This Compass points Philly-area nonprofits and business pros toward one another

By Diane Mastrull
STAFF WRITER

Alcohol, hors d’oeuvres, soft lighting, men and women moving from table to table and getting to know one another — all the markings of a speed-dating event. Indeed, the gathering was a matchmaking exercise. Yet the goal of this particular event held Sept. 28 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts wasn’t a love connection, but a way to bring together nonprofits in need of free strategic help with business professionals willing to provide it.

Compass Philadelphia is a unique volunteer program that debuted here five years ago in what was the first expansion of a program founded in Washington 15 years ago. Despite its time demands and highly selective screening process — just because you’re interested in volunteering doesn’t mean you’ll be selected (just like dating!) — Compass Philadelphia has been so impressive that it gave organization leaders in D.C. the confidence to start a program in Chicago last January and to begin a search for other suitable cities.

“Philly proved to us that probably every major city has needy nonprofits and business people willing to help. They just need to find each other,” said Suzanne Laporte, president of Compass, who came up from Washington for last week’s meet-and-greet.

Later this month, businessfolk who mingled over wine and mini-quiches on the second floor of PAFA during the project launch event will find out whether they were selected to help one of the 16 nonprofits chosen for Compass Philadelphia’s 2017-18 program year. The application deadline for volunteers was Oct. 5.

Among those hoping to be picked is Tyler Torres, 26, who even dressed to impress in a dark suit, silk polka-dot pocket square, and Italian leather Magnanni shoes. He’s a senior analyst for Mercer LLC, a global health and benefits consulting company.

“I’ve always been of the state of mind that giving back is better than receiving,” Torres said, holding a plate of shrimp and strawberries and a list of the nonprofits whose information tables were set up in a nearby gallery.

Until now, his volunteer activity has included cancer walks and building houses — worthy causes, but nothing to which he could apply his professional skills and also get something in return.

“I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to develop my consulting skills,” Torres said, before heading off in hope of finding a match.

A couple dozen leaders from the nonprofits in the current Compass project cycle gathered earlier last month at law firm Morgan Lewis, an in-kind supporter, for an orientation.

“I have been in a lot of your shoes,” Beth Dahle, Compass Philadelphia’s executive director, told them. In 2008, she cofounded Impact 100, an organization of philanthropic women that has issued more than $2 million in grants to local
eight to nine months, with each of
the teams of eight or nine volunteers
presenting their recommendations to
their nonprofit “clients” in May.
Compass offers four types of aid:
strategic alignment, board develop-
ment, funding strategies, and stra-
gtic partnerships.
“We’re not looking to rescue an or-
ganization,” Dahle said in an interview.
“We want to partner with an organiza-
tion from a position of strength.”
For instance, Compass will not
write white papers or launch fund-
raising campaigns. It will prod
nonprofits to craft a strategy for
reaching goals or to challenge them
to evaluate if they are, indeed, deliv-
ering a service that is needed.
When Dahle is out recruiting for
volunteers, she highlights the op-
portunity to be involved in projects
at a level their day jobs might not
afford them, as well as the networking
exposure. Evidently, her sales pitch is
proving too enticing: Compass Phila-
delphia turns down about 40 percent
of volunteer applicants. (More on the
qualifications Compass seeks can be
found at http://compassprobono.org/
about/frequently-asked-questions/)
Alredy making the cut, as a proj-
ect leader, is Pam Dixon, marketing
director for small-business credit
cards at JPMorgan Chase in Wilm-
ington and a Compass volunteer for
the second time in three years. She
again will help the Center for Advo-
cacy for the Rights and Interests of
the Elderly, this time to assist with
developing a funding strategy. Last
time, Dixon helped CARIE with board
development.
“It’s the impact that we make,” she
said of her Compass work’s appeal.
“With most organizations, when you
volunteer, it feels very temporal. …
This is much more lasting.”
For the nonprofits being helped, the
appeal is the free professional servic-
es many would not be able to afford.
“You’ll be very happy with the out-
come, and you may wind up with some
awesome board members,” Michael
Westover, president and CEO of the
Center for Literacy Inc. in Philadel-
phia, a 2016-17 Compass client, told
the incoming class of nonprofits at the
orientation last month.
He urged them “to be very honest”
with the Compass volunteers they get
matched with. “The first meeting is
almost like a therapy session.”
Looking forward to strategic-align-
ment advice is Family Service As-
sociation of Bucks County, an agency
with 150 employees and a budget
of $8.8 million that wants to double
spending in the next eight to 10 years.

“...”

RAYMOND W HOLMAN JR

KAIT MOORE / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Center for Literacy student John Johnson (left) works on reading skills with center volunteer Mark Swirsky at an afternoon session Sept. 25. The center has availed itself of the services of Compass Philadelphia volunteers and has been pleased, CEO Michael Westover says.

“We feel we wouldn’t be able to do
this without the skill sets that Compass
is putting in front of us,” CEO Audrey
Tucker said at the PAFA mixer, where
she and board president Joseph Bondi
were on the hunt for volunteers they
hoped might even stay involved after
their Compass obligation.
“The cost to go out and bring in Ac-
centure, Pricewaterhouse or McK-
insey, it’s hundreds of thousands of
dollars,” Bondi said. “The value of
Compass services is amazing.”
dmastrull@phillynews.com
@dmastrull