



## Generating Change:

# Renewing Leaders for Long-Term Service

### Challenge:

Keep highly effective nonprofit leaders from burning out and leaving the field

### Approach:

Create a paid, three-month sabbatical when leaders focus exclusively on renewing themselves

### Investment:

\$313,600 to support six leaders every two years

### Result:

Leaders return reinvigorated for the long haul, fortified with new perspectives, vision, ideas, peer networks and work-life balance

### Players:

Durfee Foundation, Center for the Pacific Asian Family

Like many highly effective nonprofit leaders, Debra Suh's life moves at a fast pace. At 33, she took on the executive director role at Center for the Pacific Asian Family, an organization that tackles stressful domestic violence and sexual assault issues 24 hours a day. In her first eight years, she gave birth to two children, lost a brother and worked 15-hour days to successfully grow the agency.

"I was on the verge of burning out," she explains. "I wasn't feeling balanced, and although I loved my work, I was questioning whether I was doing the right thing."

Enter the Durfee Foundation Sabbatical Program, created in 1997 and now serving six Los Angeles nonprofit leaders every other year.

"We knew that most of our colleagues in nonprofit life were in danger of burnout," explains Durfee Foundation Executive Director Claire Peeps. "Their jobs are high stress, poorly compensated and very demanding. Many of them were leaving just to get a break."

"We had made a few renewal grants before. We recognized their importance and decided to institutionalize the concept. We sought advice from the Vanguard Foundation and others and modeled our program on what we learned."

Durfee Foundation started its program with \$25,000 grants to six nonprofit leaders to support a three-month leave. Now the foundation awards \$35,000 for each leader and provides an additional \$2,500 bonus to the secondary leader at each organization, plus \$5,000 to seed a permanent professional development fund at each organization.

"I wanted a break, but I wouldn't have applied if a mentor [who was a former sabbatical recipient] hadn't pushed me," admits Suh. "I didn't think my agency was ready, but she assured me I'd have time to transition and prepare. Once I started writing the application, it became clear to me how much I *needed* a break."

## Why Invest in Renewal?

"We wish more foundations would support renewal. It's always been hard to work in this sector, but especially now when funding is tough and there's such potential for burnout. People need to find their inner reserves. As work in the sector gets tougher, more people want to bail. This is a way to stem that tide."

— Claire Peeps, Durfee Foundation



## In Their Words:

“This really changed my life. It was so important at a critical time in my career when I was wondering whether I could continue. It gave me a way to get rid of all my clutter mentally and physically and stay in it.”

— **Debra Suh**  
Executive Director  
Center for the Pacific  
Asian Family

## The Value of “Nonproductive” Time

“Sabbaticals are rigorously nonproductive,” Peeps explains. “Getting the benefit of renewal requires a 100 percent disconnect. We have a strict policy against e-mail and telephone contact with an organization during leave, and against serving on other boards. That’s tough, but the impact corresponds commensurately; it lets people really rediscover who they are and what they’re passionate about.”

“In my interview process, Durfee expressed concern that I would just spend time with my children and insisted I make a commitment to spend time on myself,” Suh recalls. “They gave me permission to just take care of myself and not take care of others.”

That in itself was a rare gift.

Suh took her sabbatical in 2008. “During the break, I wanted to clear out all the physical and mental clutter in my life, to see what I could toss and what I could keep,” she says. “At home, I cleared out a storage room completely and made it into a home office, so now I can come home earlier to spend family time, then work at night if needed.

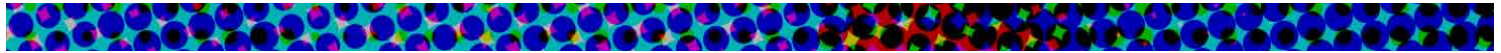
“It was about relationships, too. I do this work to build healthier relationships for women and families, so it’s important for me to be in a good place to do it. I wanted to strengthen my relationships with my husband, my kids and my aging parents. I lost my father a year after the sabbatical, and I’m so glad I had a chance to spend some time with him.

“I’m in a better place now both physically and mentally. Getting rid of things and being able to be more effective, both personally and professionally, is what really changed.”

## Beyond the Three-Month Mark

In addition to renewing leaders, another important goal for the Durfee Foundation is to offer secondary staff the chance to step up and try their hand while the leader is away. “Many EDs grow into their role as their organization grows, and they haven’t delegated very much along the way,” explains Peeps. “We want to allow the ED to have more time for strategic visioning, planning, thinking, public speaking and other activities that advance the organization’s cause. At the same time, we want to help next-level staff develop better relationships with the board, peers, funders and others, as well as sharpen their own leadership skills.”

“Coming back, I was able to lead the organization differently,” says Suh. “I now have an associate director who oversees all of the programs and a fiscal director who oversees all of the administrative functions. This has reduced staff who were directly reporting to me from eight to four. My associate director now handles all of the grant reports and audits required for government contracts, which has freed up my time and mental space. All of the managers who report to her have stepped up as well—they’re doing their own budgets, funding analyses and planning and are owning the work more. Agency-wide, we’re really seeing a lot of growth in



terms of leadership and expanded personal capacity, and I don't hold on to all those little things that were crowding out my time. We're also more strategic. Everyone has more creative space and time to be thoughtful about our work, and as a result, we've grown significantly during a down economy."

The foundation's relationship with sabbatical participants doesn't end when they return to work. "With Durfee, there's a continual reminder," says Suh. "They continue to nurture through quarterly lunches, e-mails and conversations. Every two years, they take us on a retreat to remind us to care for ourselves. That's especially good for those who have trouble balancing themselves and avoiding repeat burnout."

### Creating a Trend?

Beyond just providing sabbaticals, the Durfee Foundation serves as a voice for elevating awareness of human resources as a primary asset that fuels nonprofit organizations. The foundation regularly convenes a cohort of almost 100 fellows (sabbatical participants and others) who, Peeps says, "carry the torch for HR policies."

Awareness of sabbaticals has also grown. Organizations that don't qualify for Durfee sabbaticals have decided to fund their own. Several that have been through the Durfee program have institutionalized sabbaticals for staff—including Suh, who created a six-week paid sabbatical to which staff can add vacation time and a Nurturing Care Program that provides every employee with a \$100 annual stipend to use for wellness and self-care.

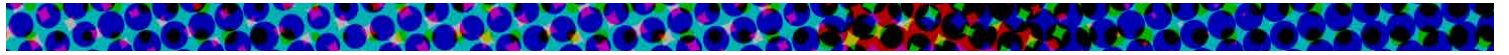
"We're proud of having kept people in their positions longer than they might have stayed otherwise," says Peeps. "We're also proud of the peer network we created; that was something that we really hadn't anticipated when we started the program. Today, our group of fellows has become a go-to resource for others who want to know what's going on in the nonprofit sector."

## The Nonprofit Talent and Leadership Development Pipeline

"Renewal" is just one of seven stages in the nonprofit talent and leadership development pipeline identified by Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy. Each stage of the pipeline offers myriad ways for funders to support the future of the nonprofit sector. Learn more about each stage at:

[epip.org/genchange](http://epip.org/genchange)





## Lessons Learned

- **Sabbaticals work.** Key findings from a 2010 evaluation, Creative Disruption, show that sabbaticals strengthen capacity, help with succession, strengthen governance and provide special insights to funders.
- **Creating a sabbatical program requires trust.** “In the early years, people assumed we had a hidden agenda or an expected work-related outcome,” Peeps remembers. “We took a lot of ribbing from other funders about people not coming back. Until we had a cadre of distinguished, revitalized graduates, people didn’t believe.”
- **A successful sabbatical experience takes a long arc of planning.** “You can’t just give the grant and expect the recipient to go,” says Peeps. “You need informal technical assistance, too, like pairing sabbatical recipients with a mentor, providing someone to work with secondary staff. The entire organization has to be ready to absorb the shock. It took us awhile to figure that out.”
- **Plan on post-sabbatical follow-up.** “It’s important to keep the reminders going after the sabbatical ends, even if it’s just with a follow-up call or e-mail reminder within the first year after the sabbatical. It helps participants harness and remember what they’ve gained in terms of keeping balance in their lives,” says Suh.
- **Use the experience to create a lasting network.** “Durfee keeps sabbatical recipients connected with one another through open, creative space,” Suh says. “I’ve gained many mentors through this network and developed several collaborations.”
- **Sabbaticals can inform other work.** “Durfee is a very small funder. We’ve focused our resources on sabbaticals and fellowships, which means we’re not an ongoing operating funder,” says Peeps. “As a result, people are willing to be more candid with us than they might be otherwise. Most of what we do now comes from their suggestions.”

## Creative Disruption



A 2010 evaluation sabbatical programs, including the one operated by The Durfee Foundation, reported that:

- 82% of participants show significant improvements in work/life balance and 68% report significantly better physical health after taking part in a sabbatical.
- 85% of participants now share a greater amount of decision making with managers, and 83% felt that managers in their organizations had become more skilled in their positions.
- 77% of nonprofit staff who served as interim leaders for sabbatical recipients agree that managers are now better skilled and that there is more delegation.

## Learn More

Find out more about how foundations are supporting renewal for nonprofit leaders at:

[epip.org/genchange](http://epip.org/genchange)  
[durfeefoundation.org](http://durfeefoundation.org)

This case study is part of **Generating Change**, an initiative designed to illuminate, inspire and activate the funding community to invest in talent and leadership development in grantee organizations, across networks and sector-wide. Generating Change is an initiative of Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy, a project housed at the Tides Center. Founded in 2001, EPIP builds extraordinary new leaders for foundations and the communities they impact.