

The Power of One: The Unsung Everyday Heroes Rescuing America's Cities

by Debra J. Berg

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CIVIC FRANCHISING

*Example is the school of mankind,  
and they will learn at no other.*

Edmund Burke

In the movie *Pay It Forward*, Mr. Simonette, a seventh-grade social studies teacher, challenges his students to think of an idea that will change the world and then put it into action. Most of the kids respond that the assignment is just “too hard” and even “weird.” The teacher, trying to get the kids to think bigger, asks them to simply contemplate the word *possible*. Trevor, one of the students, gets it. He devises a plan for doing good deeds for three people. But the class moans when he mentions that his next step is to ask them to “pay it [the good deed] forward.” Eventually, he explains, if the plan works, their unselfish acts of kindness would multiply around the world. The kids cry, “It won’t work,” and “It’s stupid,” as if to say that any action so altruistic would take an extreme act of faith in human nature to pull off.

When Trevor sets his plan into motion, he discovers there actually are other people like him who are willing to give it a try. On the receiving end of a good deed, those Trevor helps become more open to the notion of performing acts of kindness for others, of paying it forward. And once they’ve made the effort, others perform their own random acts of kindness. Eventually Trevor’s idea multiplied person-to-person to other towns, even to other states.

During the experiment, however, 11-year-old Trevor also learns some hard reality lessons. He discovers that the majority of people are simply too scared or cynical to believe that the world can be different, so they don’t even try. The result is that those who need help lose out. Mr. Simonette is right when he warns that some people will see “paying it forward” as a “Mother Theresa conga line.” Yet, Trevor is persistent and proves his critics wrong. While some of his personal good

## *Civic Franchising*

deeds could be considered heroic, no stipulations are placed on the deeds of others. Most good deeds cost nothing, only a little time investment. Yet the majority of the people in the movie are afraid to step out. After Trevor's idea falls on dozens of deaf ears, the important lesson he learns is that *everyone* is not required to agree to his plan. It only requires that a few others latch on to his world-changing idea.

The writers of *Pay It Forward* probably weren't aware that their plot wasn't entirely fictitious. As we've seen in the stories in this book, the new trend of civic solutions involves thousands of people performing good deeds. Real life outdoes Hollywood's imagination since, in real life, the deeds of civic entrepreneurs are being "paid forward" not just in America but all around the world.

It's normal for altruistic ideas to draw skeptics. Nay sayers, like the kids in Trevor's class, have to see it to believe it. Most people can never imagine launching or replicating a grassroots solution. They're handicapped because they've never met anyone who did. And since belief can never be forced, it takes someone with faith and a track record to inspire others.

It's the same when choosing a college, a career, or even a hobby. It's normally someone else's success that prompts us to change direction. A case in point is how Americans tend to volunteer for causes they've been asked to join or contribute where their friends do. Civic entrepreneurs and volunteers make us aware of needs we wouldn't otherwise have discovered. Without them, the world would be very different and certainly less humane. But the world will also be less well off without *your* efforts. There are no *limited pie theories* when it comes to how many people can participate in solving the country's social ills. Everyone's contributions are welcome.

That said, this book was not written with the objective of turning everyone into a civic entrepreneur. People's talents and gifts are different. But everyone can learn to support civic entrepreneurs where they live by donating time, resources, or ideas. Hopefully, the stories on these pages have piqued your interest in becoming a part of the larger

cause. And if you're already a civic entrepreneur, it's hoped that the lessons in this book will open your eyes to even greater possibilities.

## **FOLLOWING THE LEADERS**

There's an old adage that goes, "The best way to make it through a mine field is to follow someone who's already made it." That good advice underscores the current phase of the movement of civic solutions. Over twenty years of experience by leaders in the movement is providing a wealth of information about pitfalls and shortcuts. The experiences of pioneers show us how to widen the playing field for even more civic innovations.

One major business precept established during the last half of the twentieth century was "imitation," which is symbolized best by the concept of "franchising." During the 1990s, a large percentage of civic pioneers encouraged others to imitate or replicate their successes. The practice of what I call "civic franchising" has since been responsible for the rollout of dozens of thriving social cures nationwide.

While some cynically object to the generic look of America's cities with all the same popular restaurants and retail outlets, there's something to be said for emulating success. Likewise, when there are proven solutions that save lives, eradicate crime, or help the poor obtain self-sufficiency it makes little sense to reinvent the wheel.

