

Baltimore Observed: Big Ideas

By Rebecca Messner

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Shaneka Wolford, 13, speaks defiantly into a video camera, one hand on her hip, shifting her gaze as if addressing a wide audience.

"I'm black, I'm strong, I'm a survivor. I am a student, I am an aunt, I am a cousin, I am a sister. I'm 13. I am a middle-schooler, I am an eighth-grader ... I am going to be successful, I am going to be proud of myself, I am going to be a lawyer, I'm going to be famous. I'm going to be a diva, I'm going to be a mother, a wife, and another aunt. I am going to be a role model. I am me. Me. And that's all I can be."

Wolford is one of more than 560 young Baltimoreans who take part each year in Wide Angle Youth Media, a program started by media educator Gin Ferrara who, in 2001, received an eighteen-month, \$48,750 Baltimore Community Fellowship. The fellowships, an initiative of Baltimore's branch of billionaire George Soros' multi-national foundation, the Open Society Institute (OSI), aim to foster "audacious ideas" from enterprising individuals who seek to empower the city's disadvantaged residents and communities.

Now, the fellows, and OSI-Baltimore, which celebrated its tenth anniversary this spring, are in the hot seat. Soros only intended to fund the organization for five years. He extended his gift for three more years in 2003. In 2005, seven years and more than \$50 million into the project, he told OSI-Baltimore he would contribute another \$10 million to the cause—but only if the organization raised \$20 million from other sources by 2010. Two and a half years into this effort, OSI-Baltimore has raised just over half of that. That leaves almost \$10 million to go. "We have to dig deep," says OSI-Baltimore Director Diana Morris.

OSI has seven offices around the world, from New York to Budapest, but OSI-Baltimore is the only branch that pours its resources into a single city. Morris explains that Soros saw Baltimore as a good place to better understand the dynamics within urban centers. Baltimore's relatively small size and strong community associations suggested that an infusion of philanthropic money could make a real difference, she says. "You can just get a lot more work done with that

existing infrastructure. You have real partners,” she says. “There was also good public-private partnership, and OSI knew those partnerships would lead to bigger, more sustainable changes.”

OSI-Baltimore set out to tackle three main issues: helping Baltimore youth succeed, reducing the social and economic costs of incarceration, and tackling drug addiction. Partnering with city agencies and other funders, it has established a core of six “innovation” high schools—smaller, theme-oriented educational environments. It has worked to revise parole guidelines so that more eligible prisoners get parole in a timely manner, which saves tax dollars and allows former inmates to get on with their lives and back to their families. And it has pushed to expand treatment for under- and uninsured drug addicts.

But perhaps the most innovative OSI-Baltimore initiative is the Community Fellows program, which takes up 14 percent of the organization’s \$5.7 million annual budget. The program is like a smaller-scale, local version of the MacArthur Foundation’s “genius grants,” and it is unusual in the foundation world, because the money goes directly to an individual recipient, rather than an organization. It raises the question: Can a pack of independent visionaries solve Baltimore’s seemingly intractable problems?

Past fellows have started Chefs in the Making, a program that provides culinary training to former victims of homelessness, drug addiction, and crime, through the Dogwood restaurant in Hampden; Velocipede, a community bike project in Station North; and the Book Thing of Baltimore, the free book distribution center in Charles Village. Bonnita Spikes, a fellow in 2005, used her grant to bring together families of murder victims and prisoners convicted of murder in a fight to abolish the death penalty. Shantel Randolph, of OSI’s class of 2007, created Foster Youth Incorporated to facilitate teenagers’ transition out of foster care and into lives of self-sufficiency.

Seven years after Gin Ferrara received her fellowship, Wide Angle Youth Media has become far more than an after-school program. In 2003, Wide Angle won \$10,000 to produce a segment of the nationally broadcast PBS documentary *The Way We See It: Youth Speak Out on Education*. In 2005, the program launched the first annual “Who Are You?” Youth Media Festival at Center Stage.

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Cheryl Casciani, of the Baltimore Community Foundation, calls the Fellows program “extraordinary ... While they’re addressing these intractable problems, they’re also nurturing this network of social entrepreneurs.”

And yet not all OSI-funded projects make a lasting difference. “A lot of projects didn’t take off like the Community Conferencing Center did,” says Community Fellowships Director Pamela King. According to a recent survey of more than ninety fellows, past and present, just 30 percent of the fellows’ projects continued as originally conceived. Another 30 percent evolved into something related, and 15 percent were absorbed into another organization. The remaining 25 percent ended, or the fellows left the area.

For some fellows, life just gets in the way. Corinne Meijer had to abandon her Child Development-Community Policing Program to live closer to her family in Washington, D.C. The program is now under new leadership.

“It’s one of the challenges—how to sustain the effort,” says Richard Rowe, a 2000 fellow who continues to work with his original cause of empowering young men, but whose original program, Habitats for Success, has since ended. “The fellowship ends, some folks hit reality and say, ‘I gotta go back to work.’ We’re all trying to pay our bills.”

Morris says OSI-Baltimore is working on a program that will evaluate the fellowships more vigorously. “But the role of philanthropy is to take calculated risks,” she says. “Philanthropy doesn’t just make safe bets.”

[Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy in](#)

Washington, D.C., agrees. “Too few foundations really take risks,” he says. “Many are very risk averse. They give only to established groups. They often seek to put Band-Aids on problems rather than being bold and seeking to solve the problems.”

Asked about the number of OSI fellows who abandon their projects, Dorfman replies, “If OSI is funding people with the idea of really testing out risky, edgy ideas, then these are fine numbers. A sizeable percentage are succeeding.”

And regardless of a program’s success, fellows say they take away valuable lessons.

After leaving Baltimore for D.C., Meijer was picked up by the nonprofit mental health agency Community Connections, and asked to start a children’s services program. It is now one of the largest outpatient mental health providers for children in the District. “I attribute my success more to that year [as an OSI fellow] than all those years of grad school,” says Meijer, who has a Ph.D. in clinical community psychology.

Julianne Franz, whose CityTheatreWorks project ended when funds ran out, says, “The fellowship gave me new hope. It steps in where the world—the adult world, the career world, even the social justice world—struggles to support the individual visionary.”

Ultimately, Morris says, it’s this sense of hope and empowerment, as well as real progress, that OSI-Baltimore seeks to foster. “People feel really overwhelmed by these issues—they’re complicated, they’re technical,” she says. “People have to believe that we can collectively have success in these areas. We really can make progress.”

Video: La Kaye Mbah. Open Society Institute-Baltimore Director Diana Morris

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