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Being the Change

Veteran leader and advocate of national service is poised to fight a new battle: reducing poverty in America

By Suzanne Perry

When President Obama signed into law a sweeping national-service bill last month, few savored it more than Alan Khazei.

As head of a nonprofit group he founded in 2007, Be the Change, Mr. Khazei had worked relentlessly for more than a year to help put together a broad coalition to press for the law.

"He's a human hurricane," says John Gomperts, president of Civic Ventures, a group that promotes public-service and nonprofit jobs for older people. "Nothing is impossible to Alan."

Now the veteran national-service leader is mulling over plans for his next battle — reducing poverty in the United States — and ways he can apply the lessons he has learned so far.

Mr. Khazei says he envisions an effort dubbed OpportunityNation to follow in the footsteps of ServiceNation — a coalition that now numbers almost 200 groups that have pledged to promote an ethic of volunteerism and national service.

"We're the land of opportunity," Mr. Khazei says. "We're the American dream, we're the place where we can come here with nothing and become a small-business entrepreneur, or even a Google entrepreneur. How can we make sure that's real for everybody, especially now with this economic crisis?"

Getting Everyone to Serve

Passage of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act — which greatly expands AmeriCorps, the program that puts people to work on social causes for 10 to 12 months for a small stipend — was a milestone for ServiceNation, which Mr. Khazei organized with several other groups that promote citizen participation. But the coalition has broader goals: to make "citizen service" a part of everyone's lives.

Its message seems to have struck a chord. A wide range of foundations, universities, corporations, military leaders, entertainers, and both Democratic and Republican politicians have participated in ServiceNation events.

Even presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain found rare agreement when they each pledged to expand national service while appearing together at a televised ServiceNation forum last September.

ServiceNation is now focusing on new goals, for example, to persuade all 50 states to follow the lead of Govs. Arnold Schwarzenegger, of California, and David Paterson, of New York, and create

cabinet-level positions for service and volunteering and to enlist 100 million volunteers a year (up from 61 million now) by 2020.

No 'Slam Dunk'

When it comes to OpportunityNation, Mr. Khazei says he is in a "listening phase." Some of his associates, while supportive, say poverty could be a more complex issue to tackle than national service.

For example, it could be harder to bridge ideological differences over what role the government should play, says John Bridgeland, president of Civic Enterprises, a public-policy firm in Washington that helps run ServiceNation, and former director of USA Freedom Corps, a volunteer program started by President George W. Bush.

"It's not a slam dunk like service was," he says, "But Alan's the guy to do it. One, he'll be relentless. Two, he'll listen, he'll bring people together."

Model for AmeriCorps

Mr. Khazei, 47, created Be the Change, which operates with a staff of about 15 people in Cambridge, Mass., after almost 20 years at City Year — a group that he founded with his former Harvard Law School roommate, Michael Brown. City Year — which became a model for President Clinton when he created AmeriCorps — recruits 17to 24-year-olds to be tutors and mentors and provide other help to public schools in 19 cities.

The group, now headed by Mr. Brown, is also one of the leaders of ServiceNation, as is the Points of Light Institute, an organization that promotes volunteerism.

Citing the work of those charities and others, Mr. Khazei says he is uncomfortable with any suggestion that he is solely responsible for the effort's successes.

But his colleagues say Mr. Khazei's move to Be the Change helped propel the national-service movement forward, because it allowed someone with incredible energy to devote himself full time to the cause.

"Everybody [else] has a day job, so to speak," says Michelle Nunn, president of the Points of Light Institute.

Mr. Khazei says he decided to create Be the Change so he could escape the "social entrepreneur's trap" (a concept he credits to Mr. Brown). People start organizations because they care deeply about an issue, he says, but "once you start to build an organization, a lot of pressure is put on you to focus on the organization and less time on the movement."

He says the turning point came in 2003, when AmeriCorp's budget was slashed following some financial-management problems.

