

# Leadership Profile: Back on My Feet's Cathryn Sanderson

Cecilia Madden 24 April 2017

Cathryn Sanderson first became interested in nonprofit leadership when she worked at a small nonprofit in Phoenix, Arizona that experienced a lot of leadership turnover. "The mission of our organization was wonderful, but the leadership turnover really took a toll on our work." Determined to learn more about how nonprofits can be effectively managed, she pursued a degree in Nonprofit Management from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice. In her final year at the program, Sanderson joined Back on My Feet (BOMF). "It was my leadership practicum," Sanderson says, "and it was a really exciting time in the organization's growth."

As many are familiar, Back on My Feet is a nationally renowned organization that combats homelessness through the power of running, community support, and essential employment and housing resources. Founded in 2007 in Philadelphia, by a woman who humbly invited homeless people to join her on her regular morning run, the organization has now scaled to 12 major cities across the country. The organization and its founder, Anne Mahlum, have been featured in Runners World Magazine,

Women's Health, the New York Times, Washington Post, and USA Today. Locally, BOMF has grown over the years too: it now operates in four Philadelphia neighborhoods: Center City, South Philly, West Philly, and Point Breeze.

When Sanderson joined BOMF in 2009, however, the organization had only two chapters; many of those national profile pieces had not yet been written. When she graduated with her Masters in Nonprofit Management, Sanderson was hired permanently to handle marketing and development. She says, "We realized BOMF was scalable and we saw a ton of growth. I jumped right in with lots of responsibility."

BOMF did indeed grow a ton. Between 2009 to 2015, they added nine chapters and helped thousands of homeless individuals transition into housing and employment. With growth comes transition, however, and during the same time, BOMF also saw the departure of their founder, Anne Mahlum (in 2013), the hiring of a new national CEO, Katy Sherratt (in 2015), and the eventual hiring of Cathryn Sanderson as Philadelphia's Executive Director (in 2014).

Seasoned with her experience of working through organizational transitions in Phoenix, her studies in nonprofit management at the University of Pennsylvania, and her years on-the-ground with BOMF, the organization could not be in better hands.

Sanderson is a strategist and a consensus builder and has helped lead BOMF Philly to continued growth and impact.

Responding to the atmosphere of change, and under Cathryn's leadership, the culture of BOMF has evolved as well. "Similar to the evolution in the running community, we realize now that more is not always more. Our job is never done, of course, but we aim to work smarter, not harder. We work more intentionally, focus on relationship building, and support flexible work hours for our staff." It's not uncommon for the staff to take a midday break to attend a yoga class together. "With many of our staff showing up to group runs at 5:30 in the morning, it's unreasonable to expect them to then work traditional nine to five hours." Taking care of the staff as well as the mission, Cathryn says, "Just as all runners need rest days, our staff need periods of rest too."

Sanderson manages the relationship with the BOMF national office and the local board. BOMF operates with a shared services model, which inherently takes the burden off of the local chapters. Human resources, finances, and impact analysis are all handled centrally by the national office. The Philadelphia office manages its local budget, creates its own fundraising plan, collects data on programs, and reports on progress to the national office.

Sanderson also manages relationships with all the local Advisory Board members. Though BOMF has one National Board of Directors, which is the legal governing body of Back on My Feet, each local chapter also has an independent Advisory Board to provide fundraising support and program guidance. Remarkably, Sanderson

points out, "Even amidst turnover at the staff level, the board has seen great stability." This speaks to the deep commitment that board members have to the mission of BOMF. Now with Sanderson at the helm, she is engaging board members in new ways, deepening their commitment, and even thinking creatively about growing the board. They have a Young Professionals board, which she hopes to build upon too.

Within the past year, the national CEO led a strategic planning effort, and the local BOMF held a strategy session last month as a result. Sanderson planned and led that effort, and involved Advisory Board members, Young Professionals board members, BOMF alumni, current volunteers from each site, and staff. "In the short term, we will continue building stability. In the long term, we're dreaming big! We're looking to move the needle in terms of millennial support, and hoping to launch some new programs," says Sanderson. With Sanderson's leadership, and her inclusive, engaging management style, we can expect continued success for Back on My Feet Philly.