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A Veteran Antipoverty Activist Finds a Cheaper Way to Achieve Results

Maurice Lim Miller created the Family Independence Initiative to help needy people set their own path to reaching the middle class.

By Caroline Preston



Back in the 1990s, Maurice Lim Miller had plenty of reasons to feel a professional high. The San Francisco social-services group he had helped to expand from six employees to 120 was considered one of the country's most effective. In 1999 his work to show people how to overcome poverty was honored in President Bill Clinton's State of the Union address.

But the praise didn't sit right with Mr. Miller.

The children of the people his group had helped out of poverty a decade earlier were showing up at its doors. And the organization was spending what Mr. Miller considered unsustainable amounts: about \$14,000 a year to help an individual increase his or her income by just 8 percent.

"We were getting a lot of accolades and awards, but I wasn't sure we were breaking the cycle of poverty," he says.

In 2001 Mr. Miller started a research project to test an alternative approach. Behind his thinking was the belief that poor people are resourceful, so why not shift the responsibility to them?

Mr. Miller wondered what would happen if, instead of paying for professional caseworkers, some of the money went directly to families and they were allowed to set their own goals.

Participants in the program attend a picnic sponsored by the group.

Photographs courtesy of Family Independence



Participants in the project attend a picnic sponsored by FII

The result of that experiment is the Family Independence Initiative, a \$2-million charity that has run pilot projects in Oahu, Hawaii; Oakland, Calif.; and San Francisco, and expands to Boston this year.

Mr. Miller's ideas—and the strong initial results he has achieved while spending far less money than traditional charities—have intrigued a small but growing group of donors frustrated with the failure of other attempts to reduce poverty in the United States.

Helping Themselves

The Family Independence Initiative focuses on the working poor, people who are often left out of other charity and government programs because they are not quite needy enough. It is based on the notion that friendships and social networks, not caseworkers, are key to people's success.

The charity recruits at local churches, community organizations, laundromats, and other businesses for groups of families who can turn to each other for support.

Its staff members—just five people nationwide—challenge the participants to set goals for improving their lives. The family members can win small amounts of money if they meet the goals, like \$25 when a child improves his grades or \$50 when a participant enrolls in a health-insurance plan. But staff members and participants say the money isn't what makes the difference; it's the process of giving poor people control.

Mr. Miller believes that donors' failure to recognize the strengths of low-income people—and instead being preoccupied with poor people's problems—is one big reason that antipoverty programs often fail.

The families in his program report on their progress, and four times a year, consultants hired by the charity verify report cards, bank statements, and other information. If the families have questions—how to find a probate lawyer or where to look for a new job—the nonprofit employees encourage them to ask others they know before they turn to the organization for help.

Meeting Skepticism

Tamara Jones, a 38-year-old single mother in San Francisco, enrolled in the program in 2007 because she wanted to get a better job and buy a house.

Once a month, she completed reports on her progress and met with other families in the program—all people she knew before she became part of the Family Independence Initiative.

Ms. Jones used cash awards received through the program to take a week off from her job at a child-care center to train as a bus driver, a job that pays her in the mid-\$40,000s, significantly more than her previous salary of \$36,000.

Ms. Jones's case is not an isolated one: The results of the charity's pilot projects in Oahu and Oakland have been impressive. Participants saw their incomes (a median of \$26,000 for a family of four in the San Francisco pilot) rise by 20 percent in less than two years. Children's grades increased; household debt dropped.

To get those results, the Family Independence Initiative spent just \$3,000 per family—\$2,000 for the cash awards and \$1,000 to cover staff-member support and the computers the families use to share their progress.

Mr. Miller sometimes draws skepticism about whether his group aids people who would probably succeed without help.

Indeed, the group does not concentrate on the poorest of the poor and people in crisis, whom Mr. Miller says sometimes do need traditional kinds of support.

But, he says, the way charities have typically chosen people for their programs has held communities back. This hit home for him one day years ago at the anti-poverty charity where he spent most of his career.

Mr. Miller was enrolling gang members in a job-training program and had only one more spot. He gave the position to a young man who'd been in prison for armed robbery rather than the man's friend, who had never been incarcerated.

When Mr. Miller explained why he had to make that decision—because the charity's criteria favored people who'd been in trouble and seemed to need the most help—the chosen man nudged his friend and said, "See, you should have come on that job with me." It was then Mr. Miller realized the message his group was sending.

