

The Donor's Turn

People who make a difference through generous giving

By Mary Ellen Collins

Alan D. Solomont: Activist Philanthropist

Campaigns—philanthropic *and* political—keep Alan D. Solomont busy, motivated and fulfilled. The founder and former CEO of the ADS Group, a network of eldercare services, currently supports his alma mater by co-chairing Tufts University's \$1.2 billion capital campaign, "Beyond Boundaries." He also serves as Barack Obama's New England finance chair. According to Solomont, there is not much difference between the two activities.

"I don't make a distinction between what I do in philanthropy and what I do in politics," says Solomont, who received the Outstanding Philanthropist Award from the AFP Massachusetts Chapter in 2005. He cites an inscription at the entrance to Boston's John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, which reads, "This library is dedicated to the memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and to all those who through the art of politics seek a new and better world."

"That was the politics I was raised on—to seek a new and better world," he says. "It's what I try to do."

Equalizing the Playing Field

Solomont says he first "became politicized" while studying political science and urban studies at Tufts in the late '60s, envisioning a future as an anti-poverty lawyer. Instead, he graduated and became a community organizer in Lowell, Mass., believing that "if we could empower people to look at issues on a collective basis, we could build a more humane society."

To pay the rent, he worked as a nursing home orderly, where he discovered that he enjoyed taking care of the elderly. That led to a nursing degree so he could support himself while continuing to organize. Unexpectedly, however, he



got a job running a nursing home and became, in his words, "a business guy." While he built a career in elder care, he found the doorway that led him further into politics.

"I discovered I could be active in the political arena if I would help raise money," he says, with a sparkle. His first political fundraising job was selling \$50 tickets to a local event for a state senator. Twenty years later, he would help raise \$40 million during his tenure as the national finance chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

Before signing on with Obama, Solomont held significant positions in five previous Democratic presidential campaigns, underscoring his belief that philanthropy cannot be the sole solution to the world's problems.

"If we don't fix the public sector, if government isn't on the right side, nothing else matters," he says.

When he sold the ADS Group in 1996, he decided to focus on politics and philanthropy and do business on the side. He is currently chairman of a Newton, Mass.-based company, SolomontBailis Ventures, which invests in

early-stage healthcare companies.

Solomont believes that effective philanthropy grows out of determining what values are most important to you and deciding what you want to accomplish. For him, it is addressing social and economic inequality and encouraging active citizenship. He speaks passionately about the need to "equalize the playing field and help people whom prosperity has left behind." That has been the driving force behind his work with Boston Medical Center (www.bmc.org), where half of the patients have annual incomes below \$20,000. According to Elaine Ullian, president and CEO of BMC, "Alan Solomont's impact on Boston Medical Center cannot be overstated. He is unique in that his commitment to Boston Medical Center reflects his deep dedication to social justice and social activism. It is the perfect convergence of values, energy, talent and skills."

Solomont co-chaired the Medical Center's Moakley Campaign for a new clinical building to house cancer services and raised more than \$58 million. Under his leadership of the board's development committee, philanthropic

revenues went from \$5.7 million annually to more than \$28 million. For Solomont, his efforts boil down to doing the right thing to address an unacceptable situation.

“There’s a *huge* disparity in cancer survival rate, depending on the economic background of the patient,” he says. “Being poor shouldn’t mean you get second-rate medical care.”

He and his wife, Susan, who is a professional adviser on strategic philanthropy, named the Hematology and Oncology Center as part of their campaign gift to BMC. “Of all the things I’ve done, it’s the one that makes me the most proud,” Solomont says. “When I go to the Moakley Building and see what we have accomplished collectively, it really does move me.”

A Sense of Citizenship

Solomont also has taken his commitment to civic responsibility back to Tufts, where he is helping to set the stage for a new generation of students to heed the call to social action.

“Tufts is where I began to connect the mind and the heart,” he recalls. “It’s where I blossomed intellectually and first acquired a sense of citizenship. If we want to change our democracy, we need to get involved.”

Solomont was one of the founding members of the university’s Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service (<http://activecitizen.tufts.edu>). The college is designed to infuse education for active citizenship throughout the university, from curriculum development to working with local communities

where the university has a presence.

In addition to being a senior fellow at the Tisch College, Solomont is a visiting instructor in the department of political science, where he teaches a seminar on the American presidency.

