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Mission: Diversity

One nonprofit is doing
what most can't – or won't





FACES OF DIVERSITY
As it expanded in recent years, Lift, a national social-service group, added significant diversity to its ranks. Some 60 percent of its staff are people of color.

From left: Collin Kee, national development coordinator; Arceli “Pinky” Bacsinila, chief financial officer; Andrea Ruggirello, national grant-writing associate; and Hina Musa, program director for Washington, D.C.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN VOSS, FOR THE CHRONICLE

What It Takes

By Timothy Sandoval

KRISTY ARNOLD arrived for the job interview armed with impressive credentials and a burning question. A nonprofit veteran who had worked for years with disadvantaged families and youths, she had a Ph.D. in counseling as well as experience evaluating youths in the juvenile-justice system and applicants for mental-health benefits.

She was, in short, a terrific candidate to run the Washington, D.C., office of Lift, a national anti-poverty organization that helps parents and caregivers in low-income families build confidence, key relationships, and financial stability.

Racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity had long been important to Arnold — she wrote her dissertation on how black counselors address racial and cultural issues with clients of color — and coming into the interview, she wanted to know whether Lift took diversity seriously. Her question: How was Lift making its staff diverse and its culture inclusive?

“At this point in my career,” says Arnold, “I probably can’t work anywhere that isn’t diverse — diverse in race, diverse in gender, diverse in all sorts of values and practices.”

Lift might be one of the few nonprofits that could point to tangible action — and results — when questioned on diversity. The organization in 2010 began a rapid expansion that introduced significant racial diversity to the staff as it grew nearly sixfold in size. Today, 60 percent of its employees are people of color. Through regular yet often emotional conversations, the group has worked to remake its culture so that people of color feel accepted and that decision making at all levels considers issues of race and equity.

Perhaps most important, Lift has diversified its leadership — something a rare few nonprofits have done. It has both promoted people of color from within and recruited them from the outside. It has then worked to provide those new leaders with support, particularity in fundraising. Today, seven of its nine top executives are people of color.

In short, Lift has grown into the kind of charity where people

How one charity confronted its lack of diversity and found new strength

like Arnold, who took the job in 2016, feel included and thrive. But getting there has been a journey.

Blind Spots

Kirsten Lodal, the group’s CEO, started Lift in 1998 with Brian Kreiter when both were students at Yale. She took a gap year to build out the organization, then called National Student Partnerships, which mobilized volunteer college students to work with people in poverty to help them find jobs and connect with social services.

In the 20 years since, the organization has grown to \$6.6 million in revenue, with offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington.

Lodal has been hailed as a social entrepreneur. In 2015, she received the John F. Kennedy New Frontier Award, which honors Americans under 40 making a difference in communities through public service. Past honorees include Wendy Kopp, who, like Lodal, devised a successful nonprofit, Teach

for America, while a college student.

The expansion begun in 2010 was part of a strategic plan to professionalize, bring on more permanent staff, and rely less on volunteers and AmeriCorps participants. But as Lift assembled this plan, something nagged at Lodal. Diversity had always been a value she felt the organization cherished. It had conducted training on issues of diversity and inclusion, and it had people of color on staff and on its board.

But Lodal, who is white, knew she likely had blind spots. She grew up in an upper middle-class household in the Washington, D.C., area and attended a private high school before Yale — a much different profile than the organization’s clients, who are predominately people of color. As Lift grew, it needed staff who shared a background with its clients and who could help to better address their needs.

“I really started looking at: What’s going on in terms of my leadership, the culture?” she says. “Where do we need to start to get help to make sure that this organization is one where staff can feel supported and [can] thrive — and not like they

Case Study: Finding Diverse Employees

Six years ago, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's staff was 58 percent white. Today, that figure is 43 percent.

What happened? The foundation's transformation into a majority-minority organization happened over two decades, says Kimberley Brown, director of human resources and talent strategies. Over that time, Annie E. Casey has grown a lot. Since 2012, it has added roughly 40 employees, for a total of about 200. That's given the foundation plenty of opportunity to bring on people of color. In addition, it's been purposeful in its recruitment and hiring.

It has earned a reputation for retaining people of color, too. This — along with the foundation's work focused on race and ethnicity as a key in many underprivileged children's lives — means the foundation is attractive to people of color. "The Casey brand is a way in which we attract a lot of people," Brown says.