Although nonprofit replication has received scant popular attention, it now appears to be responsible for much of the recent grassroots growth in the human services sector. Not all groups choose to clone their solutions, but most civic entrepreneurs that I interviewed have replicated to at least one other location. (And those who haven't have entertained the idea.) Some solutions have been civic-franchised hundreds of times. In fact, projects from every social solutions category have been replicated both in the U.S. and on other continents.

## The Power of ONE

Civic franchising works much the same way that business franchising works in that with any major restaurant franchise, not every site is an exact replica of the others in the chain. Some vary their menus, others their décor. In the case of McDonalds, each restaurant has golden arches and a drive-thru, but each must also fit in within the local community's guidelines. (Golden arches displayed at suburban locations are often smaller than those on interstate highways. It also isn't unusual for fast-food chains to vary their menus by region.)

The same principle holds true for civic franchising. Jerry Rudoff, cofounder of *Youth Crime Watch of America*, states that in the late nineties the YCWA board adopted a Burger King-style customer model in order to spur his organization's growth. Rather than prescribe one

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specific menu of programs for every group, YCWA gives schools and churches the opportunity to create a new curriculum that fits their particular "market." YCWA, now franchised in forty states and 12 countries, offers a mix of crime prevention categories to its 1,500 affiliates. Each site can "have it their way" as they

select from nine modules, like *patrolling* or *mentoring*. And each module can be added to or removed from a site's "menu" to reflect the needs of local youth. Offering choices to the franchising site accelerates the start-up period while it also steps up YCWA's expansion rate.

## FRANCHISING WITH A FLEXIBLE TWIST

Civic franchising is not typically an exact cloning process. Usually, potential franchisees are given the opportunity to tailor-make a solution to their community. Which method of replication they choose often depends upon the solution's complexity. In any case, the fran-

## *Civic Franchising*

chise analogy still holds in that certain fundamentals always apply. Like McDonald's, some components may differ as long as the major ones (golden arches, quick service, and a drive-thru) are present.

While much of America seems to be about controlling and micro-managing outcomes, the most replicatable civic solutions are those that allow adaptability. Communities have many things in common, but each also possesses its own set of customs, demographics, and fundraising opportunities. In addition, civic entrepreneurs are famously creative. They need room to fine-tune solutions to their unique client population. If a civic cure isn't malleable or its components can't be tweaked, its success is less assured long-term.

There are several advantages to engaging in a large civic franchise network. One is the credibility the network lends while seeking grant funding. A functioning network arms a new civic entrepreneur with proof that the concept already works. Franchise networks also have the potential of harnessing group buying clout, as is the case with *The National Furniture Bank*. Multiple sites make it possible to negotiate volume pricing for high-cost things like warehouses and transportation. In most cases, the experience of having "been there, done that" makes the logistics of setting up a project in a new location easier to accomplish.

### **LOCATING A CIVIC ENTREPRENEUR FRANCHISE**

Prospective civic entrepreneurs can obtain information on how to replicate a successful solution as easily as making a phone call or sending an e-mail to a group's founder. Many groups maintain web sites, and Internet searches also bring up more options. While there is currently no central repository system listing all successfully franchised civic entrepreneur solutions, *www.NICENetwork.org* provides a partial list, including the programs described in this book. Regular updates are made to incorporate new groups as they become known.

## The Power of ONE

Unlike business franchising, where a drive for profits drives competition, many civic entrepreneur initiatives openly allow others to adopt their solution at little or no charge. *Amber Alert* training materials are offered to law enforcement and media personnel through the *www.missingchildren.org* site at minimal cost. In contrast to the for-profit sector, *free* doesn't mean *of limited value*. Access to low-cost information is common.

Because a social cure is only valuable if it works, civic entrepreneurs strive for excellence in what they do. Like other people in business, they are competitive and want their initiative to excel. Instead of expanding sales territories, they're motivated to spark the interest of volunteers, future funders, and potential replicators. Many strive to be the "solution of choice" in order to obtain foundation grants. In the case of youth crime prevention, a number of similar organizations currently exist, but *Youth Crime Watch*, while seeking to work in tandem with the other groups, is constantly aware of the "competition." That's proven to be a good thing. It propels them to improve upon and expand their programs.

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## CIVIC FRANCHISING STYLES

It was surprising to learn how the replication styles of the civic entrepreneurs interviewed for this book, despite their never having met one another, were similar. Their efforts fall nicely into three main categories: passive mentoring, hands-on mentoring, and cloning.

