciding to focus on kids growing up in violent and crime-ridden urban neighborhoods, they considered more than 100 programs before narrowing in on an organization in Portland, Oregon—Friends of the Children (FOTC). FOTC's mission is to help children by setting up long-term mentoring

relationships between troubled kids and supportive adults. The Portland program was a success, having already spread to five other cities; Simon and Hall decided GreenLight should try bringing it to Boston. Simon began building a community of donors, and Hall dedicated her efforts on the program side. GreenLight acquired the needed funding, built a supportive coalition, and launched the new site. Within a year, FOTC Boston had matched the first 16 high-risk kindergarteners with mentoring relationships that would continue for the next 12 years.

GreenLight's success

Encouraged by this success, GreenLight went looking for its next importable idea. As of 2010, the foundation has helped five organizations establish themselves in Boston (roughly one each year). More than 10,000 Boston youth have benefitted from these evidence-based programs so far. And what's more, these organizations are developing sustainable funding, building strong boards, and making progress on their own ambitious growth plans. GreenLight has attracted hundreds of donors to what might seem like an unlikely proposition: Bet on our next great idea.

"Our model requires that donors sign up to support this year's GreenLight thing without even knowing what it will be," Simon said. Hundreds of donors have agreed to that proposition, mainly because they trust GreenLight's leaders and respect its track record. If they are inspired by a particular initiative and choose to get more deeply involved— for example, by serving as a board member of the "imported" organization's local chapter—so much the better.

Key Takeaways

- **Revise and try again:** Adjust your approach as you encounter barriers.

- **Even strong programs are tough to spread:** Replication requires substantial time and local resources.

The next phase, Simon anticipates, will be the replication of GreenLight itself. "If a John equivalent and a Margaret equivalent popped up in, say, Denver," Simon concluded, "and came to us and said, 'We want to learn everything there is to know about GreenLight and replicate it,' we would be very interested."

He and Hall have taken preliminary steps in that direction by seeking funding for that effort, and put the word out: Feel free to borrow this idea.

SOURCES FOR THIS PROFILE INCLUDE:
- Bridgespan interview and correspondence with John Simon and Margaret Hall.
- GreenLight Fund Fall 2010 Newsletter.
- Thomas J. Tierney and Joel L. Fleishman, *Give Smart: Philanthropy That Gets Results,* (Public Affairs, 2011).