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Funder Focus: Julie Toskan-Casale and the Toskan Casale Foundation



By Elisa Birnbaum
August 5, 2008

This month in our Funder Focus series, we feature the [Toskan Casale Foundation](#), a family foundation dedicated to supporting and strengthening community-based social programs and organizations. Initiated in 2001, the foundation really got underway with the launch of its Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI) a year later. CharityVillage spoke with co-director and founder **Julie Toskan-Casale** about the initiative and how it brings much-needed support to charities in Canada and beyond, while providing youth with an education to last a lifetime.

CharityVillage: After selling M.A.C Cosmetics you started a foundation. Why? And what were its initial goals?

Julie Toskan-Casale: We asked ourselves, what did we like most when we were at M.A.C? We realized it was giving back to community and engaging people with the M.A.C AIDS Fund. So we knew we wanted to start a foundation because we wanted to keep giving back. There are so many causes and [they] are all good ones, but we wanted to ensure we were focused, strategic, and not just sending cheques over to different organizations that we didn't know anything about. We kept asking ourselves: how can we be the most impactful?

So we started the foundation, did all the legal requirements, but we were still trying to determine exactly how we were going to do our giving. It was something we were really struggling with. Then the idea of YPI [Youth and Philanthropy Initiative] just came to me one morning. I thought, "This is it! We'll teach youth to give."

CV: Why youth? Why did they become your focus?

JTC: It was really more about how are we going to be as effective as possible. We're not a billion-dollar foundation; we're a small family foundation. How are we going to have the biggest bang for our buck? And how are we going to feel really good about what we're doing? It's not going to feel good to me to sit in an office and sign cheques to charities that I know nothing about. That doesn't work for me. I need to be more involved. And I need to ensure we are being more effective than that. How can I learn about charities across Canada? I can learn about the ones within my own community, but how am I going to go outside of that? And then I just thought, "We'll get kids already in school and we'll give them some tools, teach them some skills - not only in philanthropy, but skills they require for anything they do in life. And we'll get them out there doing all the research for us."

CV: Did you feel youth lacked an education in philanthropy or community service?

JTC: I was aware of the community service requirement (mandated in most provinces) and I loved the concept, but I thought the support for it was very poor. And I still think it can be better. They've done very little to revise it. Kids can shovel their neighbour's sidewalk, for example. And as lovely as that is, that's just being nice. I don't think that's getting kids involved in community, teaching them about issues. I just think it can be so much more impactful. Fortunately, I think our program is doing that anyway, with or without the community service requirement.

The other thing for me is the idea that, while youth were doing a lot, I felt they could be doing more. They're amazing, they're like sponges; they soak up all this information. You give them a challenge and they take it on.

CV: How does the program work?

JTC: They basically go out and do all the groundwork, researching charities with the different tools we give them. They come back to their schools and share what they've learned with their classmates, explaining why they think this organization deserves a grant of \$5,000. They discuss the number of people the charity serves, how they engage volunteers, how they're benefiting the community, what participants of the organization told them, what the executive director said, etc. So not only are they doing all this learning, but they're coming back and presenting and sharing with everyone in their class, oftentimes everyone in the entire school.

CV: Who decides which charities are put in the pot and which one is eventually chosen as a grantee? What are the requirements?

JTC: The kids do. They have to choose a local grassroots organization, not a national charity, and a social service. And they have to be a registered charity.

The school puts together a panel of judges, usually between five and nine people, with more students than adults, and the kids present their choice to the panel. The panel judges the presentations and they decide on the winning charity. But we give them an evaluation rubric that guides them through what kids were supposed to have learned, a review of their lessons. We want to ensure that it's not just the kid with the flashiest presentation that wins, but someone who did all of their work. Yes, they need to speak clearly and we look at presentation skills, but it's not just about that; it's also about the content.

But, whether or not they win a grant for the charity, once they meet with the organizations, the kids do not want to turn their backs on them. They become engaged, they remain involved, they volunteer, do food drives, clothing drives, etc. Oftentimes, the groups that present on charities that don't win do more for the charities than those that do [win]. Because they're thinking, "Shoot, we didn't get the grant; we've got to do something for them." And that's exactly what we want to inspire in the kids.

CV: Why have you decided to implement a hands-off policy when it comes to choosing grantees?

JTC: We figure if we've done a good job teaching about grassroots social services, if we developed a program that gets them out to site visits, they are going to make the right choices. We don't need to be dictating. The idea was for them to decide in their own communities. I don't live in their communities so I can't decide for them. Even when I sit in on the final presentations, I watch. I don't sit with the judges. It's very important to me that the program remains run by students and is community-based.

CV: As a relatively new organization, did you face any challenges?

