



# The Power of Partnership

By Betsy Liotus


I recently saw an episode of *Extreme Makeover—Home Edition* in which a construction team undertook a seemingly impossible building renovation for a family in need. The charge was to build a 4,800 square foot house for an Alaskan family with 13 adopted children living in a 900 square foot shack. More than 50 local artisans, carpenters, and others helped frame, roof, drywall, trim, paint, tile, and otherwise complete a multitude of related tasks in less than a week. When they were finished, high school students carried in roomfuls of new furniture, paid for by program sponsors. Friends and neighbors provided encouragement and support throughout the exciting but exhausting work week.

This collaborative effort accomplished more than any single group of organizers, sponsors, crew, decorators, students, or cheerleaders could have accomplished on their own — and in far less time.

Collaboration can have equally satisfying results in the nonprofit world. Creative and comprehensive collaborations may include government and corporate partners as well. In times of increased competition for funding and demand for services, collaborative arrangements are a good way for one group to use the resources or expertise of another to improve program effectiveness, revenue, or visibility. The most successful collaborations involve organizations with compatible or complementary missions, mature leadership, and mutually agreed upon timelines and outcomes.

## It Takes a Village

At Fellowship Housing Corporation (FHC), a transitional housing program for single mothers and their children, we relied heavily on collaboration to meet client needs. For example, despite relatively low incomes, our clients became remarkably adept at avoiding credit card debt by discerning needs from wants, saving for special purchases, or



Here's an overview of what collaboration can accomplish — and steps to take before you get started.

going without. Inevitably, however, a car would break down and require repairs that cost far more than most clients could possibly have budgeted for. Faced with using a credit card to pay for repairs or losing their jobs because they had no transportation, most used the card.

A local auto repair shop (and later a local church) saved the day by agreeing to donate the labor for these repairs. FHC picked up the cost of the parts and then worked with clients to pay back that amount through small monthly payments. Many FHC donors enjoyed contributing to this fund as well. Together, we ensured that unexpected auto repairs didn't undermine the progress clients had made in so many ways. FHC gratefully acknowledged the repair shop in newsletters and other communications, enhancing their reputation in the community and perhaps increasing business as well.

A similar arrangement with a

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local dentist was already in place when I arrived at FHC. Dr. D. set aside one Saturday morning per month for the purpose of providing dental check ups or dental work for clients and their children. His staff members took turns volunteering their time on those days to help. A local eye doctor did the same.

#### A Wing and a Prayer

FHC's most complex collaboration came when we approached another transitional housing program called Women In Need Growing Stronger (WINGS) about a joint proposal to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The missions,

client base, and service area of FHC and WINGS were all similar. The supportive services each offered varied in scope, from the dental, eye, and auto repair support offered by FHC to vocational training, life counseling, and emergency shelter service provided by WINGS. An added element of interest was the fact that FHC was a faith-based organization while WINGS was not. Both organizations, however, struggled to meet a never-ending array of client needs with limited resources. About that time, HUD was shifting its funding preferences toward organizations willing to work together to meet such needs.

The government funding process can be a daunting one, especially for organizations new to that process. So WINGS' track record in securing these grants was of great benefit. However, in order for FHC to develop its own track record, we became the lead grantee

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# Shining Stars

By Hunter Phillips Goodman

*Snapshots of organizations that excel in nonprofit collaboration with fellow nonprofits*

## FuzzyFotosKC – Kansas City

When Kansas City Free Health Clinic and No More Homeless Pets\* sat down together they weren't sure if a joint project was possible. After an initial brainstorming session, the group found a shared idea they could work from: "If you cannot afford health care for yourself, you most likely cannot afford health care for your pets." Using this as their guide to work together, FuzzyFotosKC was born. FuzzyFotosKC is an online photo contest featuring local Kansas City citizens and their fuzzy, feathered, furry, and sometimes scaly pets. During a six week period the contestants use a variety of campaign tactics to get as many \$5 votes as they can for their photo. The contestant with the most votes wins. In 2006, the inaugural year, FuzzyFotosKC raised just over \$80,000 that was evenly split between No More Homeless Pets and the Kansas City Free Health Clinic. Both organizations understand that without their collaborated efforts the fundraiser could not work. The two groups serve two separate communities but find common ground and success when working with each other.

