Nonprofit Shares

This former lawyer left the courtroom for good to help teen mothers. Her career move was well worth the risk.

September 5, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

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Age: 38
Occupation: Founder and Executive Director of The Brooklyn Young Mother's Colletctive

Time for Change: After graduating from Syracuse University, I moved to New York and started working as a legal aid attorney in Brooklyn's Family Court. I saw that the same young black and Latina mothers fighting to get their kids back had also been in the foster care system—as were their parents. Because of numerous factors—the '80's crack epidemic, substandard education, lack of services—their children were now part of the system too.

The "Aha" Moment: My parents were teen parents, but they made it because they had support and people who believed in them. So, I started leading high school workshops that focused on teaching teens better parenting skills and how women should respond when the police or social services come into their homes to interrogate them.

One day while witnessing a mother who had just given birth [and was] frantic that the city was going to take her newborn away, it hit me: I wasn't part of the solution, I was part of the problem. Immediately, I quit my job and decided to take this idea about empowerment and skill sets for young mothers and turn it into a full-fledged organization.

Harder Than You Think: When I started applying for grants, I was initially turned down, which was typical, but the reasoning for it took me aback. I was told, "We did teenage pregnancy already and it didn't work." Nevertheless, I kept applying for grants, making my case. Thankfully, The New York Women's Foundation, the New York Foundation, United Way of New York City and others understood my vision and took a chance on it.

The Big Payback: We serve over 3,000 girls who access our leadership's wellness and advocacy programs that teach them they are more than "baby mamas" and "welfare queens"; they are givers and contributors to their community and society as a whole. And it seems to be working. We've helped over 11 girls get accepted into college.

BENITA’S TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- Distinguish your local organization. Find out if other groups are already doing the same work as you. If there are, you can partner with them or highlight your organization’s unique mission.
- Have a business plan. Nonprofits are more than “good” ideas. You have to compete for funding, resources and space with other older, more well-established organizations. That’s why it’s important to be organized and proficient in grant writing.
- No is never no; it means not right now. This work is about building relationships with individual funders—some of the same people who told us no in the beginning fund us now.

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