

# SPARK



During the last six years, 5,000 young women and men invested over \$1,000,000 in grants and pro bono services for 93 grassroots women's organizations. Those are the numbers. That's not the whole story.

## Spark does philanthropy differently.

Our members aggregate their social capital to improve the lives of women and girls.

Spark was started by a group of young professionals who didn't see their peers participating in philanthropy.

This wasn't because their peers didn't want to give and it wasn't because they didn't know how to give. It was because the way they were interested in giving was different.

They were willing to give money, but they also wanted to leverage the valuable resources at their disposal—their talents, connections and attention. They wanted to invest their social capital.

For six years, we have tested the premise that investing social capital—crowd-sourced grants, pro bono professional services, connections and attention—in grassroots women's organizations can have catalytic impact in women's lives.

As a result of Spark's "seed" investments in grassroots women's organizations, our grantees have opened schools, shelters, legal aid clinics and water wells. They have improved lives. They've received endorsements in the form of grants and awards from established institutions like EU Development Fund, Ford Foundation and The World Bank.



Moreover, Spark caused a shift. The face of who was giving to women's causes changed. Men and young people began to actively participate in women's causes. They raised capital, made investments and critically alerted the landscape of philanthropy.

We didn't set out to create a next generation philanthropic network, but that's what happened.

We call it The Spark Effect. The following are stories illustrating the qualitative impact of Spark's network.



## SPARK Investment

Investing a combination of time, money, connections and attention can have catalytic results.

A year ago, Spark members voted to support an innovative girls scholarship and mentoring program in Nairobi called Akili Dada. We were its first formal funder. We got to work immediately - making a grant, providing technical assistance and raising awareness about the incredible work the organization was doing to foster the next generation of women leaders in Kenya. Within a month of our partnership, Akili Dada was awarded a grant from the Global Fund for Women and the coveted UN Marketplace of Ideas Award for innovation in education.

The money and awareness that we raised were essential for Akili Dada's future, but their immediate need was an accounting system. We posted on Facebook and Twitter that they needed help.

Spark's investment model is a viable and effective agent for change.

That's when we got a call from a Spark member named Shaw, a 33 year-old businessman in San Francisco. Shaw wrote,

*I saw that there is a woman running a program in Kenya who needs help. I have been looking for the right volunteer opportunity but didn't know how to get started. Then, I got your email. The thing is I run three businesses and I'm really good at Quickbooks. Could I be the one who helps her?*

The organizations that we support—grassroots, start-up enterprises—are looking for financial resources but also connectivity that will help them scale their goals. When Shaw asked, *Can I be the one?* Our answer was **YES - ABSOLUTELY**, because, at Spark, each one of us can be the ONE!

Over the next several months, Shaw and the staff at Akili Dada built an accounting system. It wasn't easy. Shaw pushed the staff beyond their comfort zones by encouraging them to invest a cloud-based solution with a monthly fee when they were more

comfortable with a free software license.

Through this service exchange, the leadership of Akili Dada realized something. It is worth spending money on building systems now that would serve the organization in the future. Akili Dada operated on a shoe-string budget for five years, but Shaw's guidance clarified that it was time to grow from a grassroots effort into an established organization with fiscally-responsible practices and a vision for financially secured future.

When we first started working with Akili Dada they served 8 girls annually. Today, they serve 42. 100% of their scholars have graduated from high school and received full scholarships to college.

Recently, we received a call from the Founder of Akili Dada. She called to thank us. She attributed our partnership with bolstering her confidence, credibility and momentum. She credits Spark with granting her boldness.

## SPARK Insight

As we diversify and develop leaders, members and grantees reframe their ability to leverage resources.



Throughout the year, Spark hosts monthly member-led, education and networking events. In March, we hosted a speaker series with Jenni Williams. Jenni is the founder of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), a Spark grantee. WOZA empowers Zimbabweans to secure democratic representation through non-violent activism.

During the question and answer period of the presentation, a member, Greg remarked that in light of the success seen in the Arab Spring, why doesn't WOZA use social media? Jenni explained that their safety is constantly threatened and they feared putting their members in danger by using communication technologies.

Greg wasn't satisfied with the answer. He pressed Jenni on the issue. Her primary security concern centered on their safe house. The local militia regularly ransacked the house. The only computers WOZA had in the house were desktops. Therefore, when their house was attacked, their data was vulnerable.

Greg asked Jenni about laptops. If he could send her laptops, could WOZA start using social media? Again, Jenni explained that if the WOZA office received a package of laptops from the US it could be considered an act against the state and she and her team may be subject to incarceration. Then, he asked if she could bring them on the plane. Jenni thought for a moment and replied Yes! She was leaving the US in 48 hours.

The next morning Spark posted on Facebook and Twitter that we needed laptops for a grantee. Within hours, two were donated. Then, another Spark member, Triton, picked up the laptops to remove old data, upload new software and deliver them to Jenni before her flight home. Two weeks later, WOZA launched a Facebook Fan Page.

Since March, Jenni has trained her team to apply their nonviolent strategies to social media technologies. Their Facebook Fan Page has over 200 members.

Jenni regularly travels to fundraise. Yet, she had never asked for an in-kind donation from her international donors. She didn't ask for one this time. Greg asked for her.

