



Engaging Alumni Reaps Benefits

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Tamar Snyder writing in The Jewish Week:

It wasn't just about the money. That's what Idit Klein says about the initial \$1,000 grant she received from the Bronfman Youth Fellowships' Alumni Venture Fund in 2004. Klein, the executive director of Keshet, a nonprofit that champions the inclusion of LGBTs within the Jewish community, used the small seed grant to mount an educational campaign centered on marriage equality.



"It was a politically charged gesture," Klein says of the initial grant. "What was most significant about it was the recognition that this was worthy of investment. It gave me validation for doing work that is not universally supported in the Jewish community."

Five years and \$5,750 in grants later, Klein is set to join the Bronfman Youth Fellowships' alumni advisory board.

The venture grants played a significant role in keeping her and others like her tethered to a community she joined more than 20 years ago. "It's pretty remarkable that it's a community that is still very central in my life," she says of the fellowship, which takes a pluralistic group of Jewish 16-year-olds on a six-week, often life-transforming summer trip to Israel.

The Bronfman Youth Fellowships was one of the first of several Jewish organizations to recognize the value of offering small grants ranging from \$500 to \$10,000 to alumni launching innovative projects. More recently, Birthright NEXT and ROI (Return on Investment – which funds young social entrepreneurs) have also opened their coffers to alumni by distributing micro-grants.

In the tough economic times we're living in, these grants provide an excellent return on investment, alumni directors say. In addition to benefiting alumni who need just a small sum of money and advice to jumpstart a new project or initiative, the grants also boost active participation in the alumni network. And in overseeing the grant application process, alumni directors are better kept abreast of what their alumni are up to.

"It gives us a really good way of knowing who are the more entrepreneurial members of our alumni network," says Becky Voorwinde, alumni engagement director at the Bronfman Youth Fellowships. (Voorwinde is a graduate of BYFI and served on the alumni advisory board before taking on her current role).

According to a study of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships Alumni released by Jumpstart in May, 69 percent of alumni aged 33 and older are at least in annual contact with members of their year cohort. Among younger alumni, 80 percent are in contact with two or more fellow alumni.

Unlike other alumni grants, the Alumni Venture Fund at the Bronfman Youth Fellowships is supported entirely by alumni contributions. This past year's campaign raised \$22,646, up from \$16,000 the previous year. "We had alumni saying, 'I just lost my job, but I'll make a \$10 donation,'" says Voorwinde. "This highlighted the commitment of our alumni community. It's not how much money you give, but the fact that you're supporting your peers and making a statement about that."

In May 2008, Birthright took the alumni grant concept up a notch with the launch of its NEXT Shabbat initiative. Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni who host a Shabbat meal in their homes are reimbursed \$25 per person for up to 14 people, with the goal of empowering alumni to organize, as a collective, 1,000 Shabbat dinners. In just 16 months, Birthright has spent more than \$1 million on 3,000-plus NEXT Shabbat meals, which account for 40,000 participants. "The most significant result of the program is identifying leaders among a huge alumni population," Rabbi Brenner says.

According to feedback forms that NEXT Shabbat hosts submit to the organization, close to 96 percent of hosts said that they would host another Shabbat meal and 88 percent said they would participate in other Birthright Israel NEXT programs.

In July, Birthright teamed up with Natan to launch the Birthright Israel NEXT/Natan Grants for Social Entrepreneurs, which will provide \$50,000 in grants of \$10,000 or under to Birthright alumni with avant-garde ideas for creating a vibrant Jewish community. The application closes Oct. 1, and grant recipients will be notified in mid-January.

The alumni grants program provides a foot in for former Birthright Israel participants who haven't yet engaged with the alumni community. "We have observed that there have been plenty of Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni who were awarded grants who had never previously participated in a Birthright Israel NEXT program," says Emily Marx, program associate at Birthright Israel. "And we learned, following their programs, that most anticipated getting more involved with the community."

At the ROI (Return on Investment) conference this summer, philanthropist Lynn Schusterman announced that she had more than quadrupled grants for young Jewish innovators from \$100,000 in 2008 to more than \$400,000 for 2009. These grants are only open to the some-400 members of the ROI community. The ROI Seed Fund, which has a budget of \$180,000, provides grants of up to \$10,000 to support projects in the start-up phase. The Innovation Grants, which provide second-level funding of up to \$50,000, are available to later-stage projects with a preference for those that feature collaboration between members of the ROI community.

The ROI Community grants accomplish two goals: "promoting collaborative partnerships and cross pollination of ideas" and "nurturing and strengthen the ROI network," says Sharon Almougy, ROI grants manager.

Although it's difficult to gauge the impact of the grants on alumni engagement since only one batch of grants have been distributed, Almougy cites the success of G-dcast as indicative of the results ROI hopes to see. ROler Sarah Lefton received a seed grant to develop pilot episodes of G-dcast, a weekly cartoon about the Torah portion. The pilot helped her gain funding to create a full year's worth of weekly cartoon episodes, a significant number of which are narrated by members of the ROI community.

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