

THOMAS FARRAGHER

Four busy guys take time to offer relief from the BullPen

By **Thomas Farragher** Globe Columnist, December 23, 2018, 7:03 p.m.



From left, Michael Connelly, Steve Alperin, Ben Levin, and Alan Stern started The BullPen Project last year to help the poor and down-on-their-luck get back on their feet. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

NEEDHAM — These friendships stretch back decades now, to the days when they were second-graders on the dusty ball fields in the suburbs of Boston.

Some of them wore identical uniforms in the Needham Little League. Two were roommates and baseball teammates at college in Waltham.

All of them are successful. All have felt a responsibility that accompanies comfort and reasonable wealth. All of them have decided to do something about it.

“This is the least we can do, considering the blessings that have been bestowed on us over the years,” Michael Connelly told me.

“We’re four busy guys. We’ve got 10 kids between us,” said Steve Alperin. “We’ve done well. We’re very thankful for it. We’re thankful for healthy children. And we want to give back.”

And in that spirit, they have given birth to something called the Boston BullPen Project. As charities go, it’s relatively small. It’s still in its infancy. You probably haven’t heard of it or the men behind it.

But in small but important ways, they’re changing lives. Eight hundred dollars here. One thousand dollars there. One phone call — one check — at a time.

“That’s the essence of what we’re doing,” Alan Stern told me the other day over lunch here. “We’re coming in in relief. Other organizations can’t necessarily help these individuals. So they’re making a call to the bullpen. And we’re helping out.”

Stern is a Needham pediatrician. Alperin is a recently retired portfolio manager. Connelly is a commercial lender.

Their youngest colleague is Ben Levin, an attorney and father of two, who knows the difference between what we want and what we need.

“You don’t need everything you want, and there are others who don’t have the things that they need,” Levin said. “To give them that gift to get over the hump, that really matters in people’s lives.”

It certainly does. This is street-level philanthropy. There is little red tape. There is almost no bureaucracy. Look around and you can see plenty of small miracles.

“Yesterday, we got a request at 10:45 in the morning,” Alperin said. “We had it approved by 11:05 and the check was written and cut at 11:30. The loose criteria are, one, it’s a crisis, and, two, it’s a one-time game-changing request to keep somebody on their feet when all of the other resources have been exhausted.”

They help poor kids, veterans down on their luck, single moms who need a critical month’s rent payment, the homeless, the downtrodden, the desperate.

Their partners and feeder systems are some of the most well-known institutions in our city: Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, the Pine Street Inn, Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and Father Bill’s & MainSpring, whose motto is: Nobody should be homeless.

The BullPen Project was launched in early 2017. It has spent \$75,000 so far to help 100 people. For the most part, they have reached out to find the benevolent organizations they are now helping.

And they’re just in the top of the first inning.

“Who are these guys?” asked Elissa Pototsky, director of student services at Year Up Boston, which helps young adults move from poverty to professionalism. “I haven’t met them. But when I ask, ‘Can you guys help?’ They’ve never said no.”

Lora Tarlin at the Jewish Family & Children’s Service said BullPen fills a critical hole in a safety net often stretched too thin.

“The fact that I send them an e-mail at 1 o’clock in the afternoon and I know by 5 o’clock as to whether it’s going to be a yay or a nay is pretty amazing,” said Tarlin, who directs the agency’s Schechter Holocaust Services. “Everyone involved can go to sleep at night knowing that they’re going to be OK.”

Imagine receiving a thank-you note like this:

“If the registration on my truck didn’t get paid, I wouldn’t be able to work at all during my cancer treatment. Right now, I’ve managed to keep a few jobs and any extra income will go a very long way.”

Or this:

“To many, \$85 might not seem like a lot, but to someone just getting back on their feet, it can be the difference between the status quo and taking that next, life-changing step.”

Or this:

“The past few months have been very stressful and money has been tight since our son was born prematurely and I had to stop working. I’m very relieved and grateful for [your] assistance.”

There is gratitude everywhere. And a recognition that generosity delivered at a critical time can be profound.

Like the time a young woman was working, attending a community college, and trying to raise her two kids. Then, one of them got sick. Her medical bills came to \$800, enough money to jeopardize her education. She needed that money to keep her college account from being frozen. And she got it from the BullPen.

It’s unlikely she’ll ever forget the crucial relief it provided.

And neither will the man at the Pine Street Inn who needed \$15 to obtain a copy of his birth certificate to verify his citizenship.

These friends are touching the lives of people they have never met. People they never will meet. The money each of these guys has donated from the superstructure for an organization now collecting donations through its website.

Along the way, they’re also setting an example for 10 children who have a prime box-seat view of what it looks like to be generous, to be kind, to be caring. This is what it looks like

to be truly selfless.

“The thing I didn’t realize was how much a need there is out there,” Alperin told me. “We’ve [already done] 100 requests. But we’re just scratching the surface. We want to grow. We want to do it intelligently. But we want to touch more people.”

Sometimes those people are very close to home.

Alan Stern, the son of a Holocaust survivor, is 54 now. He moved to Needham in 1971, played baseball with Alperin at Needham High School, and has been practicing pediatric medicine for nearly 25 years.

He recently got an e-mail from his daughter that is suitable for framing.

“Although you did not suffer the same abuse directly as Poppa did, I think your life has definitely been shaped by it,” 20-year-old Celia Stern wrote to her dad. *“As the child of a survivor, your charitable work is a form of resistance to the abuse that Poppa suffered.”*

In this season of giving, it’s important to recognize that there are generous people atop the glass-and-chrome skyscrapers of Boston who quietly touch lives with generosity beyond the means of most of us.

There are people like Jake and Sparky Kennedy, whose Christmas in the City legacy — that magical holiday gala — has brightened the eyes and the holiday season for countless city children across three decades, kids who otherwise might not know the blessings and warmth of this season.

There’s Globe Santa, which has brought cheer to Christmas mornings for nearly 3 million kids and 1.2 million families since 1956.

And then there are these four friends, guys who know how lucky they are — four men who are grateful for their healthy children and for their deep and abiding friendships.

That’s no small gift.

Thomas Farragher is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at thomas.farragher@globe.com.

[Show 23 comments](#)

©2024 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC