Meet the Match.com of the Nonprofit World

PAUL STURM | TUESDAY, MAY 22, 2012

Growing up in Upper Marlboro, Aaron Marshall wanted to overcome his stuttering.

After many years of work with speech pathologists, Marshall succeeded and the attorney is now a board member for an agency that helps others find their own voice.

The senior counsel for Northrop Grumman Corp. in Linthicum became a board member of the nonprofit Hearing and Speech Agency of Baltimore. Last year, HASA provided diagnosis, speech therapy, family education and other assistance to more than 100 individuals who stutter and hosted a special viewing for the Oscar-winning movie “The King’s Speech.”

This summer, Marshall says he will participate in HASA’s Turtle Beach Club, a weeklong workshop that builds self-confidence and speech fluency for children who stutter and are approaching middle school years.

“I think it will be great,” Marshall says recalling his own childhood struggles to speak. “Serving on the HASA board has given me a broader, deeper perspective about how others are living and helps me remember how much others need helping hands.”

Marshall got connected to the agency through Business Volunteers Unlimited Maryland, a nonprofit with eight staff in South Baltimore that operates as the Match.com for business people who want to serve the community and nonprofits that benefit from their expertise as board members and volunteers. Since 2003, Business Volunteers Unlimited’s signature board matching program has placed more than 500 professionals from 75 companies – including Constellation Energy Group Inc., Legg Mason, PNC Bank and T. Rowe Price Group Inc. -- on the boards of 350 Baltimore-area nonprofits.

“We’re the bridge connecting the business community’s time and talent with the needs and opportunities of Baltimore’s nonprofits,” says Business Volunteers’ Executive Director Kelly Hodge-Williams. “We strengthen the community by inspiring volunteerism.”

After an initial meeting with a Business Volunteers Unlimited staff member, prospective board members attend a half-day board-training program. At a follow-up meeting, Business Volunteers Unlimited identifies one or two nonprofits that could be a good match.
This is the process that brought Jennifer Bowers to the Hampden Family Center nine months ago. Her company’s Regional Managing Principal, David Gillece, initially contacted the vice president of marketing and communications for downtown Baltimore real estate firm Cassidy Turley about getting involved with a Baltimore-area nonprofit.

“The training was interesting and eye-opening,” Bowers says. “It defined the difference between a nonprofit and for-profit business.”

Bowers was particularly intrigued when she learned about the Hampden Family Center, which provides educational programs and support to children, families and seniors. The center was looking for a board member with marketing expertise, so Bowers scheduled meetings on-site with the executive director and board president.

“I loved what I saw,” she says. “They’re making a big splash in a small area, and I realized I could be helpful in many ways.”

Serving on the board since September has given Bowers a more holistic view of what goes into a nonprofit organization versus just giving money.

Her efforts have made an impact, the center’s Executive Director Elisa Ghinger says. Bowers’ contributions included securing auction items for a fundraising event and recommending the center thank donors with notes from the children it serves.

“Jennifer brings a fresh view of our organization and understanding of its culture and capacity,” Ghinger says. “Her suggestions are realistic and doable.”

As Business Volunteers Unlimited looks ahead to its 10th anniversary and beyond, Hodge-Williams says she wants to connect more volunteers and nonprofits through increased marketing and PR efforts. The organization wants to double the number of businesses it works with and increase its board matches by 50 percent over the next three years. Its goal is to work with 100 businesses and make 150 board placements per year.

Says Hodge-Williams: “We’re increasing (Business Volunteers Unlimited’s) visibility so businesses see what we’re doing and how much impact they can make on the community.”

Paul Sturm coordinates the Baltimore Nonprofit Leaders Circles and teaches in the Nonprofit Management Program at Notre Dame of Maryland University. He lives downtown where he feeds his addiction to crab cakes and Berger Cookies.