## *Civic Franchising*

**PASSIVE MENTORING** - The founders of groups using this replication model typically view franchising as a low priority (at least in the near-term) due to staffing and funding limitations. Interested parties are allowed to borrow or purchase training guides at minimal charge. Otherwise, advice and replication details come through phone conversations with staff members or from on-site visits by inquirers at their own expense.

**Examples:** *Youth Aviation Scholarship, A Place Called Home, Compassion House, Sharing Connections, Cool-No-Violence, Brighton Neighborhood Association, Pioneer Ford, Progressive Redevelopment, Feed My People, The Time Is Now, Hope Community.*

**HANDS-ON MENTORING** - These founders play an active role in the launch of new start-ups. Staff members often spend significant time with the new civic entrepreneurs. When off-site training is requested, most groups charge a fee for consulting time and travel expenses. In the case of *Harlem Chess Club* and *Vineyard Community*, access to mentoring is contingent on the founder's availability. In most cases, the newly replicated site has no legal connection to the model site.

**Examples:** *Fresh Start of Indiana, Bridging, Inc., The Amber Plan, Harlem Chess Club, Vineyard Community Church.*

**CLONING** - These founders have set replication as a major priority and set up legally connected replicas of their time-tested nonprofits. Cloning can take months, or even years, as in the case of *Jobs for Life* or *Generations of Hope*. Three cloning methods, listed below, are generally used. Most require lead-time to secure funding, train and recruit volunteers, and build commitments with community leaders. Methods 2 and 3 often necessitate a significant upfront investment.

**Cloning Method 1** - For these initiatives, replication means generating new volunteer sites using specific instructional materials and standards of performance. Some, like *WiredSafety.org*, offer a choice of curricula to their volunteers. Volunteers establish new sites for the

## *Civic Franchising*

nonprofit and train others in its methods. The replicated sites are not separate nonprofits, although legal agreements may be required.

**Examples:** *Matthew House, WiredSafety.org, Youth Crime Watch of America.*

***Cloning Method 2*** - Using this method, a new civic entrepreneur establishes an entirely separate nonprofit, not necessarily with the same name as the parent group. Some projects are replicated exactly, whereas others adopt key facets of the parent program. Once established, the new site runs independently.

**Examples:** *Generations of Hope, St. Martin de Porres House of Hope.*

***Cloning Method 3*** - Here we find separate nonprofits under one nonprofit umbrella. As in the case of *Christmas in Action* or *Jobs for Life*, each new site incorporates the name of the parent nonprofit as part of its own name. Guidelines and training materials are uniform. A national office promotes the effort and helps with research, volunteer insurance, and promotion. Each replicated group is overseen by its own board, secures its own funding, and sets its own agenda. Often there's a significant upfront cost and the national office may require ongoing fees.

**Examples:** *Christmas in Action, People for People, Jobs for Life.*

Successful groups, some now in existence for over twenty years, have adopted every style of civic-franchising. The original *Christmas in April* project, launched in 1972 and now operating under the names of *Rebuilding Together* and *Christmas in Action*, has been replicated in more than 975 cities and towns. *Youth Crime Watch*, founded in 1979, has replicated its program at over 1,500 sites. The five-year plans for these organizations proclaim ambitious expansion goals.

Not until 1995 could one locate professionals for hire who were skilled in the science of replicating social solutions. That year, Public Private Ventures of Philadelphia ([www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org)) launched its pioneer effort

## *Civic Franchising*

designed to guide civic entrepreneurs through a structured replication process.

David P. Racine, PPV's Founding President for Replication and Expansion Services, dispelled several myths about social solution replication. First, he found that grassroots social solutions can be replicated in dissimilar circumstances and communities. Second, while some believe competition in the social sector is unfitting, it actually propels progress when civic entrepreneurs race to find a solution. Third, contrary to popular opinion, the evidence is clear that a social solution does not need a charismatic leader to increase its chances for the success of a large-scale replication project.<sup>1</sup>

Those at PPV are skilled at evaluating promising solutions and are purists when it comes to replication. Their aim is to help groups determine their potential for a successful outcome while also creating strategic and business plans for guiding their growth. PPV concentrates on proven successful solutions like the *Generations of Hope* foster care adoption program and the *Amachi* program, embraced by *People for People* as the best mentoring program for the children of prisoners from Philadelphia. To date, PPV has guided over 200 groups nationwide and has worked closely with more than a dozen. One of those, the Nurse-Family Partnership, a pregnancy and child wellness program, has been replicated in over 150 communities.<sup>2</sup>

