

ADRIAN WALKER

Aiding city, together.



There are at least two constant, if often unspoken, truths about nonprofit groups in Boston: They never have as much money as they need for what they want to do. And, regardless of how similar their missions or their geographical proximity, they are unlikely to work together unless absolutely forced to.

This is not to denigrate the people who run the community-based organizations around town. It just happens to be true.

That, at least, is what many people believed until a year ago, when Citizens Bank brought together a group of nonprofits to work for a shared purpose close to their hearts. Called the Community Gems program, the groups collaborated on a one-night fund-raiser that netted them \$155,000.

For Children's Services of Roxbury, Roxbury Multi-Service Center, Roxbury Youthworks, United Homes for Children, YouthBuild Boston, and the Boston Higher Education Resource Center, the benefits of the program went beyond splitting a large check.

You shouldn't take my word for it. Ken Smith, executive director of YouthBuild Boston explains the challenge.

"We serve the same population," he said of the groups. "But we can't sustain [cooperation]. There's no real glue."

The groups serve similar populations in different ways, from housing to social service to job training to helping high school students pursue higher education.

But, their lack of collaboration isn't a minor thing, especially when many agencies, particularly smaller ones, are struggling to maintain funding in a tough environment for philanthropy.

So, besides being a financial boost, Community Gems is an opportunity for isolated agencies, some just blocks apart in Dudley Square, to think about how they can pool ideas, as well as resources.

One person who has clamored for that kind of thinking for years is Hubie Jones, the longtime community activist and intellectual force. Not easily impressed, he gets animated in talking about the potential of group action. He has signed on to the board of Community Gems.

"I was drawn to it because I have historically been a critic of noncollaboration in Boston's black community," he said. "There's no joint planning, no joint staff development, no joint fund-raising, no joint anything."

This isn't, as I think Jones would agree, just a black community issue. In Boston, people tend to go their own way until they have a good reason to do otherwise. The good reason in this case came largely from Robert Mahoney, vice chairman of Citizens Financial Group. As the bank was considering its charitable giving last year, he wondered if there was a way to come up with something with a broader reach, rather than simply cutting a few checks. What emerged was a fundraiser at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

The recipients raised part of the money to hold the event, while sponsors, led by Citizens, contributed the rest.

These organizations are coining together to work on a fund-raiser, but more importantly, they're getting to know one another," Mahoney said. "They're discovering each other, discovering the skills they can share with one another" Instead of a black-tie dinner, the event was more casual, reflecting the clientele of the organizations. The idea was to have a party, not a dinner. Success breeding success, the second Community Gems fund-raiser will be held Saturday night at UMass-Boston, with an ambitious fund-raising target of \$250,000.

Aside from the money, the event is also a showcase for the grassroots groups involved. "These people are laboring in the vineyard every day, and one night a year their names are in lights," Mahoney said. "Their boards are there, their constituents are there. They're stars, and they deserve to be stars."

When is a party more than a party? Perhaps when it teaches the lesson that people can thrive only if they do so together. Thus far, this program may be accomplishing that. "This is no longer a flash in the pan," Smith said. It has the whiff of an institution."

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