Here are some things the foundation does:

■ **Post to websites catering to diverse candidates.** One of Annie E. Casey's primary sources for collecting resumes is the Council on Foundations website. Casey often pays for an upgrade when posting there so its ads are also placed on sites aimed at people of color, women, the disabled, and other groups.

■ **Ask current staff to help.** The foundation sometimes asks employees, many of them of diverse backgrounds, if they know anyone who is right for a particular job. The more diverse your organization becomes, the more likely it is that employees' professional networks will be diverse, too, increasing the odds you'll find talented people of color.

■ **Tap old networks.** Annie E. Casey is known for its fellowship programs, like the Jim Casey Young Fellows program, which attract rising people of color. Sometimes those fellows are right for new roles within the organization down the line, Brown says. Or the foundation asks them if they know of anyone else.

— TIMOTHY SANDOVAL

are being asked to all become mini versions of me or my co-founder?"

Sol Anderson says he felt this cultural dissonance when he started as a program manager in Lift's Chicago office in 2012. An African-American, he had grown up in a working-class neighborhood in Grand Rapids, Mich. His grandparents had been Mississippi sharecroppers and moved north in the 1950s for a better life.

At Lift, Anderson straddled two worlds awkwardly. When he talked with the organization's "members" — as the nonprofit calls its clients — he had a natural rapport. They reminded him of his family and people from his old neighborhood, where most everyone lived paycheck to paycheck.

Back in the office, however, he says he had to "code-switch" — act and talk differently than he did when with the members or black people in less formal settings.

The transition felt jarring, then inauthentic. "The code-switching had gotten so stark that I could feel myself doing it, which was weird," he says.

'Cultural Audit'

Anderson arrived at Lift just as it was beginning to commit more fully to diversity. In early 2011, it had hired the firm Cook Ross, a consultancy that specializes in diversity and inclusion, to help. The firm recommended that Lift conduct a "cultural audit" in part to gauge how employees who were people of color felt about the organization and gather insight for recruitment of volunteers and employees.

More than 130 people were surveyed — three quarters of its staff, volunteers, and board members. A doctoral student in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania also did one-on-one interviews.

The audit revealed some concerns. Many black respondents felt the organization's culture wasn't inclusive or culturally sensitive. Some employees also said the idea of diversity, which they felt was often framed in racial and ethnic terms, should be broadened to include sexual preference and political identity.

The audit spurred Lift to change in significant ways. Cook Ross helped Lift



STEPHEN VOSS, FOR THE CHRONICLE

CULTURE SHOCK

Kristy Arnold was new to fundraising — and to working with white, wealthy donors.

shape its recruiting practices to ensure more diversity in hiring. For instance, the firm pushed the group to post job ads with such organizations as Howard University's alumni network and Harvard's affinity groups for black and Latino alumni. Lift also tapped into professional organizations that serve people of color, and it set aside money to pay recruiting firms to do more thorough searches to find diverse applicants.

The organization also asked staff of color to help find new employees. "Diversity begets diversity," says Erin Ridgeway, Lift's talent manager.

Apart from recruiting, the audit prompted deep discussions about the organization's culture and such topics as how to overcome unconscious bias. The efforts weren't cheap: Lift, to start, budgeted \$100,000 for Cook Ross's services as well as other expenses related to its diversity work, which was paid for through targeted fundraising.

Diversity at the Top

Lift diversified its once all-white leadership by promoting qualified staff from within and bringing in talented outsiders. The nine individuals include four African-Americans, two Asian-Americans, and one Indian-American.



Sol Anderson

Executive Director, Chicago



Kristy M. Arnold

Executive Director, Washington, D.C.



Arceli "Pinky" Bacsinila

Chief Financial Officer



Unique Brathwaite

Executive Director, New York



Molly Day

Chief Strategy Officer



Sang Hoon Lee

Chief Development Officer



Kirsten Lodal

CEO & Co-Founder



Michelle Rhone-Collins

Chief Cities Officer



Sophie Sahaf

Senior Vice President, Program & Evaluation

Anderson remembers his first meeting about diversity and inclusion. "The first conversation wasn't awesome, to be honest," remembers Anderson, now the executive director of Lift's Chicago office. When code-switching came up, it seemed that one colleague thought it simply referred to how people can act differently with friends than they do at work.

