

**May/June 2009 Issue
Money Talks/Debra Black/Entrepreneurship**

Debra Black, CEO of Out of the Box

- 1. At 23, has your age affected your business plan in a negative way or has it been a beneficial factor toward your non-profit?** I would have to answer both to this question. Ultimately the desire is not to be looked down on because of my youth, but this does seem to happen. I have had people say, “well now that I know you’re not a flake” because I actually followed through with what I said I was going to do. I think this comes with my generation. It is sad to say but there are a lot of non-committal people apart of this age group, society has become ok with “a no follow through people, and just do what makes you feel good ideology.” I think it just makes me more determined to do what I say I am going to do and be bold about my mission for this non-profit. Your name is all you have, and I want to be known for a name that is respectable, and reliable. It is hard once people associate you with something bad, to gain back one’s admiration.

On a positive note, some people see my age as a good thing; it gets me in the door with people who see me striving for a goal so young, and they see that as something they want to associate with. It is a constant learning process and I am eager to learn. I take the “one day at a time” approach. I want to do things with excellence, rather than throwing something together that might crumble in the end because I wasn’t patient.

- 2. Are you gaining more awareness for Out of the Box with traditional marketing or online efforts?**

I am using both, and seeing the need for both in this organization. With traditional marketing there are the normal brochures, pamphlets, door hangers, business cards, marketing packages for events, possible radio advertisement and word of mouth. We all know that the Internet has become one of the greatest marketing tools an organization can use. Whether it is through emails, blogging, websites, or facebook all have been a great asset to get the word out for this organization. I have seen that if you want to cover the entire basis to get people on board or listen to your cause, why not use both? Yes, some cost more than others, but as you plan out a marketing strategy you can pick and choose what type of cost is necessary. I have found that thanks to the Internet, an organization can do a lot more marketing for free, verses having to pay for a lot of paper material which ends up getting thrown out anyway.

- 3. What advice can you provide to a fellow non-profit regarding grant writing, especially when they are a start-up and can’t afford a professional grant writer?**

I have found that grant writing is a definite gift. It takes a lot of time and effort, and especially when you are looking to a grant advisory board receiving thousands of applications; you have to stand out. I have been blessed with someone who used to sit on a grant advisory board; which I know is not the case for a lot of organizations or non-profits. A lot of the efforts for this organization have been through an awesome team of people who are gifted in different ways. My advice for anyone looking to write grants is to look for someone who has a writing background, or enjoys writing. If they are not professional writers, have a few different people look at the grant proposal after it is written and gather a few different opinions on the proposal. I would suggest trying to put together a “mock” grant board, and get some opinions on whether this application would stand out in front of a committee.

4. How do you maintain your team focused when everyone knows that non-profits mainly offer a sense of personal success rather than monetary status?

First let me just say, “Money doesn’t buy happiness”; I know I might seem young to already have an understanding of this, but it doesn’t. I also find this statement funny because I am in the “money talks” section of this magazine, but I have seen it ruin people. While money is necessary to run a business and live in society, it is not the purpose of this organization. It is only necessary to achieve a higher purpose, and this is all it will be used for in this organization. It is not the goal; it is a tool that is necessary for the goal.

In my past experiences working under others, I quickly learned what I wanted to be, and what I *didn't* want to be and more importantly what my organization was about and what it wasn't going to be about. When I started in the initial efforts, I made a list to help remind me of the goals I wanted to achieve and what the purpose was for this non-profit. I wanted to maintain true to what I believe in and what my core values are. As a part of my beliefs, walking the walk, not just talking, was one of the most important factors I wanted to deliver to my team. As part of your question, you already know I strictly endorse and articulate the term “team.” Without a team mentality any non-profit will go under. The sense of vibrancy towards my cause is contagious and I deliver the business’ core values to my team by example. I keep them...*inspired*, period. Why not? Who wants to work for an organization— for a cause—that drags them down and has a lack of vision or inspiration? I want my attitude to be positive and uplifting. I want my mind-set and the purpose of this organization to keep my team inspired to “keep on, keeping on and never lose sight of the vision.”

5. In a world that is constantly asking for funding, what sets Debra Black apart from the competition? Authenticity. It’s funny, but you are right. Every time you turn on the television you see images of Africa, poverty, and children needing adoption and these are all so very important. But I compete with all of these, and more. I don’t have the big budget right now, so in order for me to stay competitive I need to maintain open with my communication efforts to all of my sponsors, and with that I need to continually come up with creative game plans for budgeting. Also, my

vision is “Out of the Box” and allows sponsors/donators to invest in something different. It also helps when approaching companies who are not just in a specific region, to note that I want to take my cause nationwide, which makes it very attractive for sponsors, rather than staying in my own backyard.

6. What is the driving force behind your personal success?

God. I could try and come up with something more “politically correct” but I would be lying. I know this isn’t the “business strategy” answer, but it is all I’ve got. I have wonderful parents who have raised me with this driving force, and encouraged me to stand true to this force alone. He is everything I need, and all my personal success is for Him and because of Him. “I am second to HIM.” He will get all the glory and adornment for what I do and what this organization does. If I don’t stand for Him, I will fall for anything and everything. This is the best advice I could give to anyone, “stand for something true, and worth dying for.”