

Profits for nonprofits: Lee Davis '88

Co-Founder and Co-Director

NESsT, Nonprofit Enterprise and Self-sustainability Team

TO MOST PEOPLE, A self-financing, nonprofit organization is an oxymoron. To Lee Davis '88, it is a mission. Davis is co-founder and co-director of NESsT (Nonprofit Enterprise and Self-sustainability Team), an international, nonprofit company committed to strengthening the financial sustainability of civil society organizations (CSOs) that work for social change in Central Europe and Latin America.

"Our purpose is to help a group diversify its funding through entrepreneurship, but not to commercialize it," explains Davis. NESsT — a U.S.-registered nonprofit with branches in Santiago, Chile, and Budapest, Hungary — looks at self-financing as one alternative to the more traditional fundraising approaches used by nonprofit organizations. NESsT applies a "venture philanthropy" approach — analogous to that of its venture capital peers in the for-profit world — to help nonprofits develop entrepreneurial activities in order to generate sustainable income for their nonprofit mission. According to Davis, self-financing can include membership dues, sales of products or services, or even real estate and other investments

P-Centrum, an organization that helps drug-addicted youth in the Czech Republic, was having difficulty raising money. "Drug problems are often swept under the rug in post-communist countries," says Davis. But with financial investments and business development assistance from NESsT, P-Centrum is

expanding its business of selling hand-carved wooden benches — made by the youth — to schools, park services and zoos. "We're not saying that nonprofits should stop going after grants and donations, because there is still a big need for that."

The idea for NESsT began to develop when Davis was a research fellow in the "New Directions in Grassroots Development" initiative at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in 1996. He became aware of small non-government organizations (NGOs) "doing really interesting things" while researching nonprofit enterprise cases in 13 countries. The results were published in a study, *The NGO-Business Hybrid*. "With the fall of the Berlin Wall, nonprofit organizations were blossoming in Central and Eastern Europe," says Davis. He had been working for Nicole Etchart at the Third Sector Project, an NGO management assistance project of Johns Hopkins, when the two saw an opportunity to create positive change in the newly developing democracies of Central Europe. They set up shop in Budapest — "absolutely one of the greatest cities on Earth" according to Davis — in 1997 and in 1999 expanded with an office in Santiago, where Etchart was born. Though Davis travels extensively between Hungary, Chile and the U.S., he now makes his home in Santiago.

Though the organization is fairly young, they are seeing solid results. With a growing portfolio of social enterprise investments in Europe and Latin America, "we're proving that a 'dot.org' is

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a better investment than a dot.com," says Davis. NESsT has an impressive list of donors, including the American Express Foundation, Levi Strauss Foundation, the Mott Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

"I never could have imagined this career path," says Davis, who was an art



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major specializing in graphic design at CC. After graduation, he was awarded a Watson Fellowship and traveled to Japan and Switzerland studying the graphic design in those countries. Inspired by the bold graphics of the Swiss and Japanese flags, Davis titled his Watson project “Straight Lines and Perfect Circles.” After returning to the U.S., he worked as a graphic designer in Middletown, Conn., and for CARE, the international relief and development agency, in its New York City headquarters. But the business side of nonprofit organizations became more interesting to him, and he left graphic design to pursue a master’s in policy studies from Johns Hopkins.

Davis is grateful to Connecticut College for the education he received. When he was an undergraduate in the mid-80s, the college offered tuition to children of CC employees — providing the students went through the normal admission process. Davis was admitted in the fall of 1984, but that January his stepfather, Thom Lamond, former head of publications and public relations, died unexpectedly. “My mother and I were worried that I wouldn’t be able to stay,” remembers Davis. But Jane Bredeson, then secretary of the college, assured the family that his tuition remission would continue. “Conn never treated me differently,” says Davis, who went on to graduate magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. “And I will always be thankful for that.”

In addition to Bredeson, Davis fondly remembers Jan Hersey, former dean of admission; Howard Rosenthal, visiting professor of graphic arts; and retired professor Elinor Despalatovic, who spurred his interest in Eastern Europe.

“The thing I love about a liberal arts education is that you can major in something, but you can also pick and choose other courses and reinvent yourself,” says Davis, who minored in history. Though he has no immediate plans to leave NESsT (“I’m in it for the long run.”), Davis wouldn’t be surprised if there was “one more makeover in my life.” — MVH

Potato, Po-tah-to: Nora Olsen '90

Extension Potato Specialist, University of Idaho

“**EAT, SLEEP AND BREATHE** potatoes,” says Nora Olsen '90, a former chemistry major who spends her days helping Idaho farmers with their potato crops. As one of three specialists in the state that boasts “Famous Potatoes” on its license plate, she is in high demand. “I

spend about 80 percent of my time traveling out to fields, taking samples or checking out storage facilities and giving presentations and writing up management suggestions,” she says. “The other part of my time is devoted to potato research.”

Olsen, who holds an M.S. and a Ph.D. in horticulture from Washington State University, stumbled upon her profession after graduating from Connecticut College. “I was studying horticulture, and potatoes are a major crop in the West, so I studied potatoes.” The choice was a good one.

“You couldn’t ask for a better job,” says Olsen, who enjoys the combination of office work, research and working with farmers. “Potatoes are fun and complex and intellectually stimulating.”

Her research specialty is potato storage and seed potato quality and performance. Disease is a common problem on potato farms. “Late blight — it’s the same disease that caused the Great Potato Famine in Ireland,” she says. Olsen advises farmers

on how to use fungicides and when to kill off diseased plants. And she scouts fields, looking for signs of trouble.

This scientist is as enthusiastic about her undergraduate experience as she is about her profession. “It was a wonderful experience,” she says of her time at Connecticut College. “Because there was a limited number of chemistry majors, we received a lot of individual attention. And it was great in terms of independence in research projects.” Olsen credits her advisor, McCollom-Vahlteich Professor of Chemistry Bruce Branchini, for showing her just how much fun a career in higher education can be.

One would think that after a week working with potatoes, she would have no interest in growing tubers at home. Not so. “I have a garden every summer, and I always put in a few potato plants,” says Olsen, who lives in Twin Falls with her husband, Matt Nelson, and young daughter Ruth.

She even influenced her family in Washington State to turn to potatoes for their livelihood. Her mother and brother own and operate Olsen Farms in Aladdin, Wash., where they grow 26 varieties of specialty potatoes with names like All Blue, German Butterball and Red LaSoda.

So what is Olsen’s favorite way to eat a spud? “I’d have to say a good, baked potato, preferably a Russet, Burbank or Yukon Gold.” — MVH