



What happens when a Foundation takes on a life of its own?

Travis Roy's story is well known: in 1995, the rising college hockey star suffered an on-ice injury that left him paralyzed from the neck down after only 11 seconds of his first Boston University game. That tragic accident ended Travis' hockey career, but it marked the beginning of his decades-long commitment to helping others through the Travis Roy Foundation.

The Foundation's fundraising ambitions were modest in the early days. The hope was to keep Travis' name associated with positive works while raising enough in donations to assist those in need of adaptive technology.

But sometimes, deeds take on lives of their own. Travis' popularity, charisma, and dedication to his mission elevated the Foundation, and he surpassed his initial fundraising goal after a few years. Friends and strangers enjoyed his events and his presence and joined him in giving back. In twenty years the organization has raised and granted millions to aid both individuals and research programs.

As the Foundation grew, Travis faced a critical question: how can a grass roots organization powered by volunteers manage growth and sustain its impact without a sophisticated support structure?

The friends and family team behind the Travis Roy Foundation faced this challenge with the same resolve as its leader. They viewed each milepost of growth with these keys to success in mind:

Never underestimate the impact of a great leader

Not all those who spearhead fundraising or grant organizations have the skill set, energy and charisma to drive the mission forward; in those cases the founder may hand off leadership





roles to a board chair or executive director who can serve as the day to day face of the Foundation.

Travis, however, embraced the opportunity to support his mission by using his skills as a motivator and speaker and as a leader. Keeping him at the forefront of the Foundation, then, was an important and thoughtful decision. He was a twenty five year old in a wheelchair yet he grew to the challenge.

Travis' presence and clear communication was especially pivotal as the Foundation first spread its mission. Travis always believed that donations were not to benefit him personally; he sought out the personalities and stories of others. His personal message that the Foundation was created to help a greater cause enabled the Foundation to stay on track.

Travis' demeanor and determination were the primary sparks for the Foundation's growth. Travis used his charisma to become the public face of the organization, with his outreach ranging from the publication of a book to ESPN specials. Indeed, it is often said that those who work with Travis once never have to be asked to volunteer again – and that kind of infectious loyalty, from young and old, can make a tremendous difference for a mission driven nonprofit.

Staying structured for growth

With Travis balancing his college studies and work at the Foundation, he looked for administrative help from his volunteer Board members. Their expertise and vigilance were crucial to maintaining a productive foundation for Travis and his supporters.

Initial fundraising was conducted through golf tournaments and the like, raising approximately \$50,000 in annual donations, but interest seemed to grow each year. New offers for fundraising events created opportunities – but also generated more work and greater risk.

Contributions leapt to new levels through ideas such as the Foundation's annual wiffle ball event (which raises approximately \$500,000 each year) and Beanpot hockey tournament (approximately \$200,000 per year). More supporters continued to propose events such as 5k races and galas, and the team kept a close eye on proposals to ensure that Travis' well-earned reputation was not leveraged for others' personal gain or off-mission endeavors. The Foundation put systems in place to create guidelines for events, track donations, and vet research organizations and individuals who could benefit from grants.

That sound administrative structure was just as important when it came to staying compliant as a charitable organization. As the Foundation approached the threshold of \$500,000 in annual income, it required audited financials, more sophisticated Form 990 filings, and





regular, structured board meetings, and more oversight of daily activities.

Legal support and financial controls and oversight continue to give the team and its donors confidence that the Foundation's activities are carefully tracked and above board.

Find great people and partners

Several key turning points for the Foundation were marked by partnerships and people who brought new energy to the mission. Quickly there were more key relationships, volunteers, and inquiries from third parties, and more individual grantees to serve and monitor. There was no more time in Travis' day or in the schedules of the pro bono administrative team that he had built around him. The world moved forward too as digital communications exploded and websites and social media became the lifeblood of many. The organization needed an executive director to connect the dots between key events, volunteers and donors, and navigate the complex web of social media, websites, and overall online fundraising. Again finding the right person for the role, with the right skills and chemistry with Travis was critical and fortunately that person was found in Marge Oppold. With an expanded team and mission Travis and Marge could bring the foundation to a new level.

Aligning with the right partner organizations also paved the way for smart growth. Once the Foundation was raising enough money to have a greater impact on research, it needed guidance to find the most relevant and deserving grant recipients. The team affiliated with researchers from Boston and Harvard Universities and the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, learning from their network and sharing ideas for grants. A team from Wentworth University added capacity to the adaptive equipment program and the Foundation further partnered with Spaulding Rehab.

The starting connection for administrative services that Travis made was through a law firm that offered pro bono services shortly after his accident. His and his family's personal qualities cemented the commitment of key partners and administrative staff. Eventually, Travis's legal and administrative team moved to Hemenway & Barnes, a more specialized firm in Boston, which was able to connect the foundation with other like-minded philanthropic individuals and organizations, generating a powerful networking effect. The firm's nonprofit expertise helped the organization as it advanced, creating a solid "foundation for the Foundation." The firm advised on issues including strategic planning, tax compliance with the IRS, donations of tangible objects, grants management, board governance, vetting research proposals, and sound financial planning. Hemenway & Barnes also became a further reservoir of volunteers for events and activities.

As the complexity of the funding sources and grant opportunities grew, a partnership with an involved and caring auditor became critical. Further outside accounting and bookkeeping resources were brought in and best practices adopted.





Geared for the future

With a strong leader, awareness of the mission, and an underpinning of professional administrative direction, the Travis Roy Foundation continues to look for tools to advance its cause.

The ongoing events will continue to serve as a base for budgeted revenues, however the Foundation's trajectory and reach present opportunities for greater levels of individual and foundation giving.

This suggests a natural evolution from the strictly grass roots approach that helped the Foundation grow through nearly two decades. Its donor base has expanded and matured; as those who grew up with Travis' story become more empowered, they can better affect change with larger, more impactful donations.

In turn there will be new challenges as to how to make the biggest impact with its research dollars and to most efficiently use its targeted funds for individuals in need. As its success continues, the potential to become a player in connection with commercial research will in turn require continued focused leadership and an expanding resource network. Success will attract more opportunities.

The Travis Roy Foundation will no doubt inspire increased giving and great work. The organization's leadership, sound structure, and partnerships are all committed to extend its reach in support of those affected by spinal cord injuries. It remains an example of an enterprise building on its founder's strength, and then requiring and getting more of him.

Copyright © 2016 Hemenway & Barnes LLP

This advisory is provided solely for information purposes and should not be construed as legal advice with respect to any particular situation. This advisory is not intended to create a lawyer-client relationship. You should consult your legal counsel regarding your situation and any specific legal questions you may have.



Hemenway
& Barnes LLP