Mr. Khazei, fearing that City Year and other national-service programs could die, helped organize a "Save AmeriCorps" campaign that rallied national-service organizations, business leaders, members of Congress, AmeriCorps alumni, newspaper editorial writers, and others to fight to persuade the House and Senate to restore the money.

More than 700 people testified for more than 100 hours straight on Capitol Hill about the benefits of national service.

Congress restored some of the money, and even increased AmeriCorps's budget the following year.

But the program, which was unpopular with many Republicans, faced cuts again a few years later.

Mr. Khazei decided it was time to do something else. While the Save AmeriCorps effort had put together an effective "grass-tops and grass-roots" coalition, "that was all defense," he says.

Mr. Khazei wanted to go on the offense, and laid plans for Be the Change.

Tapping Idealism

The time was ripe. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, many Americans were looking for ways to serve the country, with the "millennial" generation of people, born roughly between the late 1970s and early 1990s, seen as particularly idealistic.

Both Mr. McCain and Mr. Obama — along with Michelle Obama, the future first lady — strongly supported national service. Groups like City Year, Public Allies, Teach for America, and Year Up that benefited from AmeriCorps members had been around long enough to prove their effectiveness.

Despite their different political leanings, Sens. Edward Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah, decided to work together to draft a bill to update the country's national-service programs.

Associates urged Mr. Khazei to follow his passion and build a movement around national service.

"The moment had come," says David Gergen, a political commentator and professor of public service at Harvard Kennedy School who serves on Be the Change's board. "He recognized we were on the cusp of a possible breakthrough. He wanted to be the person who helped to push it through."

Mr. Khazei worked with Mr. Bridgeland, Mr. Brown, Ms. Nunn, and AnnMaura Connolly, senior vice president at City Year, to draw up plans for ServiceNation, hoping to influence the 2008 presidential campaign.

They also helped Congress craft the Serve America Act, which in addition to expanding national service and volunteer programs adds what Mr. Khazei calls "new elements for the 21st century," like Social Innovation Funds to help entrepreneurial nonprofit groups expand their work.

With strong support from President Obama, the bill sailed through both houses of Congress with bipartisan support during the first 100 days of the administration.

Consulting Experts

Can an OpportunityNation find similar success?

Mr. Khazei says the recession has created a class of "new poor" that may "open up opportunities for a new kind of dialogue" because more people relate to the issue of poverty.

However, because so many people are already involved in antipoverty work, "it's tricky stuff," says Hubie Jones, former dean of Boston University's School of Social Work, who is a member of Be the Change's board.

He says board members have advised Mr. Khazei: "Let's be clear about the terrain you're about to walk

on. How many actors are already on the terrain, and how many people will say, Who died and left you in charge?"

Mr. Khazei says he is in the process of doing exactly that, consulting with people like Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, a Christian social-justice group; Dorothy Stoneman, president of YouthBuild USA, a group that helps low-income youths learn construction skills; and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which specializes in antipoverty work.

Unconventional Allies

He says he's learned some strategies from the ServiceNation effort that he plans to apply to future campaigns.

One, he says, is to look for unconventional partners. For example, AARP, the advocate for older Americans, became an influential member of ServiceNation because it was interested in proposals to expand public-service opportunities for people age 55 and up.

Mr. Khazei is also now writing a book about how to make change based on his experiences.

And he has another powerful partner — his wife, Vanessa Kirsch, also a longtime national-service advocate who is president of New Profit Inc., a group that provides grants to innovative social projects and manages America Forward, a coalition of entrepreneurial nonprofit groups.

The couple live in Brookline, Mass., with their two children, and have offices in the same building.

"This work is really hard, so it's great to have a sounding board with somebody who gets it," Ms. Kirsch says, adding that she and her husband have different strengths.

"He thinks more in a political realm, I think more in an operational, management realm," she says. "He's more like, How are we going to change America?"

That side of Mr. Khazei has led some of his admirers to wonder if he has a political future.

"There are a lot of people who hope someday Alan will run for office," says Harris Wofford, a former U.S. senator from Pennsylvania and former head of the federal Corporation for National and Community Service. "I can see him one day as a great member of the United States Senate."

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