

5 QUESTIONS FOR...

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Nancy Lublin, CEO, Do Something



*Since 2003, Nancy Lublin has served as CEO of **Do Something**, a New York City-based nonprofit dedicated to inspiring, supporting, and celebrating young people who see the need to do something, believe in their ability to get it done, and then take action. The organization has built a reputation for rallying youth to fight poverty around the world and claims to have been the first youth organization to respond to the devastation along the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Lublin, a native of Hartford, Connecticut, graduated from Brown University, New York University School of Law, and Oxford University, where she was a Marshall Scholar. In 1996, she founded **Dress for Success**, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of women by helping them dress properly for job interviews; that organization now has offices in seventy-eight cities in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.*

Philanthropy News Digest: Do Something was experiencing some growing pains when you became its CEO in 2003. What were some of the challenges it faced, and how is the organization different today?

Nancy Lublin: This was an organization that was, unfortunately, in a down cycle when I got here. We had \$75,000 in the bank and had just laid off twenty-one of our twenty-two employees. Before I arrived, we had lost our free office space, and everything was in boxes in Queens. It was pretty dire. We had some terrific people on the board, but they were not being utilized well; they were constantly being called to write out a check. When I met with the board, I told them we needed to use their expertise and experience, not just their wallet, and we needed to be more forward looking.

When new leadership is brought into a turnaround situation, that leadership needs to come with a Rolodex of fresh funders, sponsors, and partners. We developed new relationships with people who didn't care about what had happened in the past. What they cared about was the vision and the potential for the future. There was an enormous amount of potential. The biggest reason we've been successful in the past few years is because there was a vacuum in the space. Nobody else was doing a good job of inspiring teenagers to be involved in the community, and we have. We really want kids to believe that you don't have to be Bono to make a difference. You can be involved now.

PND: How do you get teenagers interested in volunteering?

NL: In two ways. First, we try to make it cool and fun. You'll note I don't call it "community service." To us, volunteering is not a chore. It's not something that's just a replacement for juvenile detention. It's action. It's fun. On our Web site, you'll see a section called "**Celebs Gone Good**," which is about how celebrities are making the world a better place. The second thing we do is try to think about the kinds of opportunities we present to kids and how we reach kids. A suggestion is not cool when it comes from your parents or your teacher. It's far cooler when it comes from a friend or is something you found yourself online.

We recently entered into a terrific partnership with **Volunteer Match** that gives us access to their data and technology. We love Volunteer Match, but it's for adults, so we're partnering with them to create a version especially for teenagers. We have to recognize that teenagers are a unique group. They have their own sets of needs. They're very concerned about what their friends think. They often want to volunteer in groups. Instead of saying "Come in and stuff envelopes," we try to develop opportunities that engage them.

PND: You've managed to generate a lot of publicity for the **BR!CK Awards** in years past, but this year they were aired on the CW Network. How important was the telecast in getting the word out about your organization and programs?

NL: It was huge. We were thrilled to have a televised award show at prime time, during the middle of the week, with the same production crew that's done five MTV Video Music Awards and two Super Bowl halftime shows. The show, which was produced in the same format as a Grammy or Oscar show, demonstrated that young people in America value changing the world. Hannah Taylor, one of the kids who was honored with a BR!CK Award, is eleven. She's raised more than a million dollars for homelessness with her **Ladybug Foundation**. There's a shelter named after her in Canada called Hannah's Place. We were always, like, "Okay, c'mon, kid, did your mom do this?" You can't help but be a little skeptical when the change agent is an eleven-year-old. But it totally is Hannah. She is so poised, focused, and informed about homelessness and the issues surrounding it. And she's bold. She walks up to homeless people, talks to them, and fundraises better than a lot of fifty-year-old men I've met. She's awesome.

PND: The actor Andrew Shue created Do Something and is still involved in the organization. What has celebrity involvement meant to Do Something?

NL: Celebrities really do drive our culture. People, young people especially, look up to celebrities. It's a fact, and we'd be foolish to ignore it. And frankly, I think it's a powerful, cost-effective way to get one's message out there. Especially since kids don't come in contact with a lot of these issues. If you can have a celebrity doing something about poverty in Africa, bringing back pictures, doing a show on television, or doing a story on it somewhere, it makes it more real to the kid sitting in Iowa who's never been to Africa, doesn't know anybody who's been to Africa, and really doesn't know much about poverty in Africa. It's the same with something like cancer. Lance Armstrong has made what it means to be a cancer survivor real to a lot of kids who don't know anybody who's ever had cancer or survived cancer. It's just another way to illuminate an issue for kids.

PND: How did your experience at Dress for Success impact your work at Do Something?

NL: I learned so much and my life was so changed by what I did with Dress for Success. To me, Do Something is about helping young entrepreneurs accomplish even more than I was able to do at Dress for Success. I'm amazed by the ideas these kids come up with, by what our BR!CK winners are accomplishing, and I feel like I'm a part of it, even though I'm not a young person anymore — which is something the kids tell me all the time. At the end of the day, this is not an organization about empowering future generations of leaders. These kids are leading right now. And because I did it when I was their age, I know that pretty much any kid can do it.

— *Mark Allwood*