

Jim Citrin Leadership by Example



Introducing Social Entrepreneurship

by *Jim Citrin*

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What do you get when you cross venture capital at its best with passionate social entrepreneurs who want to change the world? Echoing Green.

Social Entrepreneurship

Founded in 1987 by the senior leadership of global private equity firm General Atlantic LLC, [Echoing Green](#) is an altogether different kind of nonprofit organization.

Echoing Green applies a VC mindset and discipline to funding and supporting entrepreneurs seeking not to build profit-generating business models, but rather to create organizations intended to tackle some of society's most important social problems. Call them aspiring social entrepreneurs.

Over the past 21 years, the group has awarded nearly 450 fellowships, investing more than \$25 million in seed capital to emerging entrepreneurs across 40 countries on five continents seeking to drive social change. Program areas have included education and youth development, human rights, healthcare, environmental sustainability, and economic development. Some of Echoing Green's notable successes include the funding and support to launch national service organizations such as Teach for America and City Year; model education programs such as Peace Games and College Summit; and economic development programs such as micro-lender SKS Microfinance (which is actually a for-profit social enterprise) and the One Acre Fund.

Not Your Grandfather's Nonprofit

Here's how it works. In 2008, Echoing Green received nearly 1,500 applications from individuals competing for 20 fellowships. Each grants up to \$90,000 in funding and comes with a community of like-minded social entrepreneurs who work together to help each other, with Echoing Green's access to support resources. On May 1, 30 finalists undergo an intensive selection process with interviews by and presentations to a panel of judges, during which they'll pitch their bold ideas for social change.

When the fellows are selected, they join a growing pantheon of social innovators including Teach for America founder Wendy Kopp, Echoing Green Fellow 1991; College Summit founder J.B. Schramm, a 1997 fellow; and 1994 fellow Van Jones, creator of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

The philosophy of Echoing Green bears little resemblance to traditional nonprofit mentality. Rather than the traditional philanthropic model of giving charity to worthy causes, the organization believes that innovative social change starts with an individual's passion to solve the world's biggest problems, and generates impact by driving toward measurable results to address those problems. "These social entrepreneurs are not do-gooders," says Dr. Cheryl Dorsey, president of Echoing Green and herself a 1992 fellow. "They are problem-solvers. But while they have no shortage of determination, they lack start-up funding, skills-building opportunities, and access to key networks required to build impactful models for social change."

A Charter for Change

I attended an Echoing Green presentation last week called "Entrepreneurs in Education," which featured one of the most inspiring examples of social entrepreneurship at work.

John Alford, a 2007 Echoing Green Fellow, is the principal of [Langston Hughes](#) Charter Academy, a new public school in New Orleans. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, many experts considered the New Orleans public school system to be the worst in the country. The high school dropout rate stood at 70 percent, and 7 out of 10 eighth-graders failed to meet even the most rudimentary reading, writing, and mathematics skills.

Alford, a Harvard MBA, says, "One of the silver linings of the Katrina catastrophe is that we have the chance to rebuild the school system virtually from scratch." In the aftermath of Katrina, half of New Orleans' public schools have been replaced with charter schools, and the city is moving to become the first all-charter school system of public education in the United States.

In addition to spending the majority of his time as principal, Alford is also CEO of [NOLA 180](#), a start-up charter school management organization that aims to transform failed public schools into high-functioning charter schools that prepare all students for college. NOLA 180's goal is to send over 80 percent of enrolled students to college. Alford says his approach is to "incubate a team of educators who work together to turn around failing schools in New Orleans." By focusing on restructuring existing schools into new charter schools instead of opening new ones, Alford is convinced that the New Orleans school system can in fact be reformed at scale

(KIPP). Alford and most of the students at Langston Hughes Charter Academy (and across New Orleans' public school system overall) are African American, and its student body is comprised almost entirely of low-income students.

"It was difficult at first for the students and the teachers to follow our approach," Alford says. "The last thing that these students wanted, or anyone else in New Orleans for that matter, was another program. So our challenge was to make substantive progress without students thinking that it was through a prepackaged plan imposed on them.

"So we focused on the little things that over time actually become the big things," he continues. "We required students to keep their shirts tucked in, to say their 'pleases' and 'thank you's,' and to not interrupt. We extended the school day and began assigning homework with the expectation that students do it or face consequences. We had students wear red school uniforms and be disciplined with detention if they fought in the hallways or disrupted the learning environment in other ways."

Tackling America's Most Pressing Problems

Alford believes that if NOLA 180 can take schools that have historically had a 70 percent dropout rate and transform them into ones with an 80 or 90 percent college graduation rate, then they'll be able to prove that public education in the United States can indeed be saved.

"I've spoken to far too many Americans -- black and white; rich and poor -- who have given up on public education and are convinced that it will never be fixed. I want to prove all of those people wrong," he says conclusively.

Seeing Echoing Green at work and meeting some of their amazing fellows, it's evident to me that social entrepreneurship is proving itself a viable strategy for attacking some of society's most important problems today.