

Fearless Leaders

How Girl's Best Friend Foundation
Used Its Resources to Strengthen Organizations
and Develop Young Women

Submitted by Susannah Quern Pratt and Suzannah Cowell

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When I got involved in the program, my mom was like...“Oh, Lulu’s working with these girls”... and (other women in the community) were like “What do you mean by that?” So my mom asked me and I started informing her. It’s funny how my mom comes to me now like “There’s so and so whose husband is beating her. What can you do about it?” And then I go back to the community center and ask...And it’s interesting to me...’cause it’s my mom, who’s older than me, coming to me for information about certain subjects that she doesn’t even know about.

Lulu¹ is 17. She regularly participates in programming that helps girls organize around the issues that they identify as most pressing. Girl’s Best Friend Foundation (GBF)—a philanthropic organization that has spent its entire history supporting programming for girls—funds Lulu’s program. Lulu will tell you, when asked, that she considers herself a leader. And if you ask Lulu about how she became a leader she will point directly to the program staff at her organization. In turn, if you ask these same program staff how have they identified and cultivated their own leadership in this sector—how they have come to take action with and on behalf of girls—they will point to the work and staff members of GBF.

This evaluation report tells the story of how GBF has innovatively deployed its philanthropic resources to catalyze the powerful social change described above. Founded in 1994, GBF spent the last 13 years strengthening and supporting the young women of Chicago and the organizations that serve them. Through a highly focused, high-engagement model of philanthropy, GBF used grant making to develop leadership in its grantee organizations and the people who work within them. And as Lulu’s example demonstrates, these organizations and their staffs have, in turn, supported the development of a corps of resourceful and knowledgeable young women, capable of making change in their families, schools and communities.

Specifically, the evaluation results reported here indicate²:

- GBF’s work established a cohort of young women leaders exhibiting a confident and holistic sense of self who are change agents in their families, communities, and among their peers.
- Committed program staff—100 percent of whom stated they plan to remain in the nonprofit sector—gained leadership skills, professional development opportunities and programmatic allies through GBF funding and staff support.
- GBF fostered the development of strong girl-centered organizations, led by activist women and girls.

1 All names, except for the GBF staff, have been changed to assure anonymity.

2 See Appendix A for Evaluation Scope and Methodology.

As the report suggests, GBF made several strategic decisions over the course of its existence in order to bring about these changes. Of these, perhaps the most noteworthy has been the decision to “sunset”—or close its doors in 2008. This time-limited approach allowed the foundation the freedom to intensively deploy its resources—the benefits of which were cited numerous times by survey and interview respondents. At the same time, this evaluation surfaced a great deal of concern about GBF’s pending closure and perceived gaps in funding and networking. Put bluntly, the evaluation process forced the following question: did the benefits of GBF’s time-limited, intensive approach outweigh the costs?

In sum, given the positive impacts evidenced by this report, it is our evaluative judgment that the benefits of GBF’s high-engagement approach outweigh the costs. While grantees are clearly uncertain about how to move forward without GBF, they are, as a result of receiving GBF funding, a set of stronger growth-focused organizations, staffed by committed individuals and led by activist girls and women who are in regular communication with one another. These assets leave them well-positioned to continue the important work begun by GBF on behalf of girls.

INTRODUCTION

After providing background on Girl's Best Friend Foundation (GBF), this report begins with an exploration of the impact of the Foundation on the girls at the core of the GBF mission statement—looking closely at how they developed as activist leaders through involvement in GBF-supported youth work. We then turn to the program staff, a key ingredient in this change, exploring their own leadership and intentional ongoing commitment to girls programming, some of which they directly attribute to their experiences with GBF. Finally, we look at the impact that GBF has had on the organizational homes for these staff and girls—noting the many ways that GBF's funding has positioned them for future success.

During the evaluation process, data to support these claims was gathered through a survey of grantees from 2001 to the present³, and a series of interviews and focus groups with program staff and participants at GBF-supported institutions—allowing us to hear about the foundation's impact from over 25 different women and girls. This report is not written, however, to celebrate the achievements of GBF's work. Indeed, it is our hope that in exploring GBF's impact and approach, we might offer some insights valuable to grantmakers in general, those interested in working on a social change agenda, and finally, those interested in continuing to cultivate the tremendous potential of organizations for which powerful work with girls is central.

To that end, at the heart of this report is the question of how GBF has been able to achieve its notable impacts, and at what cost? The second half of this report attempts to answer those questions by detailing the GBF high-engagement approach—its strengths, its limitations and its implications for the future—so that others might benefit from the lessons gained. Finally, as GBF prepares to close its doors in 2008, the report concludes with the important question of what is next for the organizations it has funded and the girls they serve—many of whom are struggling to imagine a future without GBF.

³ The survey had a response rate of 56% (n=24).

Part I: The Context— Girl’s Best Friend Foundation’s Mission, Philosophy & Programs

The mission of the Girl’s Best Friend Foundation (GBF) is to promote and protect the human rights of girls and young women by advancing and sustaining policies and programs that ensure their self-determination, power, and well-being.

GBF is a family foundation that provides grants and other resources to achieve four large goals:

- promote strong girl leaders dedicated to feminist ideals and social justice
- encourage the development of effective youth worker allies
- strengthen organizations that engage and support girls as activists
- and to help build the field of girls’/youth activism.