That wasn't quite the point. Black people face a difficult reality, Anderson says, one in which they can be looked down on — whether it's acknowledged or not — for "acting black" at work.

Employees and board members credit Lodal for pushing the work, even when it was uncomfortable. She has dug deeply into the issues herself, signaling to staff their importance.

"I think she's been really courageous," says Patience Peabody, the group's former vice president for communications. "She does things because she knows that they are right. She surrounds herself with folks who will push her and challenge her."

Leslie Traub, a partner at Cook Ross, says Lift embraced its diversity work with an unusual intensity. "They really pushed themselves to sit in the fire — to really challenge their thinking and their perspectives," she says. "They were very, very willing to hear the perspectives of the people in the organization."

Not Staying Silent

In 2013, Lift published a progress report on its diversity and inclusion work that included the audit's findings. "We have come a long way," it said, while acknowledging the work really had just begun.

The next year, the organization's new direction became evident after the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. Lift doesn't have a presence

in Missouri, and it doesn't advocate on police issues, but staff felt compelled to respond. As protests raged in St. Louis and nationwide, the organization issued a statement declaring that "what's occurring in Ferguson is emblematic of a more common and subtle experience of racism and the inequality of opportunity that is present day-to-day across our country."

The group's diversity working group drafted the language over 48 hours. Lodal was involved, and board members read the statement. Six of the 10 people who worked on it were people of color, including Peabody, who is black. "The

magnitude and diversity of the voices and hearts that were embedded within that would have felt different" if fewer people of color had worked on it, Pea-

90%
of board chairs and CEOs are white

24%
of CEOs say organizations make demographics a high priority in board recruitment

SOURCE: BoardSource

body says.

Some Lift supporters questioned the decision to speak out. Was Ferguson really a battle for social-service organizations like Lift? “We got some negative feedback from people just saying, ‘This is a step too far,’” Lodal says.

Her reply? “How on earth can a direct-services organization working with a vast majority people of color be silent when these things are happening?”

Fundraisers discuss the racial dynamics of fundraising — namely, that many big donors are wealthy and white.

leadership roles — the chief executive, a development officer, and a chief operating officer. All were white.

Over time, Lift has expanded its leadership team in part by promoting individuals from within the organization. Today, the nine top leaders include four African-Americans, two Asian-Americans, and one Indian-American.

The group’s four regional directors are key to fundraising, yet only one came to the job with an extensive background in development. Anderson, in

Promoting From Within

For many years, Lift had only three

Quota Question: How to Pick a Board

The national nonprofit Sage used to recruit board members based on fairly typical qualifications: fundraising ability, big-gift potential, financial and marketing experience, and the like.

Race, ethnicity, and gender identity weren’t part of the equation. “People were uncomfortable, frankly, talking about those things,” says Michael Adams, chief executive of Sage, which works to improve the lives of older LGBT adults.

Today, Sage talks openly — and with unusual specificity — about diversity. Four years ago, it created a document that spells out what it considers the ideal board. The contents of this “Aspirational Board Composition Profile” are confidential, but it includes numerical targets for race, ethnicity, and gender.

It also has goals for the number of people who are transgender, straight, disabled, young, old, and living with HIV/AIDs, not to mention targets for geographic diversity and traditional qualifications such as the ability to make big gifts.

A big question for board members as they created these targets: Were they building a quota system? Quotas are controversial, and Sage ultimately decided it would not use the numbers as strict floors or ceilings. For instance, though the document calls for

a minimum number of people of color, the board will not limit itself to that number.

Members need flexibility, Sage argues, but also guidelines. “The board had a clear understanding that without benchmarks for what success looks like, it’s really hard to achieve success,” Adams says.

Still Aspirational

Today, the profile is a constant reference point for board nominations. “When you look at it, you can see where we’re falling short,” Adams says.

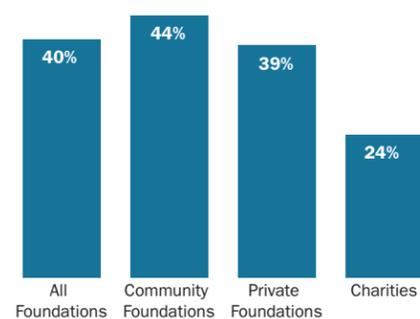
For instance, the last three people to join the board were men, so the board has focused recently on recruiting women. Sage currently has no transgender board members or people with disabilities. It’s also low on its targets for straight people and racial diversity.

