



THE FAIRY GOODMOTHER

Naomi Eisenberg and the Good People Fund give money, time and mentorship to small nonprofits of good people doing good deeds



A Bounty for Sharing

Organization: AmpleHarvest.org

Founder and director: Gary Oppenheimer, 58

Created: March 2009, incorporated April 2010

Ah-ha moment: “I realized the combined problem of both hunger in the country and the challenge of too many gardeners growing excess food, which was going to waste.”

Mission: To enable the more than 40 million people who grow food in home gardens to be able to find a neighborhood food pantry where they can donate excess garden produce (which Oppenheimer estimates could be billions of pounds), using an easy search on AmpleHarvest.org.

How the Good People Fund helped: Funding early and ongoing incidentals and start-up costs to get the non-profit off the ground, offering guidance and mentorship. Has funded a free AmpleHarvest.org iPhone app and is funding one for the Android, currently in development, among other projects. “I can’t imagine Naomi touching anything that doesn’t touch the gold. That’s how she operates. This is not an impersonal foundation. It’s more like you’re being adopted by somebody and they’re going to give you college money, but you still have a home to go back to.”

Proud moment: Becoming a CNN Hero in April 2010.

Newest additions: A “gleaning” component on the Web site, in which home gardeners can search for a local gleaning organization, who will harvest the gardener’s excess produce for them free of charge so they can donate it. Also, gardeners will be able to print from the Web site an information sheet about their fruit or vegetable to include with their donation, so recipients know just what they’ve received.

Current standing: About 3,400 food pantries nationwide have registered with AmpleHarvest.org’s network. That’s about one-tenth of all U.S. food pantries. Oppenheimer’s goal is 10,000 pantries, or about one in three, in the network within three years.



WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHEN

nonprofits are more ubiquitous than Starbucks coffee shops, and the larger ones inundate mailboxes everywhere with pleas for money in exchange for some personalized return address labels. Considering the sheer number of “mega charities” out there, it can be hard to determine which are run by good people doing truly good things who put donated funds to work with minimal overhead.

Naomi Eisenberg, executive director of the Good People Fund, has a knack for sniffing out those gems that often go undetected by the larger population of donors with money to give.

Eisenberg, frequently called a fairy godmother (though *goodmother* might be more appropriate) by the directors of the grantee charities she supports, incorporated the Good People Fund as

a nonsectarian — but very Jewishly influenced — 501(c)(3) in January 2008. It was her intent to discover and support small nonprofits who are trying to do their bit toward *tikkun olam* and *tzedakah* with few resources, to guide and mentor those grantees and to educate others about the process and power of helping others.

“We look for grassroots,” says the New Jersey resident. “Our focus is good people. There are many wonderful small programs out there, but what differentiates us is that each program is started by an individual or small group of people who are responding to a need they have come across. Something in their life has brought them to start what they’ve started.”

In fact, it was prior experience volunteering, and then working, with a similar boutique nonprofit for about 16 years that inspired Eisenberg to establish the Good People Fund.

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feature story

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When Dan Segal, director of Ziv Tzedakah Fund, whose mission mirrored that of the Good People Fund, announced his retirement and the board decided to close, Eisenberg, a board member at Ziv, “blurted out” within 30 seconds that she was starting over, “because it was too important to end. I wasn’t ready to retire, and all the programs we supported were small. They were grassroots, and it was really a very big loss for many of them. It was also a loss for many of our donors, who had come to rely on us for the very distinct type of *tzedakah* work we did.”

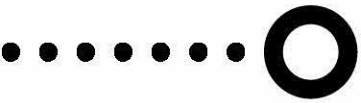
Eisenberg immediately reached out to Ziv’s donors and grantees, taking many of them with her to the Good People Fund. When you understand the operating principles at work at the Good People Fund, their eagerness to make the transition is no surprise.

“I think when someone makes a gift to the Good People Fund, they can rest assured that only a tiny percentage goes for administration,” says Allen Katzoff, one of the organization’s seven volunteer board members. “Naomi is the only paid staff person, and even her salary is a designated grant. The money goes to end users, and many of the organizations we support are similar. Many are volunteer run, or they have very small staffs, and so they do the same thing, basically. It’s a flow-through to the end user, and the recipient gets a tremendous percentage of the money given. That’s the beauty of supporting small organizations.”

According to Katzoff, the Good People Fund supports two types of organizations. First are the small, mostly volunteer-run nonprofits who are doing great work serving specific populations — the hungry, the poor, the sick. They don’t really have ambitions to grow — they’re just doing the work that needs to be done. The second type of organization, Katzoff says, is more like small start-ups. They have very transformative ideas that could one day play a part in citizens’ everyday lives.

“Once they get big enough and they’re attracting larger gifts from others,” Katzoff says, “the Good People Fund then moves on to find other small organizations. We want to help them stand on their own two feet and move up to the next level.”

Part of that process is serving as a mentor and teacher to the directors of the grantee nonprofits — a job that falls to Eisenberg.



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“I have a unique set of skills I’ve developed over 18 years of working with small nonprofits,” says Eisenberg, who, prior to that, was also a high school U.S. history teacher, a mom, a plant doctor and an entrepreneur in needlepoint, craftwork and men’s clothing. “They have unique problems and situations, so I spend a considerable amount of my time giving them concrete advice on how they should operate with efficiency and transparency....For most of the programs we work with, we develop a very strong personal relationship, and we’re there through the good times and the not so good times. Our wish is that every program we work with outgrow us, and that they grow to a certain point where they can flourish without our funds.”



Part of building that personal relationship means Eisenberg and her board members make sure they visit in person each of the organizations they support on a regular basis. In early March, she’d just returned from a trip to Israel to meet with the organizations the Good People Fund supports there.

“It’s very important to us that the funds we donate have an impact,” Eisenberg says. “We always contribute funds for specific needs, and we like to know those funds are making a considerable difference. We do a tremendous amount of due diligence. We demand a lot of transparency from the programs we work with.”

Adds Katzoff, “Many of these organizations’ [directors] are people who are interested in doing good work. Some of them are volunteering full time. These are amazing people, and it’s always humbling being in their presence when I meet them. But they don’t necessarily have business or even nonprofit backgrounds, so they need help running their organization. They need advice, and Naomi has learned to be an amazing mentor to them. She helps them, gives them advice, refers them to all sorts of resources or just brainstorms with them...On top of all that, the Good People Fund provides them with funding. In another industry, we might be called a turnkey operation.”

Eisenberg, who works out of what was once her son’s bedroom, devotes her schedule full-time to finding, mentoring and supporting the approximately 60 organizations the Good People Fund supports.

Of those nonprofits, many are either started and run by Jews or focused on helping segments of the Jewish community. The organization is tied up in Jewish values. Its roots, for example, lie in Maimonides-inspired *tzedakah*. Through third-party assistance and donations, the final recipients

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