Gender-consciousness, inclusive safe space, risk-taking, respect, emphasis on strengths and potential, and evaluation for learning are all key values of the Foundation.

While GBF consistently strived to support programming for girls in some fashion, the foundation’s approach has developed over its 13 year history. As the foundation matured in its grant making practice, it has:

- reaffirmed and focused on its original social change agenda for girls by funding girl-led organizing, action research, and advocacy, alongside direct programming for girls;
- focused more intentionally on building the programmatic and organizational capacity of a cohort of organizations working in these areas;
- moved to a more narrow geographical focus—confined to organizations in the Chicago area;
- continued and enhanced the ancillary support it offers grantees, including opportunities for training and networking; and,
- remained committed to the “sunset” model—spending out its entire asset base and closing its doors by the end of 2008.

What has this all added up to? In brief, since its inception in 1994, the foundation has given away \$7.5 million⁴ primarily to about 40⁵ organizations that have served a combined total of thousands of girls. More important than the scope of GBF’s reach, however, is the depth of its commitment to a set of issues and individuals. It is this commitment—which alternately takes the form of advocate, partner, learner and leader—that accounts for the Foundation’s significant impact. Focusing intently on a set of issues and individuals, modeling the change it was hoping to see, and offering grantees full support in all its forms, led to a high return on “investments.” High engagement means high returns.

See Appendix B for a list of the direct grants programs and other resources provided by GBF.

4 As of 6/30/07. GBF plans to make an additional \$780,000 in grants by the time it closes in 2008. Few new grantees are anticipated.

5 About 40 groups were core grantees of GBF from 2002 onward. Some of these groups were also funded between 1994 and 2001. Another 150 organizations received one-time support via earlier core support or discretionary, professional development and other kinds of grants. As of 6/30/07, 189 organizations had been funded.

Part II: The Impact

As noted in the previous section, GBF’s approach has meant that the majority of its dollars were devoted to building the capacity of a discrete set of institutions. While the foundation was spending time and resources focusing most intensively on the development of these organizations and the people that run them, they were simultaneously developing a cohort of young woman leaders capable of effecting change. This dual layer of impact appears to have come about through shared leadership and transference of empowerment. GBF strengthened organizations, which in turn could support their staff, which in turn could strengthen the girls with whom they worked.

In perhaps the most exciting turn of events, data from this evaluation suggests that these girls are now change agents in their families, communities, and among their peers.

Young Women Leaders

“I didn’t consider myself to be a leader until I got involved in the program a lot... and it’s funny, you never consider yourself being a leader until somebody tells you.”

—YOUNG WOMAN PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

The most important “bottom-line” data to emerge from this evaluation is evidence that the organizations and programs that GBF funded are making a difference in the lives of young women throughout Chicago. Indeed, focus groups conducted with girls, supplemented by testimony from program staff, demonstrates that this cohort of young leaders is confidently taking steps to improve communities and their lives.

The clearest impact to emerge from the focus group data was the girls’ conception of themselves as leaders. In the words of one young woman, “I feel like I’ve been able to...lead through [this program] because it’s an open and comfortable space so you’re able to be yourself.” Equally as important was the girls’ real commitment to a shared leadership model, and to nurturing one another as leaders—an approach both promoted and modeled by GBF. One focus group member described the leadership in her group along the following lines, “I don’t even see a single leader. I mean, you know, that Tanya is really the...the leader supposedly, but I think it’s so open that I don’t even feel tension with anything... I mean, we’re all like equals. I don’t even see such thing as leadership.” In another focus group exchange, young women sought to support the developing leadership of peers.

YOUNG WOMAN 5: I’m too shy to be a leader.

FACILITATOR: Say more. Say why you think that.

YOUNG WOMAN 5: I don’t know. I’ve always been like this, very quiet. And I’m trying, I’m trying to learn how to speak out and talk a little bit more, conversate...slowly, slowly.

YOUNG WOMAN 3: I actually think you are a leader because we’re in the process of hiring a staff and you and Maria, um, were really speaking out... which I was really, really shocked because it was unusual for you. And I was like, WOW. It left me really awed.

YOUNG WOMAN 5: I came back talking a lot.

(laughter)

YOUNG WOMAN 1: Sometimes the best leaders don't talk a lot. Sometimes they listen and talk when they feel like it's necessary.

YOUNG WOMAN 5: Thank you for the comments.

(laughter)

Focus group participants described the ways in which their leadership and commitment to girls' issues has allowed them to resource themselves, their friends, peers and communities. In both focus groups, young women were particularly well-informed and articulate about issues concerning healthy sexuality, and in both groups, young women relayed stories of passing good information on to friends. In the words of one young woman,

"We learned a lot about sex there, you know, healthy sex...disease prevention and stuff like that. And my friends, they're always getting into trouble. And when they do, you know, I can get them information. I was like, "Oh, you got Chlamydia? Oh let me tell you about Chlamydia." I get them examples...this is what it is...this is how you can cure it. We can go to the [program] office, and I can tell you where you can get the information on where to get cured, you know...stuff like that. Before that, we didn't know about information like that."

