

Capital campaign

Creating social wealth in Woburn, SCI is ready to grow

BY ROBERT PREER

Many people at one time or another have read a book or article so engaging and compelling they vowed that once they finished it, they would get up and do something—volunteer for a cause, send money to a charity, or go on a diet. Cross-country flights, with their minimal distractions and rarefied air, tend to encourage such inner calls to action. But when the plane touches down, life intrudes. Obligations arise. Soon, all those good intentions are overwhelmed, the ambitious plans placed on a shelf along with the book that inspired them.

Unless you're David Crowley. In the fall of 2000, Crowley, then the head of the Boston nonprofit Generations Inc., was flying to San Francisco for a conference. He became absorbed in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, a now-classic book on America's frayed social fabric and the decline in what Putnam and other academics call "social capital"—the value of connections among individuals in society. The title refers to the demise of bowling leagues at a time when the number of bowlers was on the rise—paralleling the demise of so many community-based organizations. As the plane began to land, Crowley devoured the final chapter, which offers a set of prescriptions for curing the country's social ills.

"I said, 'By golly, I have to do something about this,'" Crowley recalls. "I wanted to jump out of the plane and get to work."

When he returned home to Woburn a few days later, his fervor over the book, which had been published earlier in the year, was still strong. He talked about it with his wife, Jodi, who was then working for the National Conference for Community and Justice, an organization that promotes racial and religious understanding. She was skeptical at first. "She would say, 'Give it a rest,'" Crowley says.

While he couldn't give it a rest, neither did he know precisely what to do. After what he describes as "a few months

of agitation," Crowley finally hit on an idea. He would create an organization in Woburn—his boyhood home to which he had recently returned—that would connect hitherto isolated individuals and community groups.

"I had been trying to make connections in Woburn, but when you went on the Internet and used a search engine, all you got was people trying to sell you things. At some point, a light bulb went on in my head about what was needed," Crowley says.



*SCI founder David Crowley couldn't stand still after reading *Bowling Alone*.*

Thus was born Social Capital Inc. The name is taken from the concept that is at the heart of Putnam's thesis—that connections among people add value to a society in much the same way that financial capital does. SCI Woburn, as it is known in the city, is connecting citizens to information, through its Web site (www.sciwoburn.org) and "Civic Welcome Wagon" booklets, and to each other, through volunteer beautification efforts and summer concerts in the downtown area. SCI also runs training programs for emerging community leaders and promotes

civic engagement through its Woburn Youth Council, a collaboration with the local Boys and Girls Club and YMCA.

Now, after two years of community building in Woburn, Crowley is ready to spread his civic gospel—and model—to other cities in the Boston area. First stop: Dorchester.

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

Crowley got serious about putting Putnam's ideas into practice in early 2001, when he made the rounds of Boston philanthropies. (He did not seek out Putnam, who is on the faculty at Harvard University, but the two have met several times since SCI was up and running, and they exchange e-mail occasionally.) He then approached key individuals in Woburn—leaders in city government and established community organizations. Thanks to Crowley's own ability to connect with people, he made quick progress.

"You feel he really wants the input from people," says Fel Medeiros, founder of the Woburn Residents' Environmental Network. "Then they have a stake in things. He's a terrific coach."

Crowley is ready to spread his civic gospel to other cities.

After stirring up interest in SCI, Crowley called an open meeting. Louise Nolan, an assistant superintendent of schools in Woburn, agreed to co-host, lending the get-together respectability in the community. About 35 people came to that first gathering, in early 2002. They included the chief of police, school officials, and leaders of the Boys and Girls Club and YMCA. Roughly half the attendees were people who were not known as community leaders but had read about the meeting in the local newspaper, the *Daily Times Chronicle*.

"The idea I was pitching to folks was, 'Here is a problem. We have to do something about it,'" Crowley says. Those attending the meeting took the pitch, and encouraged Crowley to go forward. With a few small grants, mostly from local businesses, Crowley was able to start some initiatives, rolling out the SCI Woburn Web site that

summer. Crowley quit his job at Generations Inc., a Boston-based organization that runs community service programs involving youths and seniors. He wouldn't be able to pay himself a salary from SCI for another six months, but by that time his wife had switched careers; as a real estate broker, she was making enough money to support the two of them.

Crowley, 33, is soft-spoken and engaging. In conversation, he throws in the phrase "by golly," underscoring his earnestness. He says that his choice of occupation—community builder—was no accident. His father was an administrator for the state Department of Youth Services, and his mother taught first grade at St. Charles Elementary School in Woburn. "With both of my parents involved in what you might call the helping professions, I had a genetic predisposition to be in this field," he says.

The eldest of three children, Crow-



SCI boosters: Boston Globe Foundation director Leah Bailey (left) and Woburn alderman-at-large Joanna Gonsalves.

ley graduated in 1987 from Woburn High School, where he was senior class president and a member of the varsity baseball team. He went to Harvard University the next year, at a time when volunteerism was becoming one of the hottest trends on college campuses, especially in the Boston area. City Year, the youth service program launched in Boston in 1988, drew national attention. For his part, Crowley volunteered at a homeless shelter in Cambridge and tutored disadvantaged children in Dorchester. As an

upperclassman, he started a program that made Harvard students mentors to Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School students.

After graduation in 1991, Crowley received a grant from Harvard to do outreach with disadvantaged youth in rural Kentucky. Based at Berea College, his volunteer initiative grew into a regional program, and when Congress and President Clinton established the AmeriCorps volunteer service program, Crowley was tapped to head the organization in Kentucky.

