

Meal Exchange: A Recipe for Building a Volunteer Youth Culture

Grantor: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

Grantee: Meal Exchange

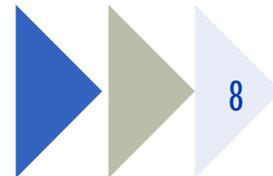
Summary: Fostering social entrepreneurship
among youth

In late 2000, Tim Brodhead, Executive Director of the J.W. McConnell Foundation of Montreal, came across a magazine article about a young social marketing entrepreneur named Rahul Raj. This article piqued his interest. In 1993, Rahul Raj had founded an organization called Meal Exchange at Sir Wilfrid Laurier University when he was still an undergraduate marketing student. Students pledged one meal from their meal plan (worth about \$10) to Meal Exchange, which in turn, used the donated funds to purchase food for non-profit organizations in the community.

Brodhead was intrigued both with Meal Exchange and with Raj. This kind of entrepreneurial activity was exactly what the

McConnell Foundation was interested in supporting: young people who are looking at old problems in new ways and finding creative solutions; in this case, previously wasted food dollars were transformed into real food for hungry people. "These young people don't know any better; they don't know they can't do it," laughs Andrew Woodall, Program Officer for the McConnell Foundation. "They just get their friends around and go for it. So the Foundation staff constantly scan the voluntary sector for projects that are innovative and fit with our mandate." From Raj's perspective, old ways aren't working very well anyway. "If we are not interested in new ways of addressing problems, then we are going to continue to have the problems persist," he points out.

Raj's activities seemed to fit with the Foundation's goals of promoting generosity and voluntary action and enabling individuals to adapt to new opportunities. Brodhead met with Raj in person and was even more impressed. Meal Exchange was a great idea; it was addressing the issue of hunger and was making voluntarism happen on several campuses. There was a clear link to the Foundation's focus on supporting social entrepreneurs. Just a few weeks later, in March 2001, the J.W. McConnell Foundation granted \$96,000 to further develop Meal Exchange.



Where does an innovative idea like Meal Exchange come from? A generous grandmother had made a deep impression on Raj in his early years. She gave what she could, on a daily basis, to people in need in her community. This way of thinking and acting became part of Raj's own life – to do what was possible on a daily basis for the people in need around him. As he grew older, he wondered how one might develop that way of thinking and acting in others who had not had his role models. At university, Raj, a slight young man and a light eater, never used all the meal points in his meal plan. He knew he was not the only one. This seemed wasteful to him. He and his friends considered a number of ways to use the points, but none seemed very good. Meal Exchange was the idea that finally worked best: it allows students to donate extra points to provide food for people who are hungry. Raj successfully convinced the university that the public relations benefits to the community far outweighed their earnings from meals paid for but not consumed.

Not only does Meal Exchange help to meet the need for food in communities; it also builds a new volunteer culture by creating new levels of awareness among students about social problems and by giving students opportunities to be part of the solution to those problems. "University students represent a perfect target group; they are truly at an inflection point in their lives where they are determining their values, their actions and their philosophies as distinct from those of their parents, and they are in a fairly safe environment in which to have this experience. Meal Exchange is an opportunity that helps them develop," says Raj.

Woodall adds, "The fact that there are people outside the university walls who aren't eating might be news to some people." This graduated response to volunteer engagement fit well with the reality of university students who often test out various volunteer activities before committing their time.

Millions of Canadians are hungry every day, and about half are children. While this is distressing, at the same time, hunger can be one of the least polarizing social problems. As Raj points out, "it allows someone new to the volunteer sector to engage in a way that is not threatening. In different geographies, student engagement might be around a different cause."

From the start, Raj has committed wholeheartedly to Meal Exchange. He used his own time and money to get it off the ground. He decided (and got permission) to write his fourth year thesis on creating and managing a non-profit organization on campus so that he could turn Meal Exchange into a national organization when he graduated in 1997. The Trillium Foundation granted \$25,000 to facilitate this vision. But Raj's dream, at 21 years of age, was much greater than his ability to deliver everything he had proposed in the Trillium grant's eighteen months.



When the J.W. McConnell Foundation stepped in to support Meal Exchange it had a tremendous impact on Raj. “I had faith in myself but it seemed no one else did. And the Foundation bet on me,” he recalls. “It added so much faith and credibility to Meal Exchange – you can’t put a price on that.”.

Since graduation, Raj had been dividing his time between his career as a marketer and Meal Exchange. He realized that everyone who had made a significant impact on society – from Bill Gates and Walt Disney to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King – had one thing in common: their relentless pursuit of a single vision. Since that epiphany, he has devoted himself full-time to Meal Exchange, applying his proven marketing talents and remarkable energy to social issues. “The thing that is so different about this world is you are consistently trying to make something out of nothing,” says Raj.

Meal Exchange has facilitated the student donation of over 200,000 meals to address hunger in many communities. It now operates on 45 post-secondary campuses across Canada and offers four programs: Skip-a-Meal (first term), Skip-a-Meal (second term), Trick-or-Eat (a Halloween door-to-door food campaign) and Clear the Shelves (a year-end campaign). If all the campuses had the same level of engagement in the programs as the top five campuses, Meal Exchange would generate over \$4 million in student donations.

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For Woodall, the McConnell Foundation’s relationship with Meal Exchange is a merging of old-style with new-style philanthropy. “The Foundation recognized an idea with potential, and saw the possibility of helping young people learn about social entrepreneurship and get their feet wet. That is old-style. The aspect that is new is that we pushed Meal Exchange to start thinking more deeply about what it is doing. So it’s not just a grant: it’s thinking about how you are doing it and why you are doing it and building it.” The other innovative aspect is the mentoring role that the J.W. McConnell Foundation has played in supporting Raj, especially in connecting him to community leaders in the voluntary sector and to funders who are involved with poverty issues. “When you are young and new at this, it’s hard to get in the door”, says Woodall.

In 2002, the McConnell Foundation granted an additional \$550,000 over two years to Meal Exchange. This money will enable the program to recruit and involve more campuses, engage more

volunteers and donors, and to educate many more students across Canada about hunger and poverty. In addition, the organization will focus on going beyond the university campus to engage the community as a whole, including high schools and voluntary organizations. Campuses in both the United States and the United Kingdom are eager to start chapters, but Meal Exchange will not have that kind of capacity for a few more years.

Raj, true to his word, is still 100 per cent committed to Meal Exchange. He is still driven by the question of how to mobilize local populations to address problems in their communities. He believes that the broad principles of Meal Exchange offer a model for building a groundswell of student support and for developing a life-long course of social responsibility that can be applied to different social issues.

stages until they are strong enough so that others feel safe in partnering, he says. "Meal Exchange is a success but it will be an even better success if it is still going in five years."

Will Meal Exchange be able to deliver a new generation of young people who are engaged in social issues? Only time will reveal that answer, but it's likely that Raj's commitment and the ongoing support of the J.W. McConnell Foundation and other funders will be a winning combination.

**For more information visit the Foundation
Web Site: www.mcconnellfoundation.ca**

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Woodall believes that supporting Meal Exchange is exactly the kind of niche that foundations should be filling, enabling exciting new ideas to prove themselves so that they find sustaining funds from more risk-averse sources. "Foundations can support initiatives through the critical initial