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The knowledge base of the young women in GBF-supported programming was not confined to healthy sexual practice. Focus group participants demonstrated awareness of a network of girl-serving and girl-led programming active in Chicago. Moreover, they articulated the kinds of resources—financial and otherwise—that it takes to keep this network going. As one girl commented, "I think Sarah [the program director] is also a really good resource, cause we were just talking about how she was going to plan a workshop around grant writing, and I mentioned recently that I wanted to make my own non-profit focusing on developing minority leaders who apply to Ivy Leagues, and she's being a really good resource and taught me to share my ambition for my non-profit." It is worth noting that in this particular case, the program staff person being referred to had taken part in the fundraising training and networking activities offered by GBF. This particular case offers a concrete example of the way that knowledge provided by GBF's programming filtered out through program staff to positively effect young women.

In particular, girls involved in GBF's girl-led grant making and community action program, Sisters Empowering Sisters, spoke articulately about the grant making process and the need for funding⁶. One interviewee offered the following evidence of how this experience influenced participants, recalling,

Fearless
Leaders

6 Sisters Empowering Sisters, GBF's girl grant making and community action program, was begun in 1997 and staffed by GBF as a way of enabling young women to actively participate in the grant making process, and also as a means of involving young women directly in GBF's decisions. In 2006, with support from GBF, SES was spun-off to become a program of the Chicago Girls' Coalition.

“The girls in our program also were funded by Sisters Empowering Sisters and then they decided to start their own grantmaking effort. They researched oppressions and decided to take on issues through RFPs. The girls applied for and received \$1250 from the regional youth net and then [our organization] matched it. They learned about philanthropy and funded 3 to 4 other girls groups...They learned you can encourage others to take on an issue with an RFP.”

In addition to thinking and talking about themselves as leaders, girls involved in GBF-supported programming talked about themselves as feminists. It is particularly important to note that, on this point, the girls most intensively involved with GBF as an organization were the most comfortable in claiming that title for themselves. For the girls who articulated a feminist identity, the term appeared to represent the notion that they were both a part of something larger than themselves, and also therefore capable of making change in the world. The following excerpt from the focus group of most highly-involved girls demonstrates this ability: In the quote below, a young woman talks about how she began by rejecting the notion of feminism, but concluded her program work by understanding and accepting herself as a woman capable of making change.

So we go through the program, and we start giving out, helping girls with the grants, and doing outreach, and then our own projects. [Our program director] is working with us, you know, and she’s like, “You are a feminist, you know...the name just seems overwhelming for you, but you guys have the traits of a feminist.”...Now when I look back, I’m like o.k. I know I’m a feminist...we stand up for [women’s issues], we believe in it, and, you know, we motivate others to do what they do and to believe in it too.

While girls less intensively involved with GBF did not feel as comfortable with the word feminist, they were nonetheless willing to engage with the notion of supporting women and making change. As one young woman commented, “how we define ourselves is not necessarily by this...label feminist, but more so, we are a coalition of woman and girls that want to learn about and take action around issues that affect woman and girls.”

Intentional, Committed Staff

From the beginning, GBF has been an absolute anchor for the organization, for me, and for my personal development. —PROGRAM STAFF AT GBF-FUNDED INSTITUTION

During the exploration of impact on girls involved in GBF-supported programming, the program staff and leadership at grantee organizations were frequently referenced as crucial to the girls’ development. Indeed, it appears much of the impact on girls is directly attributable to intensive work on the part of staff at these organizations. It is important to note, then, that when interviewed about their own formation, these program staff and organizational leaders attribute much of their own growth and change to involvement with GBF.

In particular, evaluation results demonstrate how GBF funding for staff at grantee organizations built the staff’s professionalism and sense of leadership and competence. As one interviewee

reported, involvement with GBF has, “been quite beneficial...It provided a framework for [our previous program manager’s] staff development that I would have been hard pressed to provide otherwise; we’ve never had another funder do something similar. It shaped her development incredibly. She became part of the leadership team and led strategy development. Now she’s on our board. She was recruited to a job because of her industry expertise and experience.” Another participant in GBF’s Leadership & Innovation Group for executive directors commented it was, “an amazing experience...It was about really developing each of us in terms of what we needed from our organizations to progress. There were opportunities for self reflection, to voice dreams and also to deal with challenging situations.”

Aside from the professional development opportunities provided directly through foundation resources, GBF staff also encouraged grantees to build professional development into their operating budgets. Thus, it is important to note that survey respondents report providing opportunities for their program staff (96 percent) and administrative staff (90 percent) to interact with colleagues at other nonprofit organizations and/or professional associations on a regular basis. Eighty-four percent report having professional development line item in their annual operating budgets.

Beyond the general enhancement of the program staff as a group of professionals, interviewees noted that involvement with GBF cemented their core convictions about, and commitment to, programming for girls. For most interviewees this manifested in an explicit and steadfast commitment to girl-led programming. Indeed, when asked at the onset of the interview whether they held any strong convictions about girls programming, the singular response from the vast majority of interviewees was that for a program to succeed, it must be girl-centered or girl-led.

[Girls programs] need to be girl-centered groups where they can share similar experiences.

