

Compass Expands to Philly, Recruits Business School Grads for Pro Bono Nonprofit Consulting

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On the recommendation of a friend from business school, Leily Saadat-Lajevardi decided to volunteer for Compass, an organization that recruits and matches business school grads — and other professionals — with pro bono consulting work for nonprofits.

“I looked into Compass and it got me excited,” said Saadat-Lajevardi, a brand manager at McNeil Pharmaceuticals who graduated from the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia.

“I come from the nonprofit world and I still have a lot of passion. I was looking for an opportunity to do some work that felt meaningful,” she said.

While Compass is not new — it has roots in Washington, D.C. — the organization expanded to the Philadelphia area last year. Compass vetted other cities, but was drawn to the Philadelphia’s rich nonprofit scene.

The way it works is that volunteer teams, comprised of six to eight professionals, are matched with nonprofits that need high-level expertise. Projects are focused on capacity building, such as board development, fundraising strategy, or even untangling an identity crisis, which was the case for the Women’s Center of Montgomery County.

“There was a philosophical split within the organization that was paralyzing us at the time,” said Maria Macaluso, the executive director of the Women’s Center, whose membership was struggling to talk about the organization in a succinct way.

Because part of its work is related to preventing domestic violence, “some members thought we needed a name change,” Macaluso said. “Our board would say, ‘I can’t go out and market.’ They wouldn’t do things because they felt confused.”

So the Women’s Center applied to Compass, asking for a team to gauge the need for rebranding. Saadat-Lajevardi was among the volunteers who consulted on the project.

“They were really questioning whether they should be taking the brand in a different direction, because the organization had evolved,” Saadat-Lajevardi said. Last fall, her team dug in, conducting stakeholder interviews and analyzing data. They presented their findings to the board in the spring.

“A big part of the project was, ‘What does it mean to rebrand?’ The Women’s Center has a very positive reputation in the community,” explained Saadat-Lajevardi. That discovery, she added, begged the question: “Does the organization really want to throw out their name, or talk about what they do in slightly different way?”

According to Macaluso, a 16-year-veteran of the Women’s Center, the recommendations helped the board embrace its current name and nix a rebrand.

“The outcome was that, surprisingly, people felt that we should be an empowerment organization,” Macaluso said. “It wasn’t the message that was bad, it was the way we were marketing it.”

Compass has already selected nine nonprofits that will receive expertise this year and is now recruiting professionals to volunteer on its consulting teams. The average time commitment is three hours per week, from November through May.

Saadat-Lajevardi, who will be signing on as a Compass volunteer for a second year, summed it up this way: “It was a great way for me to meet like-minded people and flex my business skills in a setting that’s much more about a cause.”