For more information about FuzzyFotosKC, visit [www.fuzzyfotoskc.com](http://www.fuzzyfotoskc.com) or contact Joe Bellinger at 816-777-2764.

*\*No More Homeless Pets ([www.nmhpkc.org](http://www.nmhpkc.org)) is a coalition of veterinarians, humane societies, municipal shelters, rescue groups, spay/neuter groups, and individuals who are working toward a time when there will be No More Homeless Pets in Kansas City. Its mission is to lead a cooperative effort to end pet overpopulation and transform the KC area into a "Humane Community." The purpose of the Kansas City Free Health Clinic ([www.kcfree.org](http://www.kcfree.org)) is to promote health and wellness by providing quality services, at no charge, to people without access to basic care.*

## THE ARC — Washington, D.C.

Nearly half of Washington, D.C.'s children live east of the Anacostia River, in neighborhoods where drug dealers and gangs rule the streets and safe, clean places to play are few and far between. Half of those children live in poverty. Until THE ARC was built in Ward 8 in 2005, many of these children and their families had no access to cultural, artistic, or safe after-school activities in their community. More than 7,000 children live within one mile of THE ARC. The Town Hall Arts and Recreation Campus, created by developer William C. Smith and Company, serves 2,000 kids each week, in collaboration with its nine partner organizations operating in the building: Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington, Children's National Medical Center, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Covenant House Washington, the Levine School of Music, Parklands Community Center, Trinity University, the Washington Ballet, and the Washington Middle School for Girls. All of these organizations are longstanding service providers in D.C., and many had been operating in satellite locations, such as in public schools or mobile units, before THE ARC gave them a permanent home in the neighborhood.

The 110,000-square-foot facility, which is open every day, is unique in the United States, conceived originally as a community center to serve a new housing development. Visitors from urban cities all over the country have visited THE ARC to learn what makes it successful. THE ARC's 365-seat theater — the only theater of any kind east of the river — presents concerts, plays, and movies, and serves as a venue for town hall meetings, debates, graduations, and other community presentations. D.C. government provided one-third of the funding needed to build THE ARC, according to Executive Director Skip McMahon. Foundations, corporations, and other donors contributed as well to make the vision a reality.

For more information, contact Betsy Rosenblatt Rosso ([www.betsyrosso.com](http://www.betsyrosso.com), [betsy@betsyrosso.com](mailto:betsy@betsyrosso.com)), a writer, editor, and communications consultant who helps nonprofit organizations tell their stories.

## Disaster Recovery Services of George County — Mississippi

Following Hurricane Katrina, concerned citizens of George County, Mississippi, united to address their communities' needs by sharing resources, working collaboratively, and acting together. George County is only 62 miles northeast of Biloxi, Mississippi and was not spared Katrina's wrath. Disaster Recovery Services (DRS) of George County is a multi-organization disaster recovery group established in January, 2006, to handle disaster recovery efforts locally through equal access to assistance resources, collective and creative problem solving, and quick decision making following disasters. At the time, George County had a list of about 300 families who needed help — help best delivered by uniting the community for shared resources, creative ideas, and direct hands-on service.

Within the first three meetings, the collaborative effort included the City of Lucedale, American Red Cross, First National Bank, Century Bank, Habitat for Humanity, Church World Services, First United Methodist Church, First Baptist Church, St. Lucy Catholic Church, Grace United Methodist Church, Crossroads Free Pentecostal Church, First State Bank, George/Green County Baptist Association, Shipman/Winborn Chapel UMC, Church of the Brethren Salvation Army, Modern Woodmen of America, Touch of Joy Ministries, Lucedale Police Department, St. James United Methodist Church, UMCOR, Antioch Methodist Church, Immaculate Heart Community Outreach, Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church, George County E.M.C., Missy Havard Tax & Accounting Service, George County Ministerial Association, and the area FEMA liaison.