You have to start from where [the girls are] at. There’s a great deal of listening in that.
They’re coming with valuable experience and knowledge that no one values or asks for.
My job is to create a space where they can feel comfortable speaking opinions about
what’s important in their lives and in a setting where they can hear other girls like them.

When caring adults join with girls to create programs, this is [the girls’] program
where they have a voice.

Programs should be girl-led. We have to listen to what they’re telling us they need.

GBF taught me to develop programs from the inside out. To start from where
the girls were, and move out from there.

Fearless
Leaders

Many of the respondents connected this set of convictions to their work with GBF, noting with particular appreciation what GBF promoted and subsequently modeled through the SES program. As one interviewee observed, “Girls need space to come up with their own stuff and be empowered to act. GBF has really promoted this model.”

Beyond their commitment to the girl-led approach, program staff members at grantee organizations report that they intend to remain in the field—continuing their work with women and girls’ issues, rather than viewing this phase of their career as a stepping stone to other work.

Of the 14 program staff interviewed for this report, 14 indicate that they intend to remain in the nonprofit sector, and 12 indicate that they intend to continue work with girls and women. As one interviewee noted, “Advocacy for women and girls...I’m going to do whether anybody pays me or not.” Or, in the words of another staff member, “I had wanted to focus on my art. The girls keep pulling me back. When you see what it does, how can you leave?” Aside from the compelling nature of the work captured in these comments, it appears that program staff who interacted with GBF have received a level of support, knowledge and skill enhancement, and community sufficient to prevent the burnout or turnover rates more common to the nonprofit sector as a whole.

To this end, the final, and perhaps most lasting effect that GBF had on program staff was to begin a network of girl-serving staff who are turning to one another for advice, wisdom, support and collaboration. Accomplished through the Learning Circles, training sessions, convenings and intentional networking on the part of GBF program staff, the leadership, youth workers and other program staff at grantee organizations are not only aware of one another but also in active conversation. Networks are both formal—as in the Chicago Girls’ Coalition, co-created by GBF—and informal. For some grantees, this network has been essential. As one interviewee commented, “When there is only one program person in a program, GBF provides a network.” Others referenced the opportunities to emerge from this network, noting, “Networking led to opportunities for collaboration...Other organizations ask if our participants can speak at their meetings. They’ve had the chance to get to know other girls.” Still others report that they continue to remain in touch with the peers that they have met through GBF. Evidence of this network at work could be found in the response to a question posed in our survey of grantee organizations. When asked how these organizations find new staff, 88 percent of respondents replied “word of mouth/networking with peer organizations.”

Strong, Growing, Girl-Led Organizations

GBF understood that a healthy organization was the best way to insure that girls get good service.

—PROGRAM STAFF AT GBF-FUNDED INSTITUTION

GBF’s grant making had multiple levels of impact on grantee organizations. Not only were the organizations strengthened through the growth and development of their staff, but grantees report that GBF’s funding improved their work by: bolstering basic programmatic structure for girls, elevating the role of girls within the organizations, and by strengthening the organizations overall.

Most prominently, grantee organizations reported making strides in successfully implementing, and in many cases expanding, their programs for girls since being funded by GBF. Evidence of program growth includes increasing the number of program participants (reported by 75 percent of respondents), increasing the number of staff involved in programming (67 percent), and increasing the visibility of the program within the organization (67 percent). In addition, since first receiving funding from GBF, 79 percent of respondents reported an increased need/demand for programming, and 79 percent reported an increased ability to meet it.

In addition to reporting stronger organizations, grantees reported elevating the role of girls

within their organizations—particularly in the areas of program planning and organizational governance. For example, respondents report involving program participants in multiple organizational activities and 50 percent say that girls and young women are part of their board. Additionally, respondents are involving girls in the program and organizational development process. Many respondents report engaging girls or young women from their programs in multiple activities since first receiving funding from GBF: developing programming for themselves or others (96 percent); providing feedback on program or organizational improvement (88 percent); participating in conferences or seminars (79 percent); fundraising, marketing and/or promoting the program to others (71 percent); strategic planning (63 percent); participating in board meetings (50 percent); and participating in staff meetings (21 percent). The active role of girls was underscored by an interviewee, who related the following story,

One girl was 12 years old when she became involved. Her mother always pushed her to form her own opinions, to be critical. [But even so,] she changed a lot over six months [of programming]. She lost her fear of speaking and expressing her opinions. She did a lot of the mental work for the group. In our work on women and girls in the media and its impact on women's feelings about themselves, she did the analysis. She's now bringing new girls into the organization and participating in setting direction about where things are going.

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In addition, it is important to note, that receiving funding from GBF has also strengthened entire organizations through a variety of mechanisms—including helping to leverage additional financial support. Respondents report that funding from GBF positioned their organization to obtain additional program support (79 percent) and general support (58 percent) from other sources. Respondents also report increasing the organization's budget (71 percent). Many who reported increases in budget attributed the increase to GBF's ability to help leverage new funding. As one respondent put it, "GBF has been extremely supportive of our work at multiple levels. One of the hidden assets of being a GBF grantee is the community building the foundation does. This community building allows organizations to leverage each others' programs and mission to achieve broader impact through partnerships and general outreach for girls." Overall, grantees see GBF as instrumental in building awareness and validity for the field of youth development and leadership programming.

