

From Aspiring to Inspiring

By Melissa A. Gertz

I never planned to be an entrepreneur. I've always dreamed of becoming a progressive lawyer. But, a businessperson? That's for those corporate types, and definitely not for me. However, life, as they say, is what happens when you're busy making other plans.

On July 24, 2004, *life* definitely happened, as I became the victim and thankful survivor of a near-fatal car accident. I was left with physical, neurological, and mental wounds that required countless surgeries and rehabilitative therapies. As an incoming third-year law student, I had a choice: abandon my dream of becoming a progressive lawyer or forge my own path. While others wrote for law reviews and competed for post-graduate clerkships, I was relearning the most basic of tasks, including being able to see.

During my recovery, I knew what the miracles and the endless generosity of the doctors, family members, and friends meant to my own survival. A few years later, it was time to pay it forward. In New Jersey, there were no nonprofit legal services specifically for veterans. I knew firsthand the complications that come from posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, which are the two "signature" wounds of the current wars. I knew what it was like to wake up one day to an entirely different world around you and to have to adapt to a new "normal." So, against all odds, I became an entrepreneur. Among pizza, beer, and a few others crazy enough to become involved, the Community Justice Center was born. Opening in March 2009, CJC provides services to veterans with disabilities and those who are homeless and with disabilities throughout New Jersey. Here are seven keys to our success that might help you start your own nonprofit:

- 1. Find your niche.** Figure out how you will fit into the nonprofit scene in your area. The media, grantors, and others always want to know what makes you unique as compared to other nonprofits that are already funded. It helps if you have an answer.
- 2. Don't underestimate the value of "in-kind" support.** Cash flow is an issue in any small business. Instead of asking for cash donations, pursue as many forms of "in-kind" support as possible (nonmonetary contributions of time, services, or equipment). You'll not only save money, but you'll also end up with a fantastic talent pool. Be creative! Instead of hiring a secretary, we bring in college students looking for externship credit.
- 3. Learn to like hats.** Understand that, especially in the beginning, you will spend a lot less time being a lawyer and a lot more time being everything else—a businessperson, a manager, a bookkeeper, a fundraiser, and the face of human resources, public relations, and outreach. The more you understand these fields before starting your nonprofit, the easier these roles are to juggle.
- 4. Momentum doesn't just happen.** When you are new, even though your services may be free, cases don't just fall into your lap. We worked endlessly on promotion and gave many presentations to area social service agencies, government entities, and foundations. We maximized free media, such as Facebook and local television/radio. We convinced every newspaper in town that we were worth writing about, and then used the articles in our promotional packets. We received endorsements from prominent politicians. But even after seeing the effects of the momentum, the trick is to *keep it going*.

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5. Know when to say no. Saying “no” is much easier said than done, but it is key to not becoming overwhelmed and burned out. Have clear priorities that further your goals and be wary of deviating from them. There is always room to change your priorities, but the slippery slope of saying yes to too many things will leave you feeling that you have been successful in none.

6. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. Constantly evaluate your progress. Know what’s working and what isn’t. Be willing to redirect your path when necessary. Rather than trying to compensate for a weakness, focus on your strengths and use them to move forward.

7. Surround yourself with inspiration. Know what makes you happy personally and make room for it. There will be many hard days when you question everything. Couple that with the often emotionally draining legal work, and things can become dreary pretty quickly if you let them. When things seem overwhelming, consult your mentors or other sources of inspiration for support. I found that the book *Naked Idealism* by Dave Wheatner infused me with motivation on the doubtful days.

You can find out more about the work the Community Justice Center does, and how to donate, on our Web site at www.nj-communityjusticecenter.org or friend us on Facebook at CJC Trenton!

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