

Boomers and Nesters: Finding Reconciliation in the Nonprofit Enterprise

By Patrick DelHomme

When I made my pilgrimage to the West, I wasn't in search of gold or silver; it was wildness I was after. I romanticized the towering mountains and abundant wildlife of the West through PBS documentaries and hunting magazines read on my lunch breaks in southern Alabama. When I arrived to make beds and scrub toilets in the cabins that dot places like Old Faithful and Canyon in Yellowstone National Park, I soon realized I was not alone. College-aged kids from around the world flocked to Yellowstone to eat lousy cafeteria food, receive wages that barely put beer on the table, and experience the majesty of Yellowstone's wildness. A landscape loving "boomer" was alive and well in the hearts and ambitions of young people not just from the US, but the world.

As winter approached, I chose to forgo returning to Alabama and settled in Bozeman to realize my dream of living in the West. It didn't take long to see that making my fortune in Bozeman was not going to happen. I had no down payment to invest in property, nor did I have any capital to start up another ski shop. Tired of working service jobs that catered to the tourists, I wondered what else was out there. What could allow me to stake my claim in the landscape of the West, or as Stegner would say, "nest"? How would I balance the boomer and the nester in myself? After a long, hard look at my options, I found the key to reconciliation lay not necessarily in the legacy of the West's boom and bust mentality, but in the philanthropic enterprise of the private nonprofit.

Robert Gassler in his book, *The Economics of Nonprofit Enterprise*, distinguishes between two types of nonprofits: the private nonprofit and the public nonprofit. He explains that the public nonprofit consists of national, provincial, and local governments like the Army, the Forest Service, or a local parks and recreation department. The private nonprofit consists of just about everything else not in the profit-making business, like the Trout Unlimited and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

Although there are many private nonprofits in the West, my first personal experience with one in particular came from an organization dedicated to Montana's environment and communities. The Montana Conservation Corps (MCC), a private nonprofit willing to give me a modest living allowance and money for school, afforded me the luxury of combining my desire to experience the Western landscape with my need to hang my hat in one place for a while. I returned to Yellowstone this time not to scrub toilets but to spend a month building a trail re-route on Specimen Ridge. I dug up dinosaur fossils with Jack Horner and his crew in the sandstone cliffs of eastern Montana. I slept under the band of the Milky Way more than I slept under the sheetrock in my apartment. MCC gave me my wildness, but it did even more.

MCC allowed me to interact with Montana communities across the state in a way that pulled both my crew together as well as those communities. In the small community of Boulder, we worked with area volunteers and at-risk youth to build compost bins that we distributed free to anyone willing to stop their truck and learn about composting. In that same community, we organized local volunteers to help construct badly needed playgrounds. In Missoula, we worked with community members to build Habitat for Humanity homes. Together, with my crew and local volunteers, we participated in bettering our habitat and invested in the future of the communities served. In effect, the projects left those participating communities and us with a feeling of accomplishment.

Gassler offers that some of our pride from these activities is inherent in the nature of the private nonprofit. "Profit enterprises can afford a mixture that contains only a little benevolence and a preponderance of selfishness," he explains. "Not so with the nonprofit enterprise...they [nonprofits] have strong elements of benevolence as a result. Too much selfishness is an abuse of its purposes" (53). Whereas profit enterprises provide for the general economic growth of a community, the nonprofit enterprise fills a niche that adds to the overall social well-being of that community. In short, the private nonprofit "straddles the economic system and its environment" (17). This tension created between the private nonprofit and the profit-making enterprise doesn't create stress on either organization; the tension strengthens both enterprises by involving the booming, industrious nature of the profit-making enterprise with the community-building nature of the nonprofit.

MCC is an organization that allowed me to exist for only a limited time in the West, for the term lasted only the summer months. When my term was over, I

turned my sights to yet another non-profit that provided a rather unique type of community service. I began work with Reach, Inc., a Bozeman-based nonprofit that according to their mission “supports the adults with disabilities whom [they] serve to attain their individual goals and aspirations.”

Created over 20 years ago, Reach has since served both adults with disabilities as well as the Bozeman community. As a group home instructor with Reach, part of my job was to involve the clients in their community. Whether I was encouraging them to attend the Sweet Pea Festival or monitoring their job at MSU, I always saw them take a certain amount of pride in the accomplishments that they made each day. Like all of us, every individual at Reach has his or her own mountain to climb. Every activity brought new challenges and successes for both the clients and the community of Bozeman that we were a part.

Reach thrives on the faith from local businesses to hire adults with disabilities, and this is where a collaborative effort between profit-making and nonprofit making enterprises is vital. In a recent issue of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, an article discussing collaboration stated that, “for our [nonprofit] programs to remain responsive to the community as well as the individuals it encompasses, we must be in constant dialogue with the people we serve and the other institutions that also touch their lives“ (6). Reach promotes dialogue in the community about adults with disabilities by getting those individuals out into the community as part of the workforce. Everyone takes something away from the experience. For the Reach clients, they are living not in the confines of an institution, but as members of the community. For their co-workers, they are given a perspective on life not afforded to most. Best of all, it’s a win-win situation where the non-profit is fulfilling its mission, while the profit-making enterprise is utilizing the work force provided by the nonprofit.

Both MCC and Reach, Inc. are organizations that are community-based. Without the community to support them, they would not exist. The same goes with profit-making enterprises like Wal-mart or McDonald’s. These companies have harnessed the boomer mentality and made their fortunes. Inevitably though, the industrious nature of the boomer comes at a cost.

Desert essayist Edward Abbey wrote that, “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.” While he was obviously cursing the destruction of his desert southwest, he was onto an idea that transcends more than just landscapes. All too often business enterprise grows for the sake of itself without taking into account the ramifications of its own growth. Whether it is people or natural

resources, something is all too often inherently exploited when profits are made. Granted, this type of positive economic growth is needed for communities to thrive financially, but it shouldn't be the focal point of a society. The profit-making agenda needs a counter weight to balance the goals of business with the needs and desires of the community in which it operates. Herein lies the nature and the purpose of the private nonprofit enterprise—balance.

As it has for years in the past, the future of the communities in the West teeters delicately between the boomer and the nester. I came West searching for golden alpine sunsets. I wanted to drink in the landscape and get drunk off of the scenery. I soon sobered up from my romantic bliss to realize I wanted more than just intoxicating scenery; I wanted to live and work in the sunsets. I wanted to find a place to roost and grow some roots for a while. As I worked and lived in Bozeman, I began to realize that the nonprofit was doing more than reconciling the tension of the boomer and nester in myself. Nonprofits were and still are reconciling that tension in Western society. They are investing in the social and human capital of societies by pulling them together to improve the communities in which they live. As a complementary element to profit-making enterprises, private nonprofits help bring together the goals of the boomer and the nester in the rapidly growing communities of a new West.

Works Cited

Gassler, Robert Scott (1986) *The Economics of Nonprofit Enterprise*. Maryland: University Press of America.

“Collaboration: A Generosity of Spirit.” (2001, Fall) *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. pp. 6-10.