

## HUMAN CAPITAL

# A 'trade group' that distributes knowledge to kids

**[DIRECTLINE]** Daniel F. Bassill is president and chief executive of Cabrini Connections Inc., a not-for-profit organization that tutors inner-city children. The after-school program meets at the Montgomery Ward & Co. offices on Chicago Avenue. Mr. Bassill recently formed a network to link similar groups throughout the area.

"I had no idea that this would be my career. I started out 25 years ago as a tutor in Cabrini Green. I didn't know what I was doing other than spending one night a week with a fourth grade boy. I had this vague notion that I was going to help him.

The tutoring program was organized by volunteers who worked at Montgomery Ward. I joined the company in 1972 as a copywriter. I became a volunteer tutor in 1973. At that point, we were losing about half the kids and half the volunteers over the course of the year. It was so disorganized.

I soon became one of the group's leaders and discovered there is a science to running these programs. By 1990, we had 300 volunteers and 285 kids. Student attendance was averaging about 80% and we were retaining about 85% of the volunteers.

That same year, Ward's offered me a choice: take a different position with the company or take a

buyout. I took the buyout. I took that opportunity to convert the tutoring program to a not-for-profit organization.

The program, which was designed for grade-school kids, grew over the next two years. We had 500 volunteers and 440 kids. But I did a poor job in terms of building a board of directors. That created a lot of conflict. In 1992, I was booted out of the program that I had led for 19 years. That's when I formed Cabrini Connections, for kids from sixth grade through high school.

The tutoring program for grade schoolers still exists, so we have a pipeline of kids. We have one student who started in the program as a first grader and is now a freshman at Illinois Wesleyan University. We spent a tremendous amount of time filling out forms with him and helping him apply for financial aid. Even now, it takes a lot of time to keep him in college. He's a



For Daniel F. Bassill, a vague notion that he was helping a boy has turned into Cabrini Connections Inc., a tutoring organization.

minority at a mostly white school. He's the father figure in his family and he's trying to break away from a neighborhood that questions why he is so different.

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In 1994, we launched the tutor/mentor connection. We wanted to find other after-school tutoring programs and help those programs grow. We started to think of ourselves as a business. We figured out that we are in the business of distributing knowledge to kids, just like Nike sells shoes to kids. We also concluded that we would only be successful if we had distribution points and could get kids to buy what we were selling.

We located 200 tutor/mentor programs in the city. We published

a directory listing the programs. So far, we have held eight conferences to bring the groups together to share ideas. We are also publishing a quarterly newsletter to help the groups communicate with each other.

We are like a trade association trying to help businesses build capacity and product mix while opening new markets. In our case, we want to help the city provide a full distribution system of good after-school tutor/mentor programs in every neighborhood and a support system to help those programs grow and expand. In our case, new markets are businesses that could provide volunteers, equipment or training.

In Chicago, there are just 12,000 kids in after-school tutoring programs. That's out of 500,000 school-age kids. The number of kids in these programs is nowhere near where it needs to be. Studies show we can move kids out of

poverty, but it takes a consistent, long-term investment. It's the non-school hours where there's the least amount of adult supervision. There is a tremendous amount of good that can be done by getting kids together with adult mentors.

Fund raising is the most difficult thing we do. We beg, borrow and steal people's hearts. We live from hand to mouth because we don't have consistent funding. We can't go to a venture capitalist. We want business people to get involved. We want CEOs to help recruit volunteers from their employees.

The business community is not receptive enough. There are less than 15,000 adult volunteers in the city. There is no better way to bring people together than to have a tutor work with a kid. Everyone who comes here is changed.

As told to Jane Adler