



Poistive change, one dollar at a time

By Adam Overland

March 18, 2009

World Bank president Robert Zoellick recently estimated that the global economic crisis might cause up to 53 million more people to live on less than \$2 a day. In Sacramento, California, tent cities are springing up, reminiscent of the "Hooverville" shantytowns built by the homeless during the Great Depression. In a time of economic downturn, the success of a burgeoning charitable organization might seem unlikely. But University of Minnesota staff member Eric Schnell is seeking to turn the tide of generosity one wave of a dollar at a time.



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Schnell is chief administrative and information officer of the Office for Equity and Diversity, whose mission is to infuse the core values of equity and diversity into all aspects of teaching, learning, research, service, and outreach at the University. Schnell devotes much of his spare time to a volunteer fundraising organization he began called www.PositiveChange.com.

The organization's mission is to alleviate poverty by raising large numbers of small donations. Its core message suggests donating just 99 cents. "For this month, we are trying to raise \$3,000," he says. "We're not on pace right now, but we're going to give it a shot."

It's a good month for it, too, as March is Minnesota Food Share Month. "Every dollar we raise could conceivably earn an extra 20 or 30 cents [from Minnesota Food Share] if we raise it in March," says Schnell. The money raised through PostiveChange.com is funneled to [Keystone Community Services](#), a nonprofit organization managing three food shelves in St. Paul.

In essence, [PostiveChange](#) is a group of foot soldiers canvassing their contacts. So far, the membership consists of dozens of University employees and their friends and family members. "It's past and present colleagues," he says. But with those people on Facebook and Twitter, Schnell hopes word will spread fast. He would like the organization to eventually become a vast network of "microphilanthropists."

A big inspiration for Schnell's Web site was the micro-loan concept at www.kiva.org. That site allows people in developed countries to loan small amounts of start-up capital for funding entrepreneurial projects in less developed countries, so that people can lift themselves out of poverty. "But there are certain problems that don't lend themselves to loans, and so we thought those could be helped with a micro-philanthropy approach," says Schnell, who notes that over 50 percent of adult food shelf visitors in Minnesota are currently employed--they're just not earning a living wage. "We can't give them a loan--they're already in a deficit mode--they need help now," he says.

U giving

Charities such as food banks and shelters are feeling the pinch of the economy, as government funding and corporate donations are decreasing, making it harder to provide services. And the University is experiencing its own budget challenges, along with the state of Minnesota. Still, just this past October, U employees raised more than \$1 million for local charities during the annual [Community Fund Drive](#).

"The extraordinary times we're living in make me acutely aware of my own privilege--working at the University, having healthy kids--and I feel a certain responsibility," says Schnell. His two sons have even gotten involved in the project. "They've kicked in some of their own money--they each have a spending, a saving, and a giving bank. It's teaching them the intrinsic rewards of giving," he says.

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Eventually, Schnell would like to leverage technology and provide real-time feedback to donors. If they raise money for a city school, for example, then the minute the concrete hits the form, donors would receive an e-mailed picture or text message. "I don't know that donating has always felt good for people who just put a few coins in a jar. And I want to make it feel just as valuable as giving a hundred bucks and with the technology today, we ought to be able to do that," says Schnell.

It could be that global empathy may be ignited by a fear of being caught in the crashing economic wave ourselves, but as the wave falls back and the economy rebuilds, it will be interesting to see where this goes. In with the tide? Out with the tide? Or perhaps a change in the sea? In the meantime, Schnell just wants to make sure no one drowns.

For more information, see [PositiveChange](#).

Brief

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