Jenni will travel to the US in 2012. Her trip will be like the ones in the past. She will meet with donors and development agencies. The difference is this time she will bring an extra suitcase for donated laptops.



Spark shifts who and how we invest in women's human rights.



## SPARK Ingenuity

Spark works both globally and locally because the issues women face happen everywhere.

Two years ago in December, a Spark member, Anna, was up late doing her bills when she realized she had \$7 left in her Flex Spending Account. This money was taken out of her paycheck and put into this health savings account. She couldn't get the money back. If she didn't spend it by the end of the year, it would go to waste. \$7 was not that much money to Anna, but it felt irresponsible to waste it. Then, she had a crazy idea.

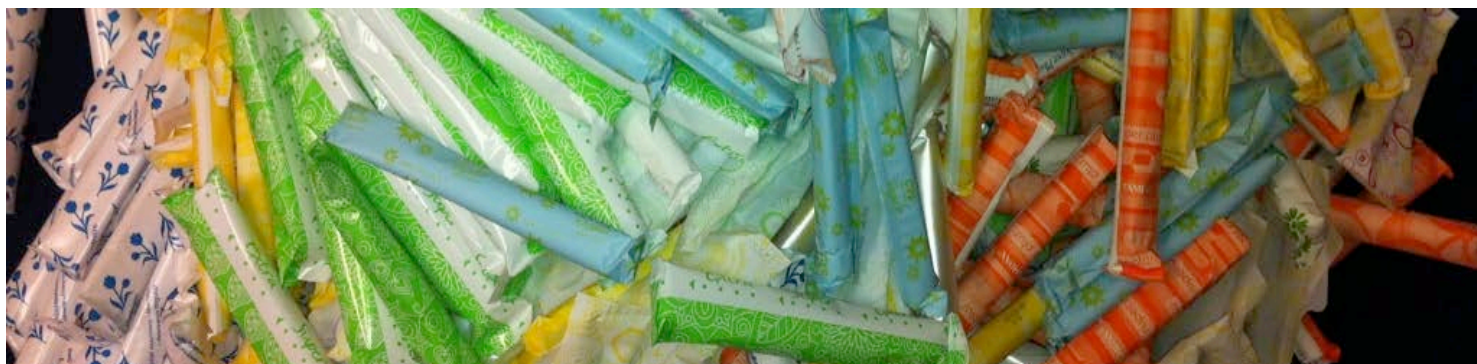
She worked at a company with great health benefits and she was healthy. Anna knew others did not share her fortune. Indeed, many of the local grantees that Anna learned about through Spark could benefit from basic health supplies. Anna had seen requests on Spark's Twitter feed for first aid kits and other health supplies. Spark grantees could use that \$7. They could probably use more than \$7.

Anna had three healthy co-workers who sat in her cube bank. She figured they too might have a little extra cash

in their flex spending accounts. She asked for their help. Anna and her co-workers pooled their remaining money in their flex spending accounts and used it to purchase \$300 worth of health supplies. With Spark's assistance, they donated these supplies to a local women's shelter. Anna and her co-workers, with insight and ingenuity, had provided the shelter with 3 months of health supplies.

Spark's investment model harnesses non-traditional, social capital resources to support grassroots women's organizations. That's exactly what Anna did when she grew \$7 into \$300 into 3 months of health supplies for an under-resourced organization.

Before Spark, Anna cared about what happens to women in the world, but she didn't know how to turn empathy into action. Through Spark, she began to understand the opportunities she could create to improve women's lives in her local and global community.



# SPARK Inspiration

Members credit Spark with increased attention and interest in investing in women's causes now and in the long term.



Elena wrote our Spark News Digest, a collection of a week's worth of thought-provoking articles on philanthropy and global women's issues. Before she headed off for law school, notes from digest followers poured in thanking Elena for her service. Here is one of the emails we received:

*Please know that I forwarded these articles to the Social Science teachers who, in turn, gave them to the students as part of the curriculum. So YOU made an impact in the lives of hundreds of teenagers every week. You will be missed, Elena.*

*– Allison, High School Spanish Teacher*

At Spark, we use the power of our network to change the global status of women by aggregating our members' donations, skills, personal and professional connections and attention. When you work in this networked way, other things begin to shift—namely, our behaviors.

In our annual survey, members shared stories about the changes they saw in their lives as a result of their involvement in Spark. Members credited Spark with empowering them to change careers, start companies and run for elected office.

One woman wrote that after sitting in a Grants Committee meeting and listening to her fellow members discuss a health benefit line item on a grant application she was compelled to approach her employer about changing their human resource policies. As a result of her advocacy, her company changed their parental leave policy. Before showing up to a Spark meeting on a Wednesday night, she would never consider such an act. Now, the company taps her for advice on their corporate policies.

SPARK

Investment

Insight

Ingenuity

Inspiration



# Networks ripple.

Those ripples have impact—serendipitous bursts that broaden our social returns. They are filled with the elements that ignite social change. The value of Spark's approach is that it creates space for the ripples that change people's behaviors. And improve women's lives. Everywhere.

To learn more about Spark and our vision for network-centric, next generation philanthropy, visit us at [www.sparksf.org](http://www.sparksf.org).

Join the Conversation.

