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After a Century of Operations, a Charity Starts Its Growth Spurt

By Ben Gose

Proponents of a move to rapidly expand successful nonprofit programs — or "take them to scale" — tend to have in mind relatively new charities started by ambitious social entrepreneurs.

Yet few large nonprofit groups are growing as fast these days as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the 103-year-old organization that pairs young people with mentors. The charity arranged such one-on-one relationships for 242,000 children in the past year, nearly twice as many as it set up in 2000. And it is working to increase that number to 325,000 by 2012.

"We have to be careful not to think that the only people who are scaling are new entrepreneurs," says Jeffrey Bradach, managing partner of the Bridgespan Group, which is working with Big Brothers Big Sisters on its latest business plan. "They are a crucial segment, but there are also organizations that have been around a while, like Big Brothers Big Sisters, that are reaching really significant scale."

Positive Results

For decades, Big Brothers Big Sisters had plodded along with only modest growth, and what growth did occur was largely the work of local affiliates rather than the national office.

But in 1995, Public/Private Ventures, a nonprofit research organization that focuses on youth charities, came out with a report based on two years of research that found that children who were paired with a "big brother" or "big sister" were far less likely to use drugs or alcohol or skip school than were students in a control group. That independent study convinced members of the charity's board that they should figure out a way to include more children in the program.

In 1999, the board hired a new leader, Judith Vredenburgh, a seasoned executive with 22 years of experience in the retail business, to help the organization devise a strategy for growth. Ms. Vredenburgh earned a master's

degree in business administration from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1975 and went on to become chief executive of Chess King, a men's clothing store, and then senior vice president at the March of Dimes.

She was charged with reversing a revenue slide at the March of Dimes, and she succeeded, increasing revenue by 50 percent during her six years there before she left to join Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Ms. Vredenburg cajoles fund raisers with the mantra "no money, no matches," and relies heavily on data to make decisions. She describes the charity's overall approach as "big heart, tough mind."

"Judy came in and really helped take the organization to a new level," says T. Charles Pierson, chief executive of Big Brother Big Sisters of North Texas.

Ms. Vredenburg says the board deserves credit for committing to growth before recruiting her.

"It started with the will," she says. "If you don't have the will, you can't figure out the strategies to grow."

\$11.4-Million in Grants

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which has committed virtually all of its \$900-million endowment to helping youth-serving organizations spread their operations, has awarded Big Brothers Big Sisters of America \$11.4-million since the foundation adopted its new approach in 2000.

Much of the money has helped the charity expand its efforts to collaborate with local school districts. In the traditional approach the charity has used, it pairs a volunteer mentor with a child age 6 to 18, and the two agree to meet somewhere to talk, play a game, or share a pizza. But increasingly, Big Brothers Big Sisters establishes a partnership with a school district, and the volunteer comes to the school to meet with the student to talk in a classroom, library, or other setting.

The school arrangements have sharply increased the number of children who are referred to Big Brothers Big Sisters, accounting for more than 124,000 children paired with mentors per year, slightly exceeding the number of matches arranged through the traditional recruitment effort.

Paradoxically, consolidation within the Big Brothers Big Sisters network also has contributed to the charity's growth. In February 2003, the Dallas, Arlington, and Fort Worth chapters consolidated to form a single North Texas

chapter. In the four years since the merger, the number of children served by the chapter has risen more than 70 percent, to 6,400.

As a consolidated chapter, says Mr. Pierson, "we're able to connect with corporate partners who serve all of North Texas and didn't want to align with just Dallas or Arlington."