Respondents also evidenced strong organizational practice in two additional areas. First, a significant portion of respondents are engaged in evaluation and strategic planning work. Thirty-eight percent of respondents report engaging in ongoing process evaluation, and 88 percent report engaging in impact evaluation. Respondents cited GBF tools, trainings and other resources⁷ as being central to this work, but the degree to which these processes are now "owned" by the grantee organizations is evidenced in the fact that 42 percent of respondents report devoting a portion of one staff person's time to evaluation, and 46 percent have a line item for evaluation in their organizational budget.

⁷ GBF provided 10%, over and above the grant amount, for evaluation costs associated with each of its core grants. In later years, it also made grants for youth-led evaluative research projects.

In this same vein, 70 percent of respondents report having a functional and current strategic plan. Second, GBF-supported organizations reported intentionally valuing diversity at both the board and staff levels. Sixty-three percent of respondents report having a policy regarding board diversity, and 67 percent report having a similar policy regarding staff diversity.

Particularly interesting about these two practices, planning/evaluation and intentional diversification, is the fact that each were intentionally modeled by GBF in its own work. Governed by a board of various abilities, ages, ethnicities, and experience, GBF sought to broaden the perspective of its grant making and to include decision makers who are often neglected at the board level⁸. Similarly, the foundation deliberately undertook regular evaluation of its own practice, at first by doing biannual summaries of grantees' evaluations alongside regular assessments of its grant making practice, and later by using a logic model format to articulate a theory of change and track impact. This iterative, reflective process allowed them to respond to emerging needs and issues, while simultaneously helping them stay on course with their key objectives and hopes. This notion of modeling, then, provides an important introduction to the second half of this report. As is evident from the interviews, survey data and focus groups, GBF's philosophy and approach is deeply appreciated by grantees. But it is this approach coupled with GBF's willingness to "practice what it preached" that allowed GBF to partner so effectively with its grantees on behalf of girls.

⁸ GBF Founder, Cynthia K. McLachlan, specified from the outset that the majority of GBF's board was to be made up of non-family members.

Part 3: The GBF Approach

“You can talk to [GBF staff]. Everyone is really thoughtful. They have been consistent. They have a strong, clear objective and they stick with it. They look outside the box.”

—PROGRAM STAFF AT A GBF-FUNDED INSTITUTION

Perhaps most consistent among the evaluation findings was a pervasive sense of appreciation for the ways in which GBF has conducted itself as a grantmaker. Specifically, respondents to both the survey and interviews commented on the following facets of GBF’s approach:

- creative institutional support
- intentional investment in individuals
- willingness to engage critical issues

These elements of GBF’s approach constitute its strengths, but data from this evaluation also reveals the limitations. The decision to spend out the foundation’s assets so intentionally and intensively has left grantees uncertain about their futures and the state of girls programming once GBF leaves the landscape. With this concern in mind, the report will conclude by addressing the question of what is next for the programs and girls impacted by GBF.

Creative Institutional Support

GBF is first and foremost a grantmaker, and so it is not surprising that several respondents focused their appreciation on the creative ways in which GBF offers grant support. First, several respondents noted the ease with which GBF structured their grant making process, forms, etc. In addition, a number of respondents commented on the ways in which GBF was willing to take a different, somewhat more risky approach with its grant making. In at least four instances cited by respondents, GBF was willing to be either the first or second funder of a program or organization. As one interviewee recalled, “Alice worked with [another funder] to provide seed money and to host a funders breakfast for other people to learn about us. That gave us a jump start, but they let me take it from there. The help was invaluable.”

This stance was not GBF’s only departure from grant making norms. Other respondents commented with appreciation about GBF’s willingness to make multi-year funding commitments to its grantees. A review of GBF’s core grantees from 2002 to 2007 reveals that almost all received renewed funding each year. This choice to remain engaged with organizations beyond a one-year commitment meant that grantees could plan and occasionally make bold choices. As one interviewee observed, “There was never a time when we had to wonder, ‘What are we going to do?’...we had a relationship with [GBF]. They weren’t going anywhere.”

Finally, GBF was not afraid to engage with organizations that were struggling financially. As one survey respondent commented, “We feel that GBF staff have been very supportive and respectful, always being sensitive to the needs of the organization and the challenges it has had to face.” Beyond sensitivity, however, GBF was willing to support organizations facing financial challenges. As one focus group respondent commented, “I know they were instrumental in helping

Fearless
Leaders

[my organization]. We were in like a seriously, seriously deep hole and they helped us, and without them a lot of organizations would not be able to exist.” Another respondent relayed a positive experience she had calling the foundation to request her grant check ahead of schedule in order to address tight internal cash flows at her organization. As she observed, “I knew it would be a safe conversation. I knew I could make the call without jeopardizing my funding.”

Intentional Support of Individuals

A second strength of GBF’s approach as cited by respondents was its willingness to invest in the individuals who make up the staff and leadership at grantee organizations. As one program staff person commented, “GBF is like family—if they can help, they will.” On the most basic level, this investment in individuals took the form of building healthy communication with grantee partners, characterized by mutual trust and honest exchange. Evaluation survey data reveals that the majority of respondents (67 percent) had three or more interactions with foundation staff each year. More notable than the quantity of these interactions, was the reported quality of the relationship. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated that their amount of interaction with the foundation was “just right” and when it came to addressing operational changes, 75 percent of respondents felt “comfortable” or “very comfortable” discussing it with GBF staff.

