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## So What Else Provides Answers

By Sharon Allen Gilder

So What Else has been focused on providing free afterschool and summer programming for underserved youth since its inception in 2009. The charity, headquartered in Rockville, achieved its 501(c)(3) status in 2010 and continues to inspire young people to ask, "So what else can we do to help?" Built on its motto, "Help the kids, help the community, and help the kids help the community," So What Else (SWE) engages young people, mobilizes them to "pay it forward" through community service, and provides resources and services to other community organizations.

Those altruistic roots were planted when SWE cofounders and North Potomac residents Robert Schless and David Silbert took a trip to New Orleans as volunteers to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. Silbert said he "could sense the tenuous nature of civilization and feel that there must be forces of good, especially for our children."

He entered the nonprofit arena "looking to discover what was most needed and wanted, and underserved youth were the answer." Schless said their mantra has been: "If we did good work in the community, then we would get the following and funding we needed to grow." Silbert noted that "word of mouth and mission-driven work" has encouraged public involvement in their cause.

He explained that identifying need is "instinctual and easy...we have a saying that all kids are in need and some are in desperation. We're driven toward the desperation but very happy to serve any youth that present themselves because, even in rich families, kids can still need attention and development."

Silbert's background in sports, running camps, and working with youth offered a natural segue into the charity that he said has become "a popular commodity now...at this point, we often have places with kids reaching out to us looking for our services." Over forty businesses and nonprofits support and partner with SWE; however, sufficient funding is a recurrent need. "I can't tell you how disappointing it is that we have to tell a principal or director of a center that we are tapped out," Schless said. "It is obvious to us that the need in the community far exceeds the resources we have to combat the problem. Even in Montgomery County, we have large pockets of in-need areas."

SWE's collaboration with for-profit and other nonprofits includes placing young people to work for them to help serve in their cause. "This allows our constituency introduction into other issue areas they may be passionate about," Silbert said. "Our grandiose hope is to collaborate with as many youth groups as possible and have them adopt our pay-it-forward curriculums and classes."

SWE's large and diverse staff creates and delivers a variety of extracurricular activity programs, which are also incorporated into their summer programs, including Health & Wellness, Green Path Academy, Expressive Arts, and Feed the Mind. This season, the charity is conducting summer camps at twenty-seven locations in the region.

A Service Learning Stewardship Program encourages leadership and social consciousness, and provides opportunities for participants to earn student service hours. SWE's website states that through the program, students "experience first-hand how they can build more community in their own lives and cultivate positive change in their community." The program is a cornerstone of the charity in tandem with its character-building skills, The Ten Pillars: youth empowerment; constant growth; be true to yourself; leave no trace; compassion; creativity; non-violence; pay it forward/civic responsibility; positivity; and teamwork and sportsmanship. SWE's website explains that the "stewardship program often referred to as 'The Big Idea!' is an educational and interactive program designed to encourage students to create novel and innovative ways to serve their community and Earth."



So What Else cofounders, Robert Schless and David Silbert.

A Bottle Bench Brick-building campaign in association with SWE's Green Path Academy resulted in the construction of two benches made from plastic water and soda bottles. The process for the craft that encourages zero waste and learning about upcycling is taught during summer camps where the bottle bricks are collected for future projects.

On Friday, November 4, SWE will host its annual fundraiser gala at Lakewood Country Club. In addition to food and drinks, there will be abundant laughs with special guest, comedian, actress, and television writer, Patty Rossborough.

Silbert said the charity's most important goal is "to get kids out serving and to inspire them to serve and love and be compassionate and even philanthropic at an earlier curve than usual. We think that can change civil society."

For more information about SWE, visit: [www.SoWhatElse.org](http://www.SoWhatElse.org).

Have any information you'd like to share in the Nonprofit Notebook?  
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