“Alan is a serial philanthropist,” says Tufts President Lawrence Bacow. “He understands that to make a difference in the world, you have to get involved, not just by being generous with your resources, but also with your time. Lots of people write checks. Alan also gives of himself. He sets a wonderful example for others in his willingness to talk about his personal commitment to being an active citizen.”

Solomont believes that community service can be a transformative experience and credits his community orga-

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Finding the Road Not Taken

Alan D. Solomont, chairman of Solomont-Bailis Ventures in Newton, Mass., grew up in an environment of giving, and he feels philanthropists should be examples for others.



Q. Did you come from a politically active family?

A: No. I came from a very religious family of Orthodox Jews. The orientation was on faith, and a lot of what I've done has been based

on those values. My father grew up quite poor, but he was passionate about *tzedakah* (righteous giving). No matter how little he had, he was taught to give and to provide for those less fortunate.

Q. How did this influence your own philanthropic values?

A: The message I received was that we aren't just passing through this world; we have a purpose for being here. Part of that purpose is to do the right thing, to help perfect the world. From my father and my uncle, I learned that those of us who are more fortunate have a responsibility to those who are less so.

Q. How do you choose organizations to support?

A: One of my favorite poems is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." I have often looked for roads that are less traveled. For example, both of my daughters were born at a wonderful hospital in Boston. It's a terrific place, but it doesn't need me as much as Boston Medical Center.

Q. How do you monitor the gifts you make?

A: The most satisfying philanthropy is when I'm engaged with both time and effort. I am fortunate to have the flexibility to devote a good deal of time to the things I support.

Q. Is there anything you don't like about raising money?

A: I'm very frustrated by anonymous giving. I look at the value of philanthropy embodied in the dollars you give and the example you set. I respect humility, but we have to model the right behavior. If you do it tastefully, it doesn't have to be an exercise in egotism. Anonymous giving misses an opportunity to set an example for others.

Q. Can you give us an example of how or why you would say "no" to a request for a gift?

A: I try not to say no completely. Every ask is worthy, but it wouldn't be productive if I tried to do everything. The number of gifts we make each year is in the hundreds, but only a couple of dozen of those are significant. If someone I know is raising money for something and I can send a \$250 check, then I do. It's better to do something, even if it's modest. It says, "I value what you're doing."

Q. What lessons are you and your wife teaching your daughters about philanthropy?

A: They are both beautiful and generous souls. Stephanie is 16 and Becca is 21. They are already good citizens. But we don't believe in force-feeding. I think the best that Susan and I can do is model behavior and instill values that are important. We talk about philanthropy, but the philanthropy we've done is ours. They're going to find their own. They need to develop their own sense of what's important to them and find their own way of perfecting the world. I have no doubt that they will.

Q. What do you hope will be the impact of your philanthropy?

A: I hope it's going to motivate other people. The problems we're tackling are so enormous. They won't be fixed by one action. If people learn the satisfaction of trying to make their mark on the world in this way, the world will be a better place.

nizing for informing much of his later work. Thirty years after helping Lowell residents tackle issues such as tenants' rights, Solomont was appointed by President Clinton to the board of directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service in Washington, D.C., which oversees AmeriCorps, the National Senior Service Corps and Learn and Serve America.

"I was present when Clinton signed the legislation to create the AmeriCorps program. When you see the power of politics to transform the world and feel you had a hand in it, it doesn't get much better," Solomont admits.


Perfecting the World

Solomont's priorities also include working for peace in the Middle East and a democratic Israel. He has advised government officials on matters relating to the peace process and accompanied President Clinton to the signing of the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel in 1994.

He currently chairs the board of Hebrew Senior Life, a large nonprofit geriatric care provider in Boston, and he serves on the boards of the Jewish Fund for Justice, Cradles to Crayons, the New Israel Fund, Israel Policy Forum and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

When Solomont speaks about his philanthropy or his politics, he often mentions trying to "perfect the world" rather than "change" or "improve" it. He chooses that word for a reason.

"There is a principle in mathematics that says you can never reach infinity; you can only approach it as a limit. Perfection is like infinity. You can never achieve perfection, but you can consistently get closer. If you think about improving, you do one thing and then you stop. If you think about perfecting, you *never* stop."

For Alan Solomont, that unachievable goal provides the perfect motivation for getting involved and getting things done. 

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