DRS welcomes volunteers to the George County area to help residents build, repair, and clean up homes. Volunteers join team members who are taking steps together to rebuild their community and its people one house at a time.

For more information, contact Rev. Harrell Moore ([hjmdrs@bellsouth.net](mailto:hjmdrs@bellsouth.net), 601-766-0730), director of Disaster Recovery Services of George County and pastor of Grace United Methodist Church of Lucedale, Mississippi.



Push for additional clarity beyond the simple altruistic motives your contacts may describe.

in the proposal to purchase a six-unit apartment building to be used by clients from both programs for a three-year period. Myriad support services were also included in the proposal, which was approved by HUD in December, 1999, and subsequently renewed several times. This effort required monthly meetings between caseworkers from each organization, as well as frequent communication by the executive directors.

### Risk Management

Even well conceived and well executed collaborations are not without risk. Misunderstandings can arise. Staff turnover or differing philosophies can also be a challenge. The best defense is a well-informed and supportive board of directors and experienced staff asking good questions up front, evaluating progress regularly, and making adjustments as needed along the way. Timely and honest communication is the key, along with a shared sense that something worthwhile is being achieved together that neither organization could likely accomplish on its own.

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center ([www.nonprofitrisk.org](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org)) offers a checklist to help ensure that proper consideration is given to important issues before entering into a collaborative project or program with a nonprofit, for-profit, or government partner. Use the questions in the following checklist to help make a decision about what form, if any, a collaborative effort might take.

### Risk Management Checklist

**Confirm Compatibility.** Is your organization compatible with your intended partner? Will you violate

any precedents or policy by partnering with the organization? For example, is it appropriate for a youth-serving agency to engage an alcohol or tobacco producer (or its subsidiary) as a lead sponsor of an educational program?

**Understand Motivations.** Your reason for collaborating may be clear — to raise money for a critical initiative, for example. The factors motivating your potential partners may be less apparent. Perhaps they want to cleanse a tarnished image, for instance, or target a new consumer group, such as members of an ethnic minority group. Look beneath the surface to be sure you understand all your partner's motives, not just the obvious ones.

Look beneath the surface to be sure you understand all your partner's motives.

**Conduct Due Diligence.** It pays to perform a minimal level of due diligence before formalizing a partnership. For example, is your potential partner a subsidiary of a company that engages in activities that your constituents may find objectionable? Does it engage in unacceptable business practices (foreign labor, child labor, or inadequate attention to environmental safeguards)?

**Interpret the Message.** Carefully consider the message your constituents will receive when they learn of your partnerships. Will they be bombarded with advertising that contains your logo? Will it appear that you have endorsed your partner's products, services, or political stance? Have you?

**Clarify Expectations.** The most important ingredient in a successful partnership is clarity of expectations. Make certain you know and acknowledge what your partner hopes to get out of the endeavor. If your partner expects an increase in sales to a specific constituency, determine what they expect you to do to accomplish that goal. Push

for additional clarity beyond the simple altruistic motives your contacts may describe.

**Put It In Writing.** If the collaboration spans a period of time, involves a substantial sum of money, or calls for specific responsibilities from each partner, be sure to create a written agreement. A brief "Memorandum of Understanding" or "Memo of Agreement" lets you outline expectations and assign risk to those who will be responsible if something goes wrong. ■

### Resources

Bush, Richard, "Collaboration and Leadership: Secrets of Success," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 1.

"How to Partner for Success," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 6.

Lies, Valerie, "How Nonprofits Can Partner with State Regulators," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 3.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Strategic Alliances ([www.snpo.org/li](http://www.snpo.org/li)).

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### Shining Stars Sidebar author

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