Still, it has made progress: Two of the five executive-committee members are African-Americans. A few years ago, they were all white.

Thanks to term limits, fresh blood is cycling through constantly. That brings more opportunities to add diverse members. But that also means progress can vanish quickly.

Says Adams: “This is why this work will never end.” —TIMOTHY SANDOVAL

Share of Nonprofits With All-White Boards



SOURCE: BOARDSOURCE, BASED ON SURVEY OF 141 FOUNDATIONS, 1,080 CHARITIES

Chicago, and Unique Brathwaite in New York were promoted from positions as program directors. Arnold, the head of the Washington, D.C., office, had never solicited money before.

Though fundraising is increasingly key to nonprofit leadership roles, Lodal says she’s observed that few people of color are given the chance to learn what it takes to raise money.

“If there’s a race ceiling in any way in fundraising, then you’re going to see real advancement ceilings,” she says.

Fundraising experience does not need to be the top qualification for leadership, Lodal says, and good leaders can be trained.

To help the regional directors learn on the job, the Lift national development team puts together training, does one-on-one counseling, and checks in regularly. At times, board members and other senior leaders accompany them on donor visits. The top leaders have also set goals to help the directors stay on track.

The directors say the organization encourages them to talk about the awkward racial dynamics of fundraising — namely, that many big donors are white and wealthy. Arnold says she’s commiserated with fellow employees of color about how it feels to sit across the table from a white male donor.

The experience can be somewhat intimidating, especially to novice fundraisers, she says. One unpleasant mental image she carried with her initially was of her, as a black woman, groveling for money before a white man.

Her colleagues have urged her

to think of herself as an equal. Their message, she says: “Even though I’m in a position where I’m seeking funds, it doesn’t make me ‘less than’ in any way. It’s just simply the nature of where [their] life has led versus where my life has led.”

For leaders of color, knowing that they can discuss such issues openly is important. “That in and of itself helps,” says Michelle Rhone-Collins, chief cities officer, who oversees the regional directors.

With white male donors, success sometimes requires extra work to build a relationship and trust, Rhone-Collins says she tells the executive directors. Barriers can come down if you learn a lot about a donor and grow close.

Deanna Singh, a Lift board member, says philanthropists are often part of communities with norms and cultures that may be unfamiliar to Lift leaders. Fundraisers have to decide on what terms they will engage and where they will draw the line. Many fundraisers, for instance, learn about golf to develop relationships with donors, even if they’ve never watched or played the game.

But if donors do something that makes fundraisers uncomfortable — for example, by saying something insensitive about race — fundraisers may need

to make a tough choice. Sometimes, such situations are teachable moments, sometimes they’re not, she says.

“You have to decide what might diminish your integrity and what you think is still within the realm of what you’re expected to do,” Singh says.

Emotional Conversations

Anderson, who felt the need to code-switch when he got to Lift, is now a de-facto leader of the working group continuing much of the diversity work. He says the organization’s culture has changed, that he and colleagues feel more comfortable being themselves.

Talks about race and diversity occur regularly. “We’ve consistently gone to a deeper level with our conversations, so that’s why I’ve kept coming back,” he says.

Recently, Anderson was part of an effort to ensure that the organization takes on issues of equity and addresses disadvantages caused by race, gender, and sexual orientation. These discussions, which were seen as an extension of the diversity work, ended with Lift formally making equity one of the organization’s core values.

Lift’s conversations about diversity, inclusion, and equity aren’t always comfortable. At an all-staff retreat last

fall, a facilitator led discussions about individual experiences with race inside and outside of Lift. Some people cried. Others got angry.

During the session, employees of various racial and ethnic groups were brought together to talk. The facilitator, however, suggested that Latino and Asian employees combine their talks, which met with objections.

Asian-Americans should have their own opportunity for a discussion, one participant said. Since the issues faced by Latinos and Asians are different, joining the two wouldn’t make much sense.

“That, to me, was powerful,” Anderson says. It’s the type of honesty about race that the organization strives for, he adds.

There is no end date to Lift’s work on diversity and inclusion, Lodal says. She wants to bring more diversity to the organization’s four regional boards and its national board.

The group must never let up on recruiting or talking about race and diversity, she says. She fears that all its progress could be lost with just a little bit of turnover.

She says: “You can never, ever take your attention off that and off its importance.”