## GLOBAL CIVIC FRANCHISING

Bliss Browne spends every day of her life adding to the world's civic entrepreneur population. Bliss's job description can be summed up in two words: "imagination generator." Focused on empowering citizens struggling with unmet social needs in their neighborhoods, she guides them through a plan of action. In the last ten years, Bliss has inspired many successful programs in Chicago by helping average citizens invent their own solutions, locate financing so that solutions come to life, and transform themselves into community leaders.<sup>3</sup>

## *Civic Franchising*

The phenomenon of the civic entrepreneur is not unique to America, however, and democracies around the world are busy inventing their own social cures. With a decade of proof that her tool kit of skills works *locally*, Bliss is now thinking and acting *globally* to engage and create international community leaders. Several representatives from Singapore, who wanted to solve problems engendered by the growth of their city, traveled to the U.S. for one of Bliss's *Imagine* seminars. The training taught them how to build the city around citizen input and innovation. Impressed with the training, Singapore's mayor earmarked \$2 million specifically for an *Imagine* budget that now funds a host of new grassroots efforts around the city. That's just one example. Other cities have seen news of Bliss's results on her *www.imaginechicago.com* site and adopted similar plans. To date, her *Imagine* initiative has spawned civic entrepreneurs on six continents and turned hundreds of people around the world into agents for positive change right where they live.<sup>4</sup>

### **FRANCHISING WITH LIMITED RESOURCES**

Grassroots leaders often complain that foundations and governments seldom prioritize resources for funding causes like theirs. But that hasn't stopped Tamara Cibus from replicating her initiative. Accustomed to offering her training materials and techniques at a minimal charge to future civic entrepreneurs, Tamara had a bigger dream for *Matthew House*. She wanted to reach more hurting children across the U.S. in a more deliberate way. Her only challenge was funding the effort. Eventually, the *Matthew House* board looked at an option of merging with an existing national nonprofit that had the infrastructure to do what was needed. Catholic Charities came along. It promised to maintain the program's integrity and engage Tamara as its key trainer. By partnering with a national nonprofit, Tamara's dream has become a reality. Today, her Godparent Home Missions program is offering a life-changing environment for thousands of minority children in cities throughout America.

## FRANCHISING COMPASSION

Both national and international networks created by civic franchising are powerful, especially in crisis situations. *WiredSafety.org* has built one such network. Each of its 10,000 volunteers can be considered a separate franchise that works to thwart cybercriminals, track down pedophiles, catch child kidnappers, and educate on-line users around the clock in 76 countries each day. But that's not all they do.

Highly skilled at crisis solving and comforting victims, *WiredSafety's* volunteers came to the rescue of the 9/11 victims' families soon after the attacks occurred. With her headquarters in New Jersey and a law office in Manhattan, Parry Aftab, the organization's founder, became personally engaged in the Twin Towers disaster. Within hours of the attack, she was transforming the group's web site into a 9/11 emergency home page.

Parry knows the capabilities of her worldwide crew to handle shock and confusion. She received hundreds of e-mails from those willing to help. Soon after the attack, she began getting e-mail pleas from those searching for their loved ones. Within days, the Family Match Program was launched to pair Cyberangels with victims' families.

Word spread quickly about the web site, and within the first few weeks after the attack, thousands from across the country became fully engaged volunteers, some in ways no one would have anticipated. One e-mail came from a Mississippi mother stating how her 13-year-old daughter had already invested weeks at a local grocery store collecting 13,000 stuffed animals for the victims' children. But the young girl needed help distributing them. Parry, who'd built a broad-based network of contacts, lined up the Marines for the task. But when they were called up to serve in Afghanistan, she turned to her Teenangel volunteers in New Jersey, a section of her teen cybergroup. One of the Teenangels, who had lost her dad in the attacks, convinced her school to convert garage space into a sorting location for the 40 x 20 x 8

### *Civic Franchising*

foot container full of toys. Within days of receiving the toys, the teens had them ready to distribute to the victims' children.

The most fascinating 9/11 effort organized by the *WiredSafety.org* team came as the result of one woman in Illinois who wanted to make and donate handcrafted angels to victims' families. With privacy an issue, Parry suggested she turn them into Christmas ornaments that might be placed on a White House Christmas tree. The only stipulation was that the White House needed them by October. The woman agreed and proceeded to engage *WiredSafety* volunteers, seniors in nursing homes, kids in preschool, and hundreds of others in an 11-state project. But October came and went and the ornaments hadn't arrived for Parry to send them on to Washington. In fact, they didn't show up until November, too late for the White House festivities.