In addition, grantees reported interacting with GBF staff on a wide variety of topics, including administrative (83 percent), strategic (63 percent), programmatic (58 percent), other (20 percent), and operational (17 percent), demonstrating the foundation’s openness to address any issue a grantee might be experiencing. As one survey respondent commented, *“I have found GBF to be the most productive interaction that I have had with a foundation in my career...I always felt welcome to call GBF staff to talk through concerns, and I never felt that any issues that I brought to the table would be used against us in future funding considerations.”*

Another interviewee observed how this listening stance translated into real needs being met at her organization,

“They [GBF] acknowledge your experience. They listened to how people with disabilities are active every day. They funded based on what they heard. For instance, they gave us funding for personal assistants so the girls could get out more.”

Beyond working to develop positive relationships with staff and leadership at grantee organizations, GBF reached out to grantees to provide a series of convenings and trainings to help build organizational capacity and enhance the professional development of staff. According to the survey, 92 percent of respondents took advantage of one or more of these opportunities, frequently sending more than one staff person. Grantees especially appreciated trainings on fundraising, financial management, and evaluation, and executive directors who took part in GBF’s Leadership & Innovation Group—a gathering of organizational leaders—felt that their own work and sense of leadership was greatly enhanced by participation. Notably, GBF supplemented these convenings and trainings with additional benefits for grantees such as a subscription to the Grassroots Fundraising Journal, and funds for classes at a local center for nonprofits.

Finally, GBF took its investment in individuals to another level by providing open-ended streams of funding for professional development and other unanticipated or situation-specific needs. The establishment of a Fund for Professional Development to which grantees could apply for issue-specific conferences or trainings became a significant resource for grantees. As one interviewee commented, “We received \$3,000 to send people to training that we never could have afforded [on our own].” Another interviewee recalled being asked to speak at a conference in Ecuador and subsequently receiving GBF support to attend and to bring along two girls. And yet another grantee remembers, “I have requested support [to send young women to trainings in San Francisco] one time for \$1,000 and another time for \$250. Both times [after reading my proposal] Alice’s only question for me was, ‘Are you sure you don’t want to send more people?’”

The spirit in which these funds were offered—one of trust and responsiveness—was perhaps their most important characteristic.

Dynamically Engaging Issues

The Foundation’s willingness to focus on a set of critical issues, and to make sure this agenda was communicated to, and shared by, its grantees was the final aspect of GBF’s approach to receive commendation from its grantees. In particular, grantees referenced GBF’s commitment to supporting girl-led programming and girl representation at the organizational leadership level, as well as an initiative on sexual orientation and gender identity, which advocated for youth programming to create safe space for LGBTQ—and straight—youth, and funded the creation of a toolkit to help groups do so.

GBF’s use of its role as funder to advance this agenda was welcomed and appreciated by the grantees, largely because of the generative spirit in which this agenda was offered and supported.

GBF carefully promoted key issues by building upon its good relationships, and by resourcing grantees to take up this agenda. One interviewee observed, “We run an annual girls conference, and we incorporated gender identity programming because GBF had it on the table and could connect us to other organizations who could help us.”

Grantees were also grateful for GBF’s commitment to funding advocacy work by and with girls, not just direct services or programming. As one survey respondent noted, “GBF has been one out of few to strongly advocate for girls’ rights and thereby developed a new standard for how social justice organizations can support girls in very significant ways.” Another interviewee observed that GBF understood the need to specifically promote the need for girls’ funding, noting, “They [GBF] advanced the funding agenda rather than the advocacy agenda. By being there, GBF was an advocate for funding.”

Perhaps the most atypical piece of GBF’s work, however, was the way in which it reached across the boundaries of a typical grantmaker to provide actual foundation-based programming for young women. GBF’s girl grant-making program, Sisters Empowering Sisters, was staffed by a foundation staff member and was funded as an integral part of the foundation. This important choice appears to have had a remarkable effect on both the girl participants, and the foundation itself—offering them direct insight into the issues, thoughts, needs and concerns of the population they were trying to reach.

Cautions and Concerns

The GBF approach is highly laudable; grantees applaud the ways in which GBF has conducted its grant making. That said, the evaluation process surfaced one important caution, and one continuing concern.

THE CAUTION

As is evident, GBF's approach requires a significant degree of involvement in the life of grantee organizations on the part of foundation staff. On more than one occasion interview and survey respondents noted that this level of involvement could have crossed the line from helpful to obtrusive, were it not for the sensitivity and trustworthiness of GBF staff. The key factor to GBF's success in this area appears to be the staff's ability to 1) listen carefully to grantee organizations, and 2) to offer flexible responsive resources alongside promoting an issue-based agenda—thereby allowing grantees to feel both led and supported as leaders, simultaneously.

In early interviews, GBF staff themselves acknowledged this risk and talked specifically about how they walk this line—primarily through a strategy of responsive listening and reflective conversation on the part of foundation staff. As the Foundation's website observes: “High-engagement philanthropy means grantee staff and GBF staff talk often and regularly about what is happening in our respective organizations and about new challenges and unanticipated opportunities that are cropping up. We all ask questions to stay on top of what we are all doing with and for girls and young women.”

