

Charity Finds Success in Work With At-Risk Children, but It's Costly



Duncan Campbell, left, the founder of a charity for at-risk children, Friends of the Children, with Jimmy Tyrrell, a graduate of the program, outside the organization's headquarters in Portland, Ore. Credit: Leah Nash for The New York Times

By Paul Sullivan

Jan. 25, 2019

Duncan Campbell made his fortune with a timber investment fund he started in 1981 and sold eight years later. But he never forgot his difficult childhood in Portland, Ore., with alcoholic parents and a father who was in and out of prison twice.

So when he had the time and wherewithal to devote to philanthropy in 1993, he said, he chose to tackle a problem he knew about: improving the lives of children at greatest risk — not the top students at underperforming schools, but the struggling ones who faced multiple impediments to success. That is the story behind [Friends of the Children](#), which began in Portland and is now in 15 cities with plans to be in 10 more by 2025.

“Our core model is to take the most at-risk or most vulnerable child,” Mr. Campbell said. “If there are 100 kindergarten kids, we ask for the eight most troubled, most challenging ones.”

The organization has won plaudits from groups like the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a philanthropy for poor children, and researchers at Stanford and the University of Washington.

The organization has managed to address three persistent challenges that philanthropists at all levels face. How can private money meaningfully influence a societal problem? How can successes be replicated? And how do you get other philanthropists to support what was essentially your idea?

Mr. Campbell said he wanted to give a sense of stability to children who may not have it at home. His organization hires a mentor, or friend, to work with just eight children, who are selected in kindergarten and are expected to remain with the program until they finish high school. The cost per child each year works out to about \$10,000.

The friends are paid a wage equivalent to or slightly higher than teachers’ salaries in the first years of their careers. And they spend four hours every week with each of their eight students — two hours in the classroom and two helping them in a variety of activities, such as doing homework and going to museums and sporting events they couldn’t afford.

From the start, Friends of Children logged data for all of these activities to get a sense of what was working and what wasn’t. It found that the intensive interaction helped build trust, increased the children’s positive social behavior and was more likely to keep the children out of trouble.

In many cases, the children’s relationship with their parent or caregiver improved. A recent study by researchers at the University of Washington and Washington State University found that the paid mentor approach provided children and their caregivers with a “consistency and continuity” that was critical to the program’s success.

But the data wasn’t always positive. The selection of who got to be mentors made a difference. They had to value education. They also had to be empathetic.

One person “did a great interview, but after first six or nine months he wasn’t connecting with the children,” Mr. Campbell said. “He eventually became a parole officer.”

After the program had success in Portland, it began to expand to other cities with a ready-made offering.

“When we go to new cities, as long as they keep the core, we’re willing to let them experiment with it,” Mr. Campbell said. “It’s fidelity to the model versus learning and adapting over the past 25 years.”

The Los Angeles chapter, for example, is focused on at-risk children of people who grew up in the foster-care system. The chapter in Austin, Tex., was the first to translate all the materials into Spanish and hired native Spanish speakers as mentors. The one in Chicago focused on the problem of gang violence.

“We’ve had different community solutions within the same program,” said Terri Sorensen, chief executive of Friends of the Children.



Mr. Tyrrell, right, credits the Friends program with helping him deal with a variety of family issues, including the murder of his father when he was 2. Credit: Leah Nash for The New York Times

Kim Starkey Jonker, chief executive of [King Philanthropies](#) and a lecturer at Stanford’s business school, has written about Friends in her book “Engine of Impact.” She said the organization’s focus on one mentor for eight children helped it succeed and get results that could be replicated.

“Focus is so important,” she said. “Nonprofits stretch themselves too thin.”

At the same time, Ms. Jonker said, the national organization knew what it could do well for all the chapters — centralized data collection, marketing, accounting and other back office work — and allowed chapters to adapt to their communities.

“Frequently, tensions tear apart nonprofits,” she said.

The national organization reached out to professionals who were already established in the cities where there was interest in starting a chapter. The executive director of the Los Angeles chapter, Thomas Lee, had 20 years of experience in child welfare there before joining Friends last year.

Mr. Lee was skeptical of the program at first, he said, but was won over by the small mentor-to-child ratio, the competitive pay that would attract qualified candidates and the organization’s ability to retain mentors for seven years, on average.

“It’s better not to have a mentor than to have one for a short time,” he said. “It’s common for some kids to bounce around foster home to foster home six, eight, 15 times. That doesn’t help create the strategies for long-term success that we’d want.”

James Tyrrell, 29, went through the Friends program in Portland and had the same mentor, John Foster, the entire time. He credits it with helping him deal with the murder of his father when he was 2, his mother’s leaving him with her parents and addiction problems in his family.

“It was consistency with that one positive adult in my life,” said Mr. Tyrrell, a court clerk south of Portland. “If I didn’t have him, I don’t know where I’d be.”

He added that his mentor had told him, “You know where this path leads, and you can go for it, but why not try this one over here?” That’s what he did, said Mr. Tyrrell, who graduated from college, moved away from his family and now has a wife and two children.

David Shapiro, chief executive of Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership and a board member of Friends, said that Friends chose its mentors well but that mass-producing those bonds was difficult.

“It’s much easier at a McDonald’s to say, ‘Wear the uniform, and cook the fries at 112 degrees,’” Mr. Shapiro said. “With humans, it’s a lot more difficult to standardize things, and every human service agency is trying to figure that out now.”

One of the criticisms of Friends is how expensive it is to reach one child in a given year, let alone over 12½ years. And getting other donors to give money to someone else’s idea is also difficult.

Friends has succeeded with donors who are driven by data and measurable results. It may also help that the charity focuses its marketing material on what it has achieved and aims to do, not on Mr. Campbell's largess.

The organization also requires every chapter to raise three years of operating expenses — about \$1.5 million — before it can start work. No more than 40 percent of that money can come from one person, to ensure that the program has broad support.

Most recently, Friends [received a multimillion-dollar grant](#) over several years from the basketball great Michael Jordan that will go toward chapters in Chicago and Charlotte, N.C. It has received funding in Seattle and Los Angeles from the former Microsoft chief executive Steve Ballmer and his wife, Connie.

Rachel Arnold, a partner at the private equity firm Vista Equity Partners, helped [start a chapter in Austin, Tex.](#), with her friend Nancy Pollard by raising \$1.8 million from 50 families.

“Most of the donors hadn't given to a program like this before,” Ms. Arnold said. “We got donors on both sides of the political spectrum. It had that broad appeal and data behind it.”

Since 2017, when the chapter started, Ms. Arnold's group has raised \$4 million.

“If I'm going to invest my time and money into a program, I want to see that impact,” she said. “It also really resonated,” she added, because “I know it to be true that it only takes one person to change a child's life.”