The angel ornaments were simple and beautiful and delivered in good condition to Parry's law office. Made from regular white copy paper, each one displayed a little red heart around its neck inscribed with a victim's name. For those who might read them, volunteers had jotted personal notes on the back of each one. Every angel, decorated in glitter, angel hair, and magic marker, had been carefully packed, sorted in alphabetical envelopes, and arranged by the name of each victim's employer. Parry was emotionally deluged as the mass of bulging envelopes evoked a reminder of just how many people had died. Now she had 11,000 paper angels, at least three for each victim, lining the hallways of her law firm and no place to send them.

Meanwhile, partnering with a police chief from New York State and a Ground Zero chaplain, she was busily working on a Christmas toy drive for the victims' children. On December 12, she overheard a phone conversation by the chaplain as he asked, "Where am I going to find ornaments, one for everyone who died, by tomorrow?" Parry tapped him on the shoulder. "I have three for everyone who died," she said when he looked up, "and you can have them by tomorrow."

The chaplain was stunned. He was working with construction workers at Ground Zero, who wanted to set up a lighted Christmas tree on

### *Civic Franchising*

the site. But they had no ornaments for the tree. Thanks to the idea of one woman in Illinois and the *WiredSaftey.org* network, they were now able to complete the task with thousands of hand engraved angels made by hundreds of caring Americans. When the workers showed up, Parry showed them the fragile angels made of paper. They would need a coating of shellac before they were hung. Otherwise, the angels would not withstand the elements should the weather turn bad.

The next day, hundreds of construction workers strung up clothes-lines in #7 World Trade Center. One by one, they pinned each paper angel to the lines and sprayed them with shellac until they were completely covered. Mayor Giuliani had given his final approval for the tree to be positioned in the middle of the wreckage. At that point, cherry pickers began hoisting the men up the grand tree so they could carefully pin thousands of delicate little paper angels to its branches. Many of the “hardhats” had trouble containing their emotions.

The weather held and the tree lighting ceremony went off without a hitch. Parry and her crew flipped the switch while construction workers, the press, and visitors looked on. When the Christmas tree lit up, it looked as if it were shining with a special radiance. Nothing could have prepared the crowd for what they saw as little white angel ornaments, thousands of them, fluttered in a gentle breeze. In contrast to the backdrop of the metal protrusions rising from the rubble, the delicate angels reflected the glow of the Christmas lights. There wasn't a dry eye on the site. The tree had taken on an indescribable reverence and the simple angels, each appearing to come to life, brought peace where chaos had once ruled.

Only a handful of people were in on the real story of the angel ornaments when the newswire photo made the front page of every city newspaper the following day. Few knew that brawny construction workers in cherry pickers had welled up with tears as they pinned the ornaments to the tree. Only a handful of people saw a volunteer construction worker from Ireland, so moved and proud to be apart of the event, present Parry with his golden hammer, a prized possession rec-

### *Civic Franchising*

ognizing thirty years of service in his profession. And few overheard the heartfelt gratefulness expressed by Mayor Giuliani as he commended Parry and her Cyberangels for their nonstop efforts. Although the Illinois woman who originated the idea was unable to attend the ceremony, her presence was clearly felt. Thanks to her idea, thousands of volunteers in eleven states and a network of cyber volunteers brought the Christmas message of a unified and steadfast America to the world.

When used in reference to the expansion of hands-on grassroots social cures, the terms “replication” and “franchise” sound sterile, almost scientific, but civic franchising is anything but cold and sterile. Civic franchising encompasses much more than a handy way to multiply a solution. The impact of replication cannot be measured in dollars spent or in calculated growth rates. The true measure of a replicated effort comes with the number of lives that are changed.

We can be sure that in years to come many new twists will be added to today’s styles of civic franchising. Already, despite cutbacks caused by the 9/11 attacks and economic downturns, civic entrepreneurs are finding novel ways to expand their efforts. Tight budgets just motivate them to stop and look more closely at new options, including controversial ones like accepting government funding and working with profit making ventures. Steadfast and determined, civic entrepreneurs are resolved to make their solutions work. Quitting is never an option when it comes to rescuing those in need.

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*The Unsung Everyday Heroes  
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**Debra J. Berg**