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Karen LaShelle has led Theatre Action Project during its growth from a budget of \$35,000 in 2003 to a nearly \$1 million nonprofit serving more than 16,000 young people a year throughout the region.

STAGING SUCCESS

Nonprofit able to sell the value of its theater-based community service

SANDRA ZARAGOZA | STAFF WRITER

When Karen LaShelle began volunteering in 2003 for Theatre Action Project, little did she know that within her creative side lay a head for business and that it would make a big difference.

Soon after LaShelle started, she became the then-fledgling nonprofit's executive director and found herself facing all the typical challenges of an entrepreneur, from marketing and hiring to identifying funding and managing growth.

"I started to do a lot of program development and marketing of those programs to schools," said LaShelle, who has a master's degree in community-based arts from New York University and a bachelor of fine arts from Illinois Wesleyan University. "My creative side just started kicking in, and I saw how building the business itself was a place that my creativity could really come into play."

What she's built is a nonprofit that serves more than 16,000 young people a year and presents its programs on 56 campuses throughout Central Texas. And with 13 full-time staff members and several volunteers, Theatre Action Project is preparing to expand its after-school programming to Del Valle next year while positioning itself to one day build a permanent home for its theater-based programs.

Early on, LaShelle saw a need to package the nonprofit's programs and explain their potential impact on students to stakeholders who were often not familiar with educational theater.

"Part of what I try to do is communicate the vast array of what we do simply," LaShelle said.

And it's her ability to reach out and build partnerships that has enabled

her to sell the nonprofit's value and build partnerships to help deliver it, said Rich Smalling, a longtime Theatre Action Project board member and president of American Innovations.

"One of the things that the top person needs to do is really connect with the outside world, and she does that really, really well. She can speak to the mission in detail because she's involved, and she can explain it in terms that anyone can grasp," said Smalling, whose company helps keep gas and oil pipelines safe. "And she's good at forming partnerships, like with SafePlace and Communities in Schools and all kinds of other partnerships that she's put together to drive the organization."

Theatre Action Project has four program categories:

- Through TAP After School, young people explore age-appropriate activities, develop skills and build self-esteem through creative activities, such as theater, visual arts, puppet and mask making, dance, creative writing and filmmaking.

- TAP In The Classroom provides multiday interactive shows that engage students with drama, role playing, songs and discussion. Some of the social issues tackled include cyberbullying, dating violence and anger management.

- TAP In The Community works with dozens of community organizations — including FirstNightAustin, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and Heart House — to create customized programs for community events, festivals, summer camps and workshops.

- In Youth Theatre Ensembles, young people are paid to create performances addressing dating violence and related issues, which they take on tours to area schools and community centers. The program is run in partnership with SafePlace, a nonprofit that helps women and families

SEE THEATRE, P16

ASK THE EXPERTS

What entrepreneurial skills that are generally associated with successful startups are also vital to growing a young nonprofit?

Growing a nonprofit or a startup requires the same skills: vision, leadership and passion. You need a vision that is clear, compelling and easily understood. Your leadership has to inspire others. Always surround yourself with people smarter than you. Lastly, you have to radiate passion. It carries you through the trying times and inspires people to fund you.



Successful business and nonprofit leaders share many traits, including a strong networking background, social communication skills, business planning and branding, recruiting skills and an ability to motivate talent to believe in the mission. If nonprofits do not consider themselves a business and hold themselves accountable to those they serve, they cannot be successful.



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