JTC: In the beginning it was a bit more difficult so we chose to go with a private school. Royal St. Georges College was the first school, our pilot school. We struggled with that a bit because we didn't want people to perceive this program as elitist, surrounded by people with lots of money, in private school, etc. But it was really necessary for us to get it off the ground, to work in an environment that could be flexible. In the public schools it was more difficult to get the teachers to commit the time without us having a proven track record. We wanted to work with a school that could really engage the

kids, engage the staff, give us feedback, provide us with the information we needed.

Our first year may have been more difficult because people hadn't heard of us before, but word of mouth was helpful. Teachers move from one school to the other and they want to bring the program with them. And teachers know other teachers and go to seminars, etc. So we went from one school in 2002 to 200 schools this past year with a waiting list.

We were also pretty fortunate because we work directly with the schools. We find the teachers that are interested and then they talk to their principals about it. Also, there's no cost to the schools, which makes it easier. All we require is a teacher who is willing, eager, committed, believes in the kids, and believes kids can make a difference. And they find a way to work it into their program.

In Canada, we also have a whole resource guide and it shows the teachers where our program meets all the mandated curriculum requirements. Teachers are given things they have to cover throughout the school year, expectations given to them by the province. We tell them where our program touches on all the different areas they have to cover. So if they're doing our program, they no longer have to worry about those different areas because we've got them covered. We find the program tends to fit into the civics curriculum, but it's also put into religion, etc. We cover things like team-building skills, presentation skills. We even teach them how to use PowerPoint and how to review a financial statement at a very basic level. We touch on a lot of different areas and those areas are all supposed to be covered at the grade nine and ten levels. I think that's really helpful, too, so that they're not looking at this and saying, "Oh no, here's more work." It really replaces something else they're already doing.

CV: What makes this program so unique?

JTC: The program is mandated across an entire grade level (ninth and tenth), so it's not an after-school, come-if-you-want program. You have to take it. We're saying to kids, "Okay, you're taking civics. YPI is part of civics and you have to do it." We want to ensure that we're not just getting the kids that would agree to do this anyway. Those kids are probably going to get involved in community regardless. We want to get to the kids who feel they have nothing to offer, who don't know how to get involved. Those stories are still the ones that inspire me the most. There are kids who actually stand up and present on charities that they're using, charities that their families are using. It's just so incredibly impactful. And for them to have the opportunity to give back where they may not have had the chance and to say, "Here's a \$5,000 cheque," to a charity that's helped them...it's amazing.

CV: You currently have 200 programs running, ten of which are in the UK. What are your future plans?

JTC: It's really a matter of opportunity. Quite honestly, that's how we're moving this program forward. There's no five-year strategy that includes exactly where we're going to be, though we have an idea of what we want to do and we're definitely very responsible. It's really a matter of partnership opportunities that come up for us. The one in the UK was a really good one. And, as of last week, they brought in someone who agreed to fund the expansion of YPI into Scotland. So they are supporting ten schools this year, 25 the following, and 50 the year after that.

This year we give away a million dollars. We can't keep growing like that without, at some point, running out of money. So, again, as we get partners that are interested in working with us, we will move forward. We are at 200 in Canada and I doubt we'll ever go below that.

I don't want to take the program out of a school and move it around. There's something about it staying in the same environment that builds momentum. We'll go to schools where kids do presentations and they'll do it in front of the entire school. The following year, the kids at the lower grade level know what they're in for. They want to be a part of it. If we pull it out and bring it to another school, that doesn't feel right to me. So there really is a need to grow this bigger and bigger rather than just move it around.

CV: Do you hope to expand into other countries?

JTC: Yes I do, because I think this program works in every environment. It's not specific to Canada and it's not specific to poor communities or rich communities. It works in just about every environment. I would like to expand and will do so wherever opportunities allow us to, wherever we can get funding partners. And it's really great because not only are we granting money to charities, we're teaching all these kids about community, philanthropy and getting involved. I was in the UK recently for the end-of-year celebration and some kids came on stage talking about what YPI meant to them. It was just as though I was in Toronto, except kids had British accents. It confirmed for me that, even though I'm in a whole other country, with different kids, different backgrounds, the learning is the same. It's effective, it's positive, they're all getting it. The experience is enhancing their lives.

A formidable entrepreneur, Julie Toskan-Casale was once an active partner in the M.A.C cosmetics empire. But it was her role overseeing the company's AIDS Fund - a foundation dedicated to helping people living with HIV and AIDS - that truly fuelled this businesswoman's passion. After selling the company, Toskan-Casale was faced with one simple question: what now? Armed with a love for philanthropy and a unique concept, she helped establish a foundation quickly garnering a reputation for making a difference in the communities it serves and the youth it inspires.

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