After five years in Kentucky, Crowley and his wife, who was a student at Berea College when they met, decided to move to the Boston area. They rented an apartment in Everett, but soon began looking for a house. Woburn, a small city where real estate prices had not yet soared out of reach, was a logical choice for a young couple working for social service agencies, even if Crowley hadn't grown up there.

"It wasn't so much going back to my roots," Crowley says. "But we looked at the prices of homes and saw this was a place we could afford."

Located 10 miles northwest of Boston, at the crossroads of I-93 and Route 128, Woburn is a middle-class bedroom community of 37,000 people, with suburban subdivisions

and an old downtown. The city is just over 90 percent white, but with growing Asian, Latino, and African-American populations.

SCI Woburn is located in a business park on the east side of the city, near Route 128. Crowley says he would have preferred an office in Woburn's downtown, but the space near the highway was available for the right price. Crowley's staff consists of a part-time administrative aide and an AmeriCorps fellow, who works with young people.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

On Sept. 11, 2002, SCI had something of a public coming-out. To mark the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks, volunteers organized by SCI planted daffodil bulbs at Woburn's Horn Pond. They held a community forum and candlelight ceremonies, undaunted by high winds. People in Woburn began to notice the fledgling organization.

"In one week we showed in a lot of ways that we were doing things to add value to the community," Crowley says. That fall, SCI set up a 20-member youth council, drawn from members of established service organizations. SCI trains middle and high school students on the council to be civic leaders, then puts them in charge of



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roughly \$7,000 in state grant money to other youth groups involved in community service. The funds have gone to environmental cleanups, recycling initiatives, and a rock concert to raise money for charity. In 2003, the youth council organized a debate at Woburn High School between the two contenders in the mayoral election.

SCI has also launched an adult leadership training program. Crowley notes that one of the reasons Putnam identified for the demise of community-based organizations was the dearth of new leaders to replace those who leave.

"You have this same group of people who do everything, and over time, the group gets smaller and smaller as people get burned out," he says. The leadership trainees in Woburn meet regularly and get instruction on public speaking, running meetings, and understanding local government.

Another SCI initiative is a summer concert series. While the city has had summer concerts in the past featuring pop standards, last year's three concerts featured Brazilian jazz, doo-wop, and contemporary rock. Six concerts are scheduled for this summer.

Early this year, SCI Woburn launched the Civic Welcome Wagon. Volunteers contact every new resident to the city and deliver to them—in person, when possible—a 30-page booklet with such information as phone numbers for city departments, contacts for youth sports, and child care options. (The booklet is delivered with a free coffee mug.) Tucked in the back is a voter registration form.

Joanna Gonsalves, a Woburn alderman at-large and a psychology professor at Salem State College, is a Civic Welcome Wagon volunteer, and she says about half of those contacted ask for the home visit. "What I've found is when I show up, people have a pot of coffee made, and there are cookies on the table. It becomes a social thing," she says.

The visits might also bring new recruits to other community programs. "What I like about SCI is that it has brought new people to the table," says Sandy Morander, district vice president for the YMCA of Greater Boston and head of the Woburn Y.

Gonsalves agrees. "For the September 11 events, there were three generations working together," she notes. "I don't know of any other group that does that."

TRANSPLANTING THE CIVIC SEED

After subsisting for two years on small grants from a variety of sources, last fall SCI won a grant that would give it much-needed financial stability—and a launching pad for expansion. Crowley had approached the Boston Globe Foundation, the charitable arm of the newspaper, which was especially interested in programs that promote civic participation.

"We wanted to find groups we could partner with and

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Doreen Treacy, director of the Health Services Partnership in Dorchester, sees a vital need for SCI in her neighborhood.

make a deep investment in and bring the group to the next level," says Leah Bailey, director of the foundation. "It was a perfect fit for what David was doing."

Even better, the Globe Foundation wanted to support a program within the city of Boston and Crowley wanted to bring the SCI model to a Boston neighborhood. In October, the foundation awarded SCI \$60,000, with the understanding that more support would be forthcoming if the organization continued to thrive. Counting other grants, SCI has a budget of \$150,000 for 2004.

Crowley hopes SCI Dorchester will do for Boston's largest residential neighborhood what SCI Woburn has

'I think we have had a catalytic effect in Woburn.'

done for his hometown—build an infrastructure for community involvement. The new group will work with the Health Services Partnership of Dorchester, which is itself a joint venture of the Codman Square Health Center and the Dorchester House Multi-Service Center. The partnership is giving SCI office space in the Codman Square agency.

Dorchester already has a multitude of community-based organizations, but Doreen Treacy, director of the health partnership, says SCI will perform a vital function. "What our community has historically lacked that SCI

can provide is a central convener, a place where conversations can occur and connections [can be] made across boundaries," says Treacy.

Crowley plans a six-month startup period, during which a Web site will be constructed and the framework for a youth council established. SCI Dorchester initially will focus on the neighborhoods around Codman Square and Fields Corner. The area is racially mixed, with significant numbers of whites, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Haitians.

"We have to be careful about not making assumptions that what worked in Woburn will work in Dorchester," says Crowley. "But we do think we have some concepts that are transferable."

Crowley also hopes that Dorchester won't be the end of SCI's proliferation. Over the next three years, he plans to open sites in four other communities—one more in Boston, one in a bedroom community similar to Woburn, and two in an older, medium-sized city, such as Lowell or Brockton.

But Crowley does not see himself expanding SCI across the country. Rather, his fondest hope is that Social Capital Inc. will serve as a model that will help groups elsewhere build home-grown social capital-creating initiatives.

"I think we have had a catalytic effect in Woburn. We've helped to make things happen," he says. "We like to see ways we can work with a relatively small number of people to have ripple effects." ■