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SE Greenhouse Blooms Where It's Planted (Providence)

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Credit: SE Greenhouse

By Courtney Gabrielson

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If you talk to anyone business-inclined folk in Rhode Island long enough, the Social Enterprise Greenhouse is sure to come up.

For those out of the loop, it's a veritable titan of a, well, entity, as describing it as just an accelerator or an incubator or a coworking spot or what-have-you would be much too exclusive.

In fact, the SE Greenhouse co-founder and CEO, Kelly Ramirez, talks nearly longest when she's just explaining to me the many offerings the organization boasts. "There's a big menu of different workshops," she tells me. "A signature program; a 12-week accelerator program, coupled with Brown University; there's an MBA program; online curriculums; consulting and advising, three times a year; customized advising; a loan fund, a coworking space. [We do] a lot of work with the university, helping them develop social enterprise programs by building a pipeline and tapping student talent."

The Greenhouse's vast menu of opportunities are united by its common goal: fostering [no surprise] social enterprises, those who aim to "do well and do good."

"We call ourselves an ecosystem builder," Ramirez says. "The concept is, we want to serve the entrepreneur, from, 'I'm someone who has an idea or might have an idea' ... all the way to those growing and scaling their businesses."

Unsurprisingly, the Social Enterprise Greenhouse is interested in fostering social enterprises, which the organization defines on its website as groups “that strive to do well and do good.”

The SE Greenhouse got its own start either six years or nine years ago, depending how you measure a beginning. Nine years ago in 2008, what would ultimately prove the DNA of the greenhouse was first spotted in a chapter of a global social venture partners group, of which Ramirez was a part.

“The business mode was not working well,” she says. “A group of folks involved with that SEC chapter and I, who had just moved to Rhode Island, were eager to get involved in the social enterprise. We hit at this and figured out a business model that works, and so we transformed [the group] into SEG. It’s been quite a ride.”

The relaunched and rebranded SE Greenhouse premiered in 2011, with Ramirez at the helm and a realigned business model providing a stronger structure.

The team hit the ground running.

“We put on an event, we identified 50-60 social entrepreneurs, and we just started building a community and asking what they needed,” Ramirez says. “We have tried things that haven’t worked, but continued to innovate. The field is still changing, and there’s lots of growth. We’re very excited to expand to the needs of the community.”

And expand they have. “In six years, we’ve increased our portfolio ventures from 10 to more than 400 and helped create more than 1,200 jobs in our region,” their website reads. “Our ventures have improved the lives of nearly 1,000,000 people in a myriad of ways including job training, educational interventions, and financial literacy training.”

That growth is a credit both to the SE Greenhouse’s all-women team (an accident; “it really was how it shook out,” Ramirez says, adding that male team member will join the Greenhouse in the fall) and the businesses themselves, Ramirez says. “We’re obviously an intermediary,” she continues. “We serve the businesses that eventually serve the clients. We measure our success by how many businesses they work with and how they’re doing; how they are growing, if they positively impact [the community].”

But success today isn’t the end all for the Greenhouse of the entrepreneurs it works with.

“We’re only as good as the business that we serve, and we certainly can’t take all the credit,” Ramirez says. “I am not a person who wants to maintain. I think we’re still learning. The space is growing. I think there are a lot of needs.”

And while that may mean the local environment is changing, it won’t preclude the SE Greenhouse from stepping up, with Ramirez hoping to continue to “grow the movement of the people who believe in this concept.”

Specifically on her plate? Finding ways to connect innovators to the capital they need to get their organizations up and running. While the SE Greenhouse does have a loan fund, Ramirez says she still wants to explore different ways to garner capital through partnerships and other opportunities to make the SE Greenhouse’s assistance capabilities even more robust.

These aforementioned entrepreneurs represent enterprises from across the industrial gamut – health care to food to the environment. More than 50 percent are female, and 24 percent represent racially or socio-economically diverse communities.

Inclusivity and representation in both the “pipeline” of entrepreneurs, volunteers and staff is paramount for Ramirez and the Greenhouse, a “constant” goal.

Diversity makes the team stronger, she says. “The reality is, those in the position to solve some of the greatest challenges are those who have had first-hand experience with those challenges.”

The SE Greenhouses' volunteer community bolsters that sense of the importance of having many different folks at the table, an asset that Ramirez calls "our secret sauce."

Said volunteers provide most of the programming for events and other offerings and provide mentoring services to those using the Greenhouse's tools. "I joke we're a Match.com for social enterprises in the state," Ramirez says. "We couldn't even be half of the organization that we are without our volunteer network."

Volunteers love it because they feel like they've helped someone with the time that they give. Entrepreneurs love it because they feel like they've gotten something incredibly valuable having facetime with storied innovators, lawyers, and entrepreneurs themselves. "It's such a fantastic resource," Ramirez adds.

It's from this network that the SE Greenhouse's resources grow, she says, but it's also the lynch pin of the group's ultimate vision and heart. "The entrepreneurs are fantastic and generous, as are the volunteers," Ramirez says. "The Greenhouse is a very robust, welcoming, helpful community of people who really believe this type of entrepreneurship is really key to and community development."

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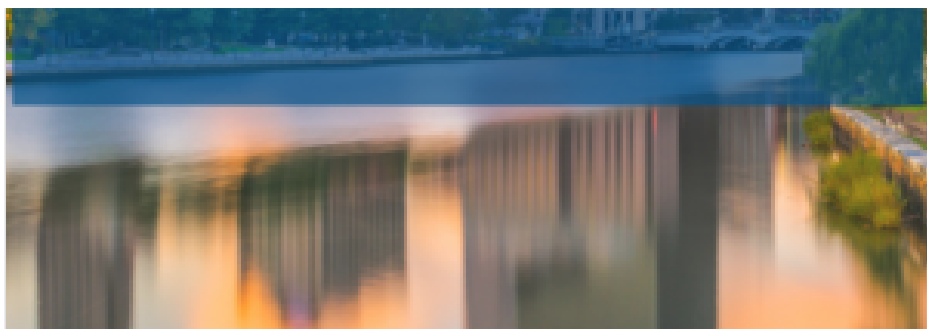
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