Finally, staff observed that this high-intensity approach could be difficult for a grantee if more than one or two funders operated in this style.

THE CONCERN

In the section on Staff Impact, this evaluation highlighted the universally-held conviction about girl-led programming. It is important to note, however, that there was another prevalent answer offered in response to the question: “What convictions have you come to hold about girls programming?” The answer—there is still simply not enough programming for girls.

This concern was underscored by a series of unsolicited comments offered in the surveys, interviews, and focus groups about who would fill the gap in funding and networking that will be left by GBF when it closes its doors in 2008. Program staff and girls alike grieved openly for the loss of GBF's staff, financial resources, and overall organizational commitment. While many acknowledged the responsible ways in which GBF has begun the process of closing down—full transparency, plenty of advance warning, cutting back on foundation staff alongside cutting back on grant making budget—they were still left grappling with the question of which funders will continue to build the field of girl-focused organizations in Chicago and beyond.

Several interviewees expressed the desire to proactively address this issue, noting, “Grantees need to get together and talk about transition.” Still others were able to name funders and other supporters who they believe may be able to support key programming. Nonetheless, the evaluation surfaced a pervasive anxiety about the future.

What Next? Life After GBF...

The conclusion of this evaluation, then, raises an important issue. When a foundation engages so intensively with grantees, issues and individuals, does it foster an unsustainable dependency alongside the positive change it engenders? Has the net effect of GBF's work been to create a functioning system that is overly reliant on GBF as its central hub?

Given the positive impacts evidenced by this report, it is our evaluative judgment that the benefits of GBF's high-engagement approach outweigh the costs. While grantees are clearly uncertain about how to move forward without GBF, they are, as a result of receiving GBF funding, a set of stronger organizations, staffed by a committed individuals and led by activist girls and women who are in regular communication with one another. These assets leave them well-positioned to continue the important work begun by GBF on behalf of girls.

Perhaps the final convincing evidence of this can be found in the response to our concluding survey question which asked respondents to comment on the single greatest challenge outside of funding that the organization anticipates facing in the next five years. Of note: the vast majority of grantees focused on growth-related issues, implying that this cohort of grantees is not struggling with or worrying about basic organizational survival but is, instead, thriving now, and as they imagine themselves into the future. Several respondents cited the need for leadership development. Other responses ran the gamut from transitioning beyond a founding director to "maintaining our current success" or "managing growth." Indeed, to the extent that this answer represents the forward view of GBF grantees, it is encouraging to see that the responses are self-aware, confident of their organizational capacity, and growth-focused.

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In conclusion, GBF has put into motion programs, organizations, and modes of thought that simply did not exist before the Foundation's support, but which appear likely to live on well beyond GBF's close. Evidence from this report attests to the fact that these programs and organizations are changing girls lives, and that these girls are changing their communities for the better. In addition, girls and women across Chicago are both aware of, and connected to, one another in important ways. While the immediate period of transition may be difficult, this evidence suggests that GBF is leaving behind a strong legacy of work on behalf of girls and young women that will likely continue in their absence. In the words of one young woman,

"... There's just so much you could say about GBF... the organizations that do exist, the programming they do, would not be the way that they are now. And the staff that run these programs would not be the way that they are. I mean, I've been through the Learning Circles. These are things that totally changed my life that would not have happened without the help of GBF... They are revolutionary, and even the fact that they're not just leaving, [instead] they're leaving a mark and helping organizations... I think is phenomenal. So, they'll still be here even though they're not here."

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Girl's Best Friend Foundation's Response

How'd we do it?

We've consistently worked from two basic beliefs—we must know and be known by the groups we help support, and we provide resources in addition to grants. These convictions form the essence of our high engagement approach.

Focus, focus, focus—when we reached a state of organizational maturity that clarified our choices, GBF returned to its original emphasis on girls' feminist social change activism. We realigned all our resources to move ahead.

We've steadily incorporated changes in the field and in our perspectives. Program officers were charged with bringing new information, developments, and nuanced shifts back to GBF for discussion and inclusion. We plowed what we learned back into conversations outside the office. For instance, after raising questions about how friendly and safe programs were for LBTQ girls, we recognized that our take on gender did not include all young people's experience. We decided to fund more than girl-only programs, as strong groups for all genders developed.

Based on our knowledge and insights from others we articulated our theory of what it would take to support and stimulate girls' activism in Chicago. We illustrated that theory in a succinct logic model that sharply condensed our goals, and stated the strategies and resources we'd deploy to reach them—and then relied on it. (What we wouldn't do was also included.)

We selected community groups to fund that fit a collective vision of what it takes to support girls' becoming activists. We told and then reminded grantees regularly of what we were doing, why, how, and when we'd be done.

To stay abreast of our field, we needed to know the practitioners. Once the review process was complete, we had "support visits" that were conversations and chances for us to learn. We read evaluation reports, and followed up with questions and kudos. We were deliberate about building staff to staff relationships.

We learned from girls, by operating a girls program, Sisters Empowering Sisters. The young women who were part of this grant making and community action project were learners and teachers, keeping the rest of us real about what girls want, how they develop their activism chops, and what it takes to do great work with them.