Donors on the Rise

Supported for years by a handful of wealthy individuals and grant makers, the Family Independence Initiative is now getting attention from more and more donors.

In Boston, it is the cornerstone of a new \$15-million antipoverty effort called Boston Rising, through which it has received \$800,000 over four years from the Eos Foundation.

The fund was started by Ken Nickerson, a hedge-fund manager who was inspired by the success of Harlem Children's Zone in getting New York's financial elite interested in fighting poverty.

The Boston Foundation has pledged \$450,000 over the next three years, and last month a Boston grant maker that did not want its name disclosed gave \$990,000.

The Family Independence Initiative is also exploring the idea of a project in New Orleans, where families familiar with its work in Oakland have asked the charity to help.

‘He’s Lived That Reality’

The flurry of recent grants notwithstanding, it can take a long time to convince donors, particularly foundations, that the charity’s approach deserves an investment. Mr. Miller says that is in part because his group does not provide a specific service or fit neatly into the way foundations allot money.

“It’s hard to get your head wrapped around it,” agrees Virginia Romano, program director of human services at the Kresge Foundation, in Troy, Mich., which made a \$450,000, three-year grant in 2008. “When I went out to California to do a site visit, it’s not like there was a building to walk into or caseworkers providing services. You go into the community and you sit down and have coffee with the families.”

Whatever their reason for first getting interested in the charity, most supporters are ultimately won over by Mr. Miller himself.

“Maurice is an outstanding thinker who has developed this program based on his own life experience,” says Geeta Pradhan, director of programs at the Boston Foundation. “It’s very powerful that he’s lived that reality and understands it.”

Mr. Miller was raised in Oakland by his Mexican-born mother, who divorced his father when her son was 2. He sees many of his family’s problems stemming from the fact that his mother had to work two jobs and didn’t get the support she needed. She was a plucky, courageous woman—the kind of person Mr. Miller seeks to help—but in working to keep her children out of poverty she was often absent.

When Mr. Miller’s older sister was 16, she got pregnant and moved out of the house to live with her boyfriend. His mother was devastated. She focused on getting Mr. Miller into college, and he graduated with an engineering degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1968.

When his mother died in 1972, Mr. Miller blamed her poor health on poverty. A few years later, he left engineering work and took a job with a charity called Asian Neighborhood Design, helping former gang members find employment.

But gradually he started to feel that the work wasn’t solving anything. The people served by his charity were influenced more by their friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends than by anything a caseworker could say or do. Frustrated, Mr. Miller thought about starting a dating service because it seemed to have better odds of fostering positive ties between people than his charity work.

On Their Own Terms

Around the same time, his sister's son was struggling with drug addiction. It wasn't until Mr. Miller let his nephew pick his own clinic and enroll on his own terms that the young man was finally able to complete a drug-treatment program.

Mr. Miller left the charity to test his theories about family networks and individual responsibility.

With support from then-Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown, the Levi Strauss Foundation, and a few others, he started pilot projects in Oahu and Oakland. San Francisco was added in 2007.

Last year the charity began a test in San Francisco to determine whether the project could have a ripple effect, influencing families who live near people in the program but do not participate as directly. Families in the extended group saw their incomes dip last year along with the downturn, but now they are back to where they were at the beginning of 2009.

Mr. Miller receives many requests to expand the charity to other cities. Often, he says, the requests are from other nonprofit groups that misinterpret the project as an incentive program and want to add it to their existing work.

But Mr. Miller emphasizes that it's the process of giving people control over their own future that makes the difference.

Ms. Jones, the mother who participates in the Family Independence Initiative's program in San Francisco, agrees with this premise.

In addition to finding a new job, she was able to save \$5,000 for a down payment on a house for herself and her three children. Meetings with her friends and neighbors through the program "helped me reflect on what I did that month," she says.

That may sound vague or "wishy-washy," as one donor put it, but Mr. Miller believes that donors have been looking for answers to poverty in the wrong places.

To illustrate his point, he talks about a discussion with people in Boston, where his charity is now recruiting families from the hard-knock neighborhoods of East Boston, Dorchester, and Roxbury to join its first pilot program on the East Coast.

People were talking about the troubles in those neighborhoods: the high crime rates, the problems in getting the police to curb crime, and the dysfunctional schools that graduated only half their students.

"Everyone is saying we have to look at these kids who aren't graduating," says Mr. Miller. "And I say, Wait, you're telling me that there are really terrible conditions and 50 percent of the kids living in these terrible conditions *do* graduate? That's where the solution lies."

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