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Fixer-Uppers

Inside the makeovers of venerable charities, their culture shifts, and their amped-up fundraising

4H's new look includes a popular robotics program.

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Renovation Nation: How Three Aging Nonprofits Rebooted and Sparked Growth



NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL, TENNESSEE

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME: With classes like Junk Drawer Robotics, in which 4-H members create their own automatons, the venerable youth charity is boosting its appeal to modern kids.

Inspiration and perspiration built America's 1.5 million charities. Yet truth be told, many of these organizations could use a little TLC.

Imagine you're a decades-old legacy nonprofit. Your donors are aging; competitors are crowding your niche; you're a direct-mail organization in a mobile-app world. Or your leadership has grown entrenched, complacent, tired. Or your brand doesn't resonate with the diverse generation of supporters you need for the future.

Since the Great Recession, the concentration of wealth into fewer hands has increased the pressure on many nonprofits, making fundraising harder and needs greater. "You've seen organizations that have tried to do more with less, for decades. And there's a limit to how far you can go," says Jan Glick, author of the book *Nonprofit Turnaround: A Guide for Nonprofit Leaders, Consultants & Funders*.

Under such conditions, some charities fold. Others merge. But some, like the venerable organizations whose stories we feature in this issue of *The Chronicle*, choose to renovate.

Leadership transitions can trigger massive renewal projects for nonprofits, experts say. New CEOs often bring in fresh talent, update messaging, add tech savvy, and launch strategic plans. With baby-boomer retirements, more organizations than ever are likely to draw up new blueprints.

And some long-lived nonprofits undertake makeovers simply because they have grown bulky and byzantine, like Gilded Age mansions groaning under their own weight. "We've worked with organizations where the various departments weren't even aware of what each other was doing," says Howard Adam Levy, principal of Red Rooster Group, a branding agency that focuses on nonprofits. "They were referring clients to outside services they already had within the organization."

For some mammoth organizations, like the Salvation Army and Rotary International, giving local chapters freedom to adapt to community needs has been a key to staying vital over decades. "We've come to realize that one size doesn't fit all," says John Hewko, general secretary of Rotary, the service group founded in 1905.

Rotary was "the original LinkedIn," Mr. Hewko says, a place to do good while forging business connections. But middle-class professionals in the Meetup era have more options for networking. The organization sees its best hopes for growth in Asian, African, and Central and Eastern European countries with emerging middle classes and underdeveloped social networks for professionals. Seventy percent of its 1.2 million members now live outside of North America.

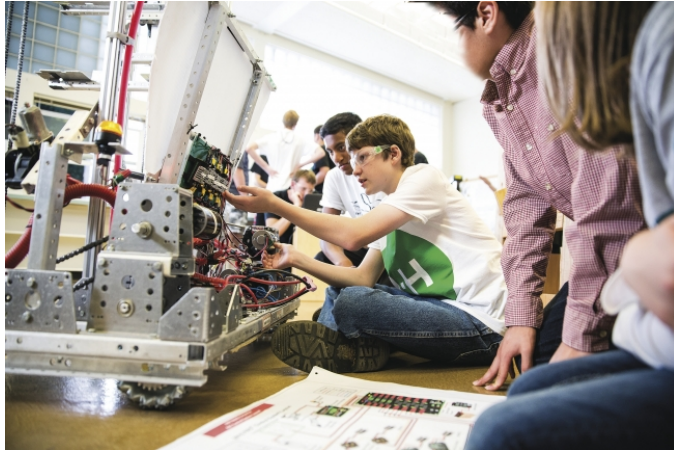
The Salvation Army, the Christian-led social-services giant founded in 1865, has seen its Las Vegas chapter open a shelter to ensure safe housing for transgender individuals, who can be targets of harassment and violence. While Salvation Army officials say the organization isn't undergoing a major overhaul, it is spreading the word about lesser-known programs and policies, such as those addressing discrimination, human trafficking, domestic violence, and substance abuse.

"It's a constant battle for us to help people understand that we're relevant," says Lt. Col. Ron Busroe, the charity's national spokesman. Too few people, he says, know the group is more than "kettles and old clothes and disaster work."

The following stories detail how three organizations, each roughly a century old, have updated their images, shaken up operations, and found new supporters and offer guidance on how your nonprofit can take on a renovation job of its own.

4-H Taps Alumni and Updates Image to Boost Support

By Heather Joslyn



NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL, OREGON

MACHINE LEARNING: 4-H has long been known for its agricultural activities, but today, robotics is the venerable youth organization's most popular program.

