

Social Venture Partners Boulder County: Getting to 20

By Sabine Kortals Stein

Five years ago, in our report “[Getting to 15](#),” we reported on key milestones in the history of our social change enterprise.

Today, as Social Venture Partners (SVP) Boulder County celebrates 20 years of philanthropic changemaking countywide, we find ourselves in a notably new landscape of shifting community needs and dynamic opportunities for local engagement among SVP Partners, staff, and nonprofits.

In gratitude for the relevant and representative perspectives shared by current CEO Joshua Silberstein, former CEO Jennie Arbogash, Partner and former Board Chair Peter Spear, Vice Chair Amy Maranowicz, and former Chief Relationship Officer Shannon Sackmann, this update to “Getting to 15” highlights our collective accomplishments over the last five years – and where we go from here.

At SVP Boulder County, we bring good business practices to good causes. Among such good business practices is our increasing momentum and focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. That means more intentionally prioritizing the diversity of all SVP stakeholders – from our Partner network to the nonprofits we support. It also means adding new programs for our Partners and nonprofits, and increasing volunteer opportunities around DEI work – which, in turn, fosters an ever-deepening sense of connection, community, innovation, and advancement within and among local nonprofits.

In addition to achieving its 501(c)(3) status, and developing and implementing a new strategic plan (2018-2022), SVP also identified and implemented a greater emphasis on organizational sustainability and culture, replacing and building upon our previous emphasis on growth. That required substantial restructuring of programs and staffing, as well as a significant shift in Partners’ valuing programs beyond our longer-term [Catapult](#) investments and [Invested Leaders](#) program.

“Relationships are the bedrock of SVP Boulder County,” says Arbogash. “Strengthening connections and relationships across all SVP stakeholders are at the root of the changes we’ve made in the last five years, thereby creating more meaningful engagement for our Partners and greater impact for the nonprofits we serve.”

Continues Arbogash, “As reflected in our Strategic Plan, SVP is fundamentally different than it was five years ago. We’re doing so much more to educate and engage SVP Partners at a much deeper level. For Partners and local nonprofits alike, we’ve created more layers of learning...and learning together.

“I’m truly excited about SVP’s potential in the next 20 years, as we refine the critical role we play toward achieving a more just and equitable community. I see this playing out in a number of ways: by deconstructing the power dynamic of philanthropy and the nonprofit sector; by eliminating biases in the systems, structures, and practices that underlie so many of our institutions; by shifting the paradigm from treating the problem to preventing the problem; and by bringing together local leaders and influencers across sectors to more holistically address our community concerns – and to more effectively establish our own thought leadership standing, countywide.

“Where we used to be more transactional, SVP has moved into a really dynamic and richly responsive stage, where we’re poised to nimbly support short-term, urgent needs as they arise, as well as anticipate future needs.”

Indeed, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Boulder County, our volunteer-powered network immediately sprung into action, eagerly heeding the call of our community. Beginning April 2020, SVP Partners, board, and staff came together to provide support to local nonprofits for pandemic-related issues.

Partners took ownership, lending both their time and expertise to help local nonprofit leaders navigate a range of concerns and uncertainties due to COVID-19, supporting them in making difficult decisions about their organizations and staffs. Specifically, our experienced, committed Partners provided insights into strategy and government funding, fundraising and development, personal and organizational well-being, board performance, leadership, and more. [Learn more in our [COVID-19 Response Report](#).]

SVP’s COVID-19 Response Task Force not only expanded both Partner engagement and the number of nonprofits we serve; the experience also helped us gain greater awareness of how we can continue to increase Partner engagement across more Boulder County nonprofits. Indeed, our new [Resource Teams](#) aim to tackle short-term projects tailored to nonprofits’ specific needs.

Agrees Spear, “In last five years, we greatly expanded our programs to connect with and support our community more broadly. We came to understand that there are nonprofits in our community that need support, but not necessarily the whole menu of services we provide through our Catapult investments. We realized we could help with organizational assessments, fundraising, board development, human resources issues, and other distinct challenges – that’s how the Resource Teams came to be, both benefitting more nonprofits and providing more opportunities for Partner engagement.

“As a result of our deepening culture of collaboration, SVP Partners are increasingly and uniquely positioned to provide *pro bono* consulting, working with a wide variety of nonprofits to help weather the pandemic and solve other time-sensitive challenges.”

Spear also notes the work yet to be done in order for SVP Boulder County to achieve more diversified income streams, and that progress thereto is already underway.

In her former role as Chief Relationship Officer, Sackmann’s key responsibilities comprised Partner engagement and growth. “It was a huge shift for the organization,” she recalls. “When I started, Partners didn’t feel like they needed to be social – they just wanted to do the work. But by the time I left, we went from some 30 attendees at Partner socials to 60 or 70 participants, many of whom were prospects.

“We did a membership campaign, which had never been done before, and we organized education sessions over a six-month period. These efforts not only made Partners feel more welcome and gave community members the chance to get to know SVP, but we also expanded community awareness of SVP...and shifted the mindset of our Partners along the way.

“They realized they all really liked and respected one another, which deepened their engagement. That led to making our organization even more welcoming by adding more entry-points for

becoming a member – which, in turn, plays into SVP’s ever more caring and collaborative culture, and its increasing emphasis on DEI work.”

Adding her perspective on SVP’s last five years, Maranowicz says she’s seen “significant growth and evaluation in who we are.”

“We expanded our approach to how we’re serving our community,” she explains. “At the same time, we’ve taken steps to expand our Partner network. And we created different opportunities and pathways to become a Partner, which has created greater diversity in our network – in terms of backgrounds, lived experiences, skills, and knowledge –, and which has really evolved our organization.

“We spent a lot of time identifying more Partner relationship building and engagement opportunities to more strategically intensify SVP’s role as a philanthropic change agent, especially in our current climate or racial tensions, and other social determinants that underlie entrenched community challenges.

“By walking side-by-side with area nonprofits and community members, we become a more thriving Boulder County. To leverage our collective impact, these past five years have positioned us to ask ‘Who are the voices we haven’t heard from?’ and ‘How are these voices part of creating our future?’”

The Next 20

“SVP Boulder County is a living organism that’s poised to respond and adapt to our times – including understanding and overcoming biases, and helping to address such complex issues as systemic racism, right here in our own backyard,” says Silberstein. “It’s my job to listen, to learn together with you, and to ensure that our Partners’ energy, experience, time, and treasure are applied in ways that best benefit all SVP stakeholders – and that position SVP as our community’s go-to resource for nonprofits.” [\[Read more about our new CEO’s vision for SVP Boulder County.\]](#)