

Planting the seeds of success for 5 years

By Jean Hopfensperger , Star Tribune

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Five years ago, Joe Selvaggio launched a nonprofit that transformed donations from wealthy Minnesotans into \$1,000 cash grants for low-income folks trying to get ahead.

The grants filled a rare niche in philanthropy. They paid for tools for young men trained as roofers, equipment for start-up day care homes, books for technical school students and more. Or as Selvaggio put it, "They pay for anything to help people become self-sufficient."

The new nonprofit, called MicroGrants, was launched in a spare bedroom in Selvaggio's Minneapolis home and with two \$25,000 donations. Today it has a \$2 million budget and can write out checks seven days a week.

"I've been raising money from the 'haves' to give to the 'have-nots' for over 40 years," said Selvaggio, 73, who founded Project for Pride in Living and was the executive director of the One Percent Club. "These people [who receive the grants] are ambitious and focused and want to get ahead."

Selvaggio works with a dozen nonprofits that screen and refer candidates to him. They include Summit Academy OIC, WomenVenture and Twin Cities RISE! Selvaggio's main job is to drum up funds from his long list of wealthy friends and colleagues.

"I meet them in a suite or in the street," he joked, referring to the two locations where he tends to meet donors -- the posh Minneapolis Club or his house near the rougher edges of Lake Street.

Because the nonprofit is run out of his house with minimal staffing, 92 percent of the donations go directly to Minnesotans in need, he said.

MicroGrants has awarded more than 1,600 grants so far. But Selvaggio, known as one of the Twin Cities' most tenacious fundraisers, wants to do more. On Feb. 13, MicroGrants will stage a five-year anniversary fundraiser in hopes of helping even more up-and-coming Minnesotans. Said Selvaggio: "You never get tired of it."

For more information, go to microgrants.net.

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