Andrew Bosworth, who grew up on a California horse ranch, spent much of his childhood in 4-H. He raised sheep and pigs, competed for ribbons at the county fair, and learned to cook.

The club also introduced him to computer programming, which proved life-changing. He went on to get a Harvard degree in computer science and is now vice president for advertising at Facebook, where he helped create the social network's ubiquitous News Feed.

Many people he meets are surprised to learn that 4-H teaches technology. But such instruction has always been a core of the global youth-development group, which was founded to help farm kids learn cutting-edge agriculture skills their parents wouldn't embrace. Remembers Mr. Bosworth: "We used to joke: 'It's not just cows and cooking!'"

Those words could serve as the rallying cry for 4-H now, as it searches for relevance in a time altogether different from the agrarian age in which it was born. Established circa 1902 as an after-school program, it flourished

in the rural areas that were home to more than half of Americans. Today, more than eight in 10 people live in metropolitan regions.

Not coincidentally, 4-H is promoting programs that resonate with modern kids and families. It's also showcasing alumni like Mr. Bosworth to tout the work that a lot of city slickers might not know about.

Unrestricted giving to the National 4-H Council has shot up 518 percent since 2008, according to the organization.

MAKEOVER TIPS: RETOOL AND RETHINK

- Be willing to rethink everything about how you operate.
- Double down on popular programs.
- Tell your story. And give program participants tools to tell their stories.
- Invite alumni to stay involved.
- Listen to your staff, your affiliates, and the people you serve. They may alert you to emerging problems or opportunities.

Robotics and Fitness

Local 4-H chapters were starting to double down on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs by at least the mid-2000s, according to the council's president, Jennifer Sirangelo. By 2012, the national organization had begun investing significantly more money in the effort. Among other things, it built a new robotics curriculum, which is now its most popular, systemwide.

Interest in nutrition and fitness programs has also spiked, driven by concern about childhood obesity.

Last year, 4-H launched a new marketing campaign, Grow True Leaders. The aim is to promote the charity's wide array of programs and tout its effectiveness at giving kids skills and confidence.

The campaign is part of a big push to expand. Though it serves 6 million American youths a year — more than the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts put together — 4-H hopes to increase membership to 10 million by 2025. Toward that end, the National 4-H Council launched a five-year, \$125 million drive in 2015, with \$36 million raised so far.

Ms. Sirangelo says the organization is worried that youth-development charities serve less than half of American kids from 8 to 18. "We felt we had a moral obligation to grow. Because if we don't do it, who will?"

4-H's far-flung chapters have helped steer its growth, Ms. Sirangelo says. She recalls visiting the charity's leaders in Kansas, where she asked, "What keeps you up at night?"

A man volunteered, "In my county, 80 percent of the kids are Latino, and not enough of them are in 4-H."

The result: New programs in that county for kids, many of them Hispanic, whose parents work at a local dairy. The effort spread rapidly across the state, and more clubs for Hispanics are sprouting up in the Midwest, part of the First Generation 4-H Families Initiative.

Meanwhile, 4-H is continuing its internal efforts to expand outreach. The organization is taking a hard look at itself, Ms. Sirangelo says, including "old ways we recruit kids, how we engage families, how we recruit volunteers — some real nuts and bolts about how 4-H operates locally."

The charity's leaders still have a big task ahead, she adds, "but they're asking the right questions."

Tapping Alumni

Mr. Bosworth is one of about 25 million 4-H alumni, but until recently, he and the others were a neglected asset. A survey commissioned by the organization in 2012 found that while 96 percent of former club members had a positive view of the organization, most said they no longer felt connected to it.

To change that, 4-H is enlisting the help of alumni like Kent Bazemore, a pro basketball player with the Atlanta Hawks, and actress Aubrey Plaza, best known for her role on TV's Parks and Recreation. In February, Ms. Plaza helped boost the organization's street cred by reciting the 4-H Pledge on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*.

Mr. Bosworth says the organization has done an excellent job adapting its programming to the needs of today's kids. The challenge 4-H and other traditional charities face is adapting to new ways of communicating.

"For a long time, exerting a lot of control over your brand was a very successful strategy," he says. "In the modern era, with the internet and social media in particular, you really have to empower your community to own your brand, to be its ambassadors. And that means giving up some control you used to assert."

And that, he adds, is not just a challenge for venerable nonprofits: "I work with some of the biggest advertisers in the world, and they struggle with the exact same thing."

Send an e-mail to Heather Joslyn.

This article is part of:

RENOVATION NATION: HOW THREE AGING NONPROFITS REBOOTED AND SPARKED GROWTH

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