We were willing to take risks. We funded deeply and over time. Core grants (which included a 10% add-on to support evaluation) were awarded and renewed annually. Core support was complemented by grants for staff and youth professional development, capacity building, and youth-led evaluation. Girls in GBF-funded programs applied for and received grants from other girls at GBF. We responded to unanticipated opportunities and crises with small discretionary grants, while an annual budget line for "opportunities" made larger, flexible grants possible.

We used what we called a "grants plus" approach. Grants were supplemented by in-house training workshops, underwritten classes and learning circles, and convened discussions.

GIRL'S BEST FRIEND FOUNDATION'S GOALS

1. Develop strong leaders for social justice with support for effective programs and groups for girls.
2. Enhance the professional development of youth workers and other staff of girls' organizations.
3. Strengthen organizations essential to girls' power, well being, and self-determination.
4. Build the local field of girls' and youth activism.

Girl's Best Friend
Foundation

We had high expectations of groups, and offered a high degree of support to match.

Staffing was unusually deep for a small foundation. Each was expected to be an expert, and to actively seek out and share knowledge, connections, and the bird's eye view, to the benefit of funded groups. Grantee program and organization leaders frequently called on us for leads, info, ideas, and help with problem solving.

Courtesy and respect are essential to good grant making and a foundation's reputation as a partner. We practiced both.

Relationships with other foundations were intentionally built and sustained. These promoted our learning, kept us honest about our work, created opportunities for joint funding, and were channels for our advocacy on behalf of girls and girls' activism, particularly in the areas of strength-based programming, flexible funding, and the grantees of GBF.

As a time-limited, high engagement foundation we had the responsibility to look ahead to help fill roles formerly played by GBF—convener, trainer, girl and youth champion, and, of course, grant maker. We sought, helped build, and funded the development of replacements. The Chicago Freedom School, Chicago Girls' Coalition, national Girl Grantmakers Network, and the Youth Fund for Social Change (at the Crossroads Fund) will live on well beyond GBF, as will Sisters Empowering Sisters, now housed at the Chicago Girls' Coalition.

Her fingerprints are all over the evaluation results, though she is named just once—Cynthia K. McLachlan (1940-2005), Girl's Best Friend Foundation's founder and donor. Her vision animated everything about the Foundation and its success.

How proud she'd have been to know that GBF's efforts to strengthen and promote girls and girl-focused groups, have worked.



Alice Cottingham
Executive Director

Fearless
Leaders

Appendix A

EVALUATION SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this evaluation was to explore the impact that GBF has had during its 13 years of existence. After initial conversations with the GBF board and staff, it was clear that the investigation of impact should have dual foci—an effort to understand whether the Foundation’s work had any impact on girls themselves, and an effort to understand the degree to which involvement with GBF had impacted grantee organizations. Finally, since GBF went through a significant rethinking and restructuring of its approach in 2001, we chose to focus the evaluation on the Foundation’s work from 2001 to the present.

The evaluation employed three methods of data collection. First, a survey of all core grantee organizations from 2001 to the present was used to explore the impact of GBF funding on both specific programs, and the larger organizations that are home to those programs. Using a mix of open and closed-ended questions, the survey generated a 56 percent response rate (n=24). Responses were sent directly to the evaluation team, and all individual comments were kept anonymous.

Second, the evaluation team conducted 2 focus groups with girls directly involved in GBF-supported programming. The focus group conversations lasted an hour, were facilitated by members of the evaluation team, and were recorded. Parental permissions were sought from young women participants under age 18, and all participants were guaranteed confidentiality.

Because they exist at the intersection of impact on programs and girls, program staff and executive directors of GBF-supported organizations were interviewed at length by the evaluation team. These 14 interviews were conducted using a loosely structured protocol, and lasted about an hour on average. Interviewees were also assured that their responses would remain confidential.

Finally, given GBF’s commitment to supporting girl-led efforts, we felt it necessary to incorporate girls into the evaluation planning process. Therefore, an Evaluation Advisory Committee (Appendix C) comprised of two young women and four other women familiar with GBF’s work oversaw the evaluation process. The role of this committee was to help broaden the perspective of the evaluation by incorporating a wider variety of voices at critical junctures in the process. Specifically, members were asked to provide feedback on key evaluation questions and evaluation methodology, direct the evaluation team toward overlooked evaluation questions or data sources, and offer alternative or additional interpretations of preliminary findings. We are grateful to each member of this committee for her wisdom and guidance.

Appendix B

GRANT PROGRAMS

Capacity Building Initiative
Collaborative Grants
Core Grants
Discretionary Grants
Fund for Professional Development
Legacy Grants
National/Statewide Conference Underwriting
Reproductive Rights Education & Organizing Grants
Safe Space Project
Sisters Empowering Sisters
Special Opportunity Grants
Youth-led Research Grants

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES PROVIDED

Grantee Convenings & Exchanges
Facilitated Peer Learning (Learning Circles and Leadership & Innovation Group)
Online Resources
Research
Training

Appendix C

EVALUATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Sabuwra Baty
Sonja Bugvilionis
Mae Hong
Iris Krieg
Suleyma Pérez
Karen Tamley

Fearless
Leaders

