



# Ain't I a Social Entrepreneur?<sup>1</sup>

by Phil Anthrop

**T**HE BEST-RECOGNIZED SOCIAL entrepreneurs in the country created the Committee for Effective Funding (CEF) meeting in Washington, D.C. These innovators became the best recognized through no small efforts of their own to issue promotional materials, organize conferences, write articles, and seek funding for the development of the new field of social entrepreneurship.

CEF issued a proclamation with its goals for this new era of philanthropy and governmental social investment. The manifesto text itself was admittedly blurry, but between the lines the intent was clear: more money was needed for "social innovation-oriented" groups publicly recognized as social entrepreneurs.

Stephanie Jennifer was one of the public faces of the campaign—and an attractive one at that. As the founder of a nascent service organization to transform at-risk youth into risk-averse young adults, she expanded the organization from an idealistic vision to an educational

powerhouse and created intense competition for a limited number of highly sought-after positions. The organization's claim to fame: the number of Ivy League job applicants it rejected.

Ian Smith-Davis, formerly of Wall Street, took up the cause alongside Jennifer and recruited former colleagues at

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Lehman Brothers and Goldman Sachs to underwrite lavish think-tank retreats, assembling former Clinton-era officials and new-tech philanthropists to create a *new* new way of giving back and transforming society.

Knowing that the new Obama administration represented a distinct opportunity, CEF had access to the eyes and ears of the new administration.

In the critical first months of the administration, Jennifer was everywhere.

And by ensuring that everyone knew she had been involved in the Obama campaign, she was in great demand from every foundation that wanted an inside connection.

Planning the announcement of the recipients of the \$50 million social entrepreneur fund required lots of scheduling and, most important, coordination with the schedule of First Lady Michelle Obama.

If all went according to plan, it would be possible to steer large sections of federal funds as well as foundation and corporate grants through marketing, celebrity connections, and old-fashioned salesmanship. Like being the fastest-growing sport, being the *new* new charitable thing had obvious benefits. Staying at the crest of the wave required a Washington meeting with all the pieces in one place. With CEF having created the new field of Social Innovation and having defined its boundaries and marshaled its resources and media attention, it was

*Continued on page 103*

now time to close the deal.

The program of the Washington event was to be a mix of outcome-driven results celebration and cameo appearances by the leading lights in the new field. Since most of these leading lights looked alike (a common problem in charity circles), Jennifer had to bring visible new faces into the mix to achieve the right image. Thembe Samal fit the bill after having started a single-parents sewing enterprise with Somali immigrants that turned into a five-city anticolonial empire based in the newly important Chicago.

The key news that would attract national attention was the announcement of recipients of the \$50 million. This was the shining star to get front-page coverage on every news Web site around the country. The proposal process was intense, rigorous, and complex. The criteria had been developed by a team of young Obama administration officials (drawn from the ranks of the new social entrepreneurs' organizations), who then turned over the judging to a group of foundations. They knew the new language and the new theory, and most important, they already knew what worked and who worked it. These dollars would be limited to effective programs capable of going to scale to attack the country's toughest problems.

At charity meetings across the country, the intensity of interest in the \$50 million was palpable. Nonprofits formed coalitions, collaborations, team proposals, and new ideas to aggressively attack the toughest U.S. problems. The online process was tricky and required some of the best minds that had ever spent hours registering with Grants.gov. In cubicles and basement offices all over the United States, development professionals entered the words, the hopes, and the dreams that could change their organizations forever.

Like many competitive programs that

promote their existence by boasting how many applications they are forced to decline, the social innovation fund broke new ground by attracting just more than 10,000 proposals. In a competition for \$50 million, with an estimated preparation time of 225 hours per proposal, the total effort to get some part of the \$50 million surpassed \$55 million: a net loss of \$5 million.

Security was tight, but the bright fall day in Washington had the feel of a crisp \$100 bill outside the U Street Youth Center where the ceremony was held. Samal had a prominent place on the program, but Jennifer worried about an embarrassing glitch: Samal's organization would receive no funds, while other program speakers' organizations

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were due to receive million-dollar grants. At that point, nothing could be done, although Jennifer and Ian promised to go to bat with the national foundations and ensure that Samal's organization would ultimately receive even more money than this inaugural class of social-innovation grantees.

It was standing-room only at the youth center's gymnasium—especially since the folding bleachers had broken the day before in the half-open position. Samal's job was to introduce Michelle Obama, and there were nervous glances as she approached the microphone.

Samal was known for speaking brutal truths in uncomfortable settings, so the worry was not misplaced. Samal grabbed both sides of the podium and began her remarks. "Ain't I a social entrepreneur?" she asked. "Ain't I one of those who is involved in organizations all over the

country to do the daily work of supporting, encouraging, and animating our communities?"

Samal paused, and you could have heard an iPhone rattle next to foundation Lexus keys from the back of the room. "I don't have an Ivy League degree, and I don't have a federal grant," she continued. "What I have is a community that wants to change things and people who are willing to invest their own money, sweat, and ideas *not* to build a franchise, *not* to go to scale, *not* to glorify the head of the organization, and definitely *not* to garner the feel-good recognition by those with connections. What's happening here is actually kind of fake.

"But ain't I a social entrepreneur?" she repeated. "Ain't I the same as those who a hundred years ago started Hull House and the NAACP and the Red Cross and the Salvation Army and domestic violence shelters and folk schools and community clinics and nature centers? Didn't all these people start with a dream and an inspiration and a drive to do something together that they couldn't do apart? You don't have to be a community organizer to know what it takes to organize a community. Every nonprofit in the country is doing this in its own way. Ain't they social entrepreneurs and innovators, too? No matter. We'll just get on with our work—same as always."

#### ENDNOTES

1. This title takes a page from Sojourner Truth, who delivered her epic speech "Ain't I a Woman?" at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio.

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