

Spotlight on: Women for Social Innovation

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Summary

A local giving circle, Women for Social Innovation (WSI), provides seed funding to innovative nonprofit organizations and projects serving women, girls or families in Philadelphia. Lending the experience and expertise of its giving circle members to grantees through mentorship and support, WSI is working to usher in the next generation of social innovators in the city.

Supporting Young Innovators

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You may know Nancy Moses as a contributing writer to the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal*, an expert in strategic management consulting and a veteran-about-town in the nonprofit sector. What you may not know is that she is also founder and chair of a new philanthropic initiative in Philadelphia.

Women for Social Innovation (WSI) is a giving circle of 23 women, committed to providing seed support to young

social innovators between the ages of 18 and 35.

According to its website, "Women for Social Innovation fosters philanthropic investments in emerging social innovators whose efforts hold promise for improving the lives of women, girls, or families in Greater Philadelphia" (Women for Social Innovation 2009). Founded in 2008, WSI gives an annual award called the Turning Point Prize to an innovative start-up and social entrepreneur. The \$15,000 prize is an incredible opportunity for young people with new ideas and clear strategy to make a difference in Philadelphia. Getting that first grant award can help a new entrepreneur move ideas into action.

What Is a Giving Circle?

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The Chronicle of Philanthropy reports, "Giving circles have grown in popularity over the past decade—their numbers have doubled since 2004, according to the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, which has identified well over 500 such groups in the United States—and may become even more appealing in a down economy" (Wasley 2009a). The concept of a giving circle, or, as WSI defines it, a "collaborative process of hands-on philanthropy," is fairly straightforward: individuals pool their resources and give to a cause chosen by the contributing members (Women for Social Innovation 2009). The concept promotes the belief that larger gifts created by

pooled resources make a greater philanthropic difference than smaller individual gifts. In addition, many argue that the process of collaborative decision-making in giving circles can foster new levels of philanthropic engagement more than the act of simply writing a check (Wasley 2009b).

But as anyone who has worked in philanthropy can tell you, philanthropic collaborations can be complicated, and philosophical differences can arise. Determining what amount each giving circle member should contribute, let alone picking a cause to support, can be a challenge. The structure of a giving circle demands trust and requires weighing diverse opinions about how to define social innovation, how to determine need and how best to effect social change—all topics that generate considerable debate among experts.

How WSI Took Shape

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WSI members Nancy Moses and Margaret Sadler met these sorts of challenges head-on and with thoughtful deliberation. Sadler described WSI's first year as a "slow but deliberate" process of research and development to determine what causes to support and to develop the trust necessary among members. WSI decided upon a minimum annual giving threshold of \$250 for women under 35 and \$1,000 for those 35 and older to make

participation in the circle accessible to individuals able to give at various levels. They researched other giving circle models in order to determine a level of funding and a cause for which their support could make a substantial difference and elicit the greatest impact.

Their research indicated that there were fewer philanthropic dollars available for new ideas and emerging innovators. "Every entrepreneur faces challenges, but we think young people face a few more," Moses explained. With a commitment to social change, WSI members settled upon providing seed funding to emerging social entrepreneurs as an avenue to "germinate new social innovators in Philadelphia" (Women for Social Innovation 2009). Through structured meetings and carefully thought through processes, the giving circle members defined roles and split responsibilities to create the structure for the annual Turning Point Prize.

One key question addressed in WSI's planning stage was choosing an institution to align with in order to fulfill the mission they had set for themselves. Women's Way, "the country's oldest and largest women's funding federation," was the best fit and agreed to act as WSI's umbrella organization. WSI is a Donor Advised Fund of Women's Way, a giving vehicle popular with community foundations and for-profit financial institutions as an alternative to starting one's own private foundation. Working through Women's Way requires WSI to align their mission with Women's Way's. However, Moses and Sadler clarified that

WSI accepts applications from men, in addition to women, as long as the proposed project is in line with improving the lives of women, girls or families in the Greater Philadelphia area.

In 2009, WSI awarded its first Turning Point Prize to Jamie Gauthier. Her project, "Mommy Grads," provides single-mother college students with resources and support to ensure academic success and economic mobility.

The Application Process

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All WSI applicants are required to submit an application in which they clearly define the problem their project seeks to address, state clear goals and impact, and describe sustainability and feasibility plans. When assessing all social innovation, questions inevitably arise: "Is this project really a new idea? Does the sector need yet another innovator"?

