Small Grant Maker, Closing Down in 4 Years, Is a Force in Immigration

By Ben Gose

It's fitting that Darren Sandow heads a foundation built on the Miracle-Gro fortune. Fans of Mr. Sandow's work say he has nurtured impressive results out of the Hagedorn Foundation, which was founded eight years ago with just $58-million. Mr. Sandow's focus on national leadership on immigration issues has greatly benefited Nassau and Suffolk Counties, the two Long Island counties at the center of the foundation's work, they say.

Last month, Mr. Sandow received the Robert W. Scrivner Award for Creative Grantmaking, which comes with a $10,000 prize, at the Council on Foundations' annual meeting in Chicago.

While little-known and destined to be short-lived—Hagedorn is now down to $31-million and plans to close its doors in 2017—the foundation “isn’t afraid to play outside of its weight class,” says Monona Yin, a consultant to the Four Freedoms Fund, a group of foundations that give to immigrant-rights groups.

“Darren is a model for what a good regional funder can and should do,” she says.

‘Plugged In’

Mr. Sandow has turned Hagedorn into a major player in defusing the bitter immigration tensions that have plagued Long Island since Latino immigrants began flocking to the suburban area for work in the late 1990s.

The foundation jumped into the fray locally by founding two nonprofits—one that seeks to improve perceptions about immigrants and another that seeks to engage voters and community leaders in immigrant-rights issues.

But Mr. Sandow has also taken a prominent role nationally, joining foundation collaboratives like the Four Freedoms Fund. Last month, Mr. Sandow traveled to Washington for a White House briefing for philanthropists on the immigration-reform debate.

“We’ve plugged in at the national level because we know that until we get comprehensive immigration reform, things aren’t going to get a lot better locally,” he says.

Creating a Foundation

Mr. Sandow met Horace and Amy Hagedorn at the Long Island Community Foundation, a branch of the New York Community Trust. Mr. Sandow became a program officer for the community foundation in 1996, after serving in the Peace Corps in Costa Rica and er local groups that were doing cutting-edge work.

When Mr. Hagedorn became frail, Amy Hagedorn asked the community foundation to establish the Hagedorn Foundation, with Mr. Sandow as its executive director, learned about strategies he could try at home, and also steered the attention of much bigger national foundations toward Long Island.

Empower the People You’re Trying to Help

rather than spending on direct assistance to the immigrants, Hagedorn gives more than $400,000 per year to a civic-engagement group that is focused on getting the newcomers to vote and take leadership positions in their communities.

Don’t Be Afraid to Go it Alone

When Hagedorn could not rally other foundations to help it challenge a Nassau County decision about a youth board, Mr. Sandow requested a meeting with county officials anyway, and he won even greater results than he had expected.

Consider Closing at a Set Time

Hagedorn will spend all its assets by 2017, which enables it to grant far more each year than similar-size foundations that aim to operate in perpetuity.

How a Regional Foundation Gets So Much Done

Make National Connections

By getting involved in national immigration organizations, Darren Sandow, Hagedorn’s executive director, learned about strategies he could try at home, and also steered the attention of much bigger national foundations toward Long Island.

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Amy Hagedorn and Darren Sandow plan to close the foundation's doors in 2017, allowing it to give more away than similar-size groups can.

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Grant Maker Works to Get Immigrants to Be Activists

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Long Island Wins, a communications campaign designed to highlight the positive contributions that immigrants were making in the community. "This was Darren's brainchild," says Maryann Sinclair Slutsky, the group’s executive director. "He realized that what was happening in Suffolk was really untenable. People were being terrorized." Long Island Wins has since evolved into a full-fledged nonprofit, and Hagedorn has contributed a total of more than $2-million to support it. In 2008, when an Ecuadorian immigrant in Suffolk County was beaten to death by a group of white students out "beaner hopping"—a derogatory euphemism for attacking Hispanics—Long Island Wins had a blogger at the trial each day. "That was a turning point," Ms. Slutsky says. "It made a huge impact in turning the tide.

Going National

Mr. Sandow’s local involvement convinced him he needed to join the national debate. He helped lead the Funders Census Initiative, an informal group that worked to ensure that hard-to-count communities, including immigrants, weren’t overlooked in the 2010 census count. He learned about Welcoming America, a program that builds connections between immigrant populations and long-term residents, and brought the program to Long Island, under the umbrella of Long Island Wins. Until then, Welcoming America had been active only in Tennessee, but Mr. Sandow’s support contributed to the charity’s growth. Welcoming America is now active in 21 states.

"Darren, and what he tells the Schwarzman Scholars program to provide tuition aid to graduate students from all over the world to study at the university's School of Economics and Management.

Donor’s connection to the institution: Mr. Schwarzman is a member of the advisory board of the economics school.

Where other money for the program will come from: Mr. Schwarzman is helping Tsinghua raise an additional $200-million for the program, and says he has already raised half of that.

Why the donor gave: Mr. Schwarzman says he was worried in the West and elsewhere could turn into resentment over China’s robust economic strides. "I wanted to do something that could try to ameliorate and address this problem.

Impact of the gift: The fellowships will act as an endorsement of international education and international philanthropy, says Mr. Schwarzman.

—MARIA DE MENTO

For details about other new gifts, including a $66-million bequest to the Medical College of Georgia Foundation, go to philanthropy.com/topdonors.

Send gift news to gifts@philanthropy.com.