

Donors Choose

An innovative Internet program pairs donors with teachers to fund classroom projects.

FIVE years ago an idea occurred to 24-year-old Bronx alternative school instructor Charles Best in a teacher's lunchroom. The idea was as simple as it now is successful.

Best, the son of an affluent New York lawyer who has devoted himself to public service, commiserated with fellow teachers about instructional materials and other classroom needs that neither they nor their institution could fund. He decided to set up a Web site called Donors Choose to solicit contributions to pay for class projects proposed by teachers.

Best covered the first round of requests out of his own salary, but his venture has evolved into a multimillion dollar, award-winning operation that is expanding its services into the Houston area with the sponsorship of the Chronicle and J.P. Morgan Chase.

"Although we went into our own pockets to buy the basic paper and pencils our students didn't have, overall we just saw our kids going without the resources and materials they needed to learn." Best reasoned that if classroom needs were spelled out to potential donors, who could watch their dollars at work, they would pay to turn teacher proposals into reality.

Rather than send money to the teachers, the staff of Donors Choose solicits proposals for class projects, posts them on its Web site and pro-

cesses the contributions from donors. All purchases of materials and services are handled by the organization, which then delivers directly to the instructors. "We saw that if really committed educators are given this open invitation to design microsolutions for their kids," Best explained, "teachers are going to come up with awesome ideas." The program also provides feedback to the donors by having teachers photograph the projects and send the photos, an impact letter and student thank you notes to the contributor.

Donors Choose hit the big time last year when it won the Amazon.com Nonprofit Innovation Award by raising more contributions over 2½ months than nine other finalists. In raising \$790,000, the organization received a matching cash award. Since its founding, it has funded more than 10,000 teacher proposals, purchasing more than \$5 million in supplies and services for nearly 300,000 students.

The Chronicle urges Houston-area teachers and potential contributors to visit www.donorschoose.org for more information on the organization and how to provide an enriching educational experience for local instructors and their students. For Texans who are tired of waiting for adequate funding of the public schools, Donors Choose is a great way to get immediately involved in the effort to improve the quality of learning in the classrooms.