WSI addresses these concerns up front in its application: "Is this **idea new**? If other programs exist to address the same problem, how is your idea **significantly different from or significantly better** than other programs addressing the same problem?" For this reason, the WSI application can be a helpful resource and thought exercise for budding entrepreneurs as they endeavor to create new projects. While the application process is

thorough, it does not limit WSI from taking philanthropic risks, as exemplified by the 2010 winner, Jessica McKay, whose “Rock to the Future Program” provides free after-school music education and youth development programs to students ages 9–14. “Our 2010 finalists were incredible projects,” Moses explained, “but they didn’t need the support as much as this one did—we chose the riskiest.”

What Makes WSI Different?

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WSI stands out from other local giving circles because of the entrepreneurial spirit that their own members bring to the table. Most of the participating giving circle members are accomplished businesswomen, having forged successful careers at a time when women were rarer in leadership roles, and derive their acumen and spirit from having faced that challenge. These rich experiences, Moses and Sadler explained, enable WSI members to feel more connected to social impact investing, inspiring them to give back to the next generation by supporting young individuals who exhibit an entrepreneurial spirit.

Winners of the Turning Point Prize are offered mentoring and professional opportunities, and twice a year grantees are invited to present on their progress in person, in addition to submitting a final report. Breaking down the traditional walls between grantor and grantee, WSI strives to be a “support circle” to their prize winners, as they are

personally aware of the courage it takes to be a new innovator.

Listening to Moses and Sadler, it's clear that WSI's own governance is in line with the values they espouse and support. Moses has described her own leadership style as "as authentic and focused as possible" with an emphasis on collaborative work as team. Leadership, she explained, must be distributed and shared among the whole. "My success will come when I am no longer necessary," Moses stated.

Locally and nationally, from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Center for Economic Opportunity to the White House's Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, support for social innovation is on the rise, according to *The Economist* (Let's Hear Those Ideas 2010). However, "so far the enthusiasm for social entrepreneurship has run ahead of its effects. The problem has not been a lack of good ideas" but is "instead one of speed and scale. Successful innovations have spread slowly, if at all" (Let's Hear Those Ideas 2010). This is where WSI intends to make its impact, through not only its giving but also its messaging about scale. Moses and Sadler clearly believe in the giving circle model and advocate for its adaptability to other areas of social need. WSI has set its own cap for how many members it will accept, but is willing to advise new groups as they get started.

Sadler's advice for new giving circles is "move slowly, but deliberately, and set goals." WSI members also advise that determining what you are *not* going to support is harder than choosing what you *are* going to support. They encourage new giving circles to be clear about strategy and interests—e.g., do you support only clearly sustainable projects, or make a risky investment in a social entrepreneur?

WSI is a young organization, and it is still too early to assess the success of its innovators. Nevertheless, in the third year of the Turning Point Prize, WSI is advancing a meaningful philanthropic model. The giving circle members understand the passion and drive required to foster social innovation, as well as the strategies and planning needed to be successful. Philadelphia is fortunate to have them as new players on the funding scene, and this spring, WSI will deliver its third award, the 2011 Turning Point Prize, to Tracie Gilbert of The Empowered Mom's Think Tank.

Nancy Moses is the Principal of Nancy Moses Planning + Development, which develops business planning for nonprofits and cultural plans for communities. The firm's strategic, feasibility, marketing and fundraising plans help organizations and communities start up, revitalize and build on their heritage. The author of the award-winning *Lost in the Museum: Hidden Treasures and the Stories They Tell*, Moses has written op-eds and articles that have appeared in *The Wall Street*

Journal, Boston Globe, BaltimoreSun, Philadelphia Inquirer and many other publications. Moses holds a master's degree in American Civilization from The George Washington University. She serves on the Leadership Council of Pennsylvania Hospital, as Chair of Women for Social Innovation and as a long-time member of the Union League of Philadelphia and Forum of Executive Women.

Margaret Sadler was most recently a global Human Resource Executive with FMC Corporation, with headquarters in Philadelphia, and Vice President of HR and Marketing Communications for a division of ITT in St. Paul, Minnesota. While living in St. Paul, she was chair of the Civil Service Commission and President of Ramsey Hill Association. As an executive volunteer she serves on the Executive Committee of the Council of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and is a Trustee of the Women's Law Project. She chairs the Marketing Committee for Women for Social Innovation and is active in WIL of Philadelphia, the Forum of Executive Women and other organizations supporting a better Philadelphia. She holds a bachelor of arts degree in English from Youngstown State University.

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