



### *A Smart Response to Disaster Relief*

**Ben Smilowitz**

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From an early age, Ben Smilowitz had a charitable ethic instilled in him by his grandparents. In his home, *Tzedakah* – the Hebrew word for charity—inspires his family to serve social justice. Not surprisingly, in carrying out this tradition Ben Smilowitz has become a leading name in innovative disaster relief efforts.

By the time Ben was in elementary school, he was already on the path to becoming involved in his community and bringing about positive change. “In the first or second grade I knocked on my state senator’s door, selling oranges and grapefruits for a school fundraiser,” Ben says, recalling his youthful efforts. When the senator asked him to get involved in his campaign, Ben’s lifelong foray into civic engagement had begun.

In no time, Ben was touring the state capitol with the senator, learning the ropes, and handing out flyers for causes he wanted to support. All the while he was asking questions about policies and agendas that he didn’t yet understand. He quickly became versed in the workings of local politics thanks to mentoring from forward-looking campaigners and staff. And by the age of 8 he had started to develop a practical toolkit for impacting local change.

Next he aimed to get his peers involved. When he was 16 years old, “I read that someone had resigned on the state Board of Education,” Ben recalls. “I wrote the governor a letter and asked him to appoint a young person.” He wrote a press release announcing that he was launching a campaign to fill the vacant seat with a young person. Even though an adult was appointed to that seat, Ben didn’t let it deter him.

He then launched a new campaign to add student seats to the board. This time around, he ramped up his efforts. He held public hearings, lobbied, and organized multiple press conferences with the media to get the word out. “We got about 50 students from across the state to write letters. We created a petition and got a few thousand signatures. And then we had about 20 students attend our rally, and another 15 students went to the state capitol to lobby... A year and a month after our first letter to the governor, we had a bill signing.” Ben and a few other students were in the gallery watching the vote, which passed 145 to 0. The standing ovation, for a bill Ben had written, brought all of their combined efforts to heart. “It was a successful grassroots campaign in every sense, with passion and collaboration every step of the way,” Ben says.

Ben went on to champion a variety of other issues. He founded the International Student Activism Alliance, which aimed to organize young people in communities across the country to serve as a student watchdog group, representing students’ rights and public education issues. And in Missouri, he helped create the nation’s first Youth Cabinet, in which all the cabinet positions were occupied by youth.

No matter what issue he gets involved in, Ben’s message is always about getting youth and local communities to act in support of public service. When asked what youth need to do to make progress on causes important to them, he says, “They need the trust of others. They need validation that they are on the right track, that they have the power to do what they’re doing, and that they should pursue their ideas.”

In 2005, when Ben was 24, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the southeastern U.S., wreaking havoc anywhere it touched down. In the immediate aftermath of this national emergency Ben decided to volunteer for the American Red Cross in Gulfport, Mississippi. And at ground zero, he assisted in a very real, practical sense.

When he first arrived, he noticed from the start that something didn't seem right. Inexperienced, first-time volunteers were being assigned to entire sites with extremely difficult, expansive, tough tasks that they weren't equipped to manage. There was little to no accounting of what was being distributed, and to whom. This created massive queues: mothers with babies waited in long, hot lines, without attention. People with disabilities were suffering and too often neglected. Medical professionals were unlicensed to operate. Worst of all, in a multiethnic, multiracial area, hate groups showed up to intimidate those receiving aid. After experiencing all this suffering, Ben learned one of the hardest lessons of his life: sometimes there are great obstacles that lie in the way of doing good.

“Don't get me wrong,” he explains, describing the bungled relief efforts. “People were extremely generous. Americans and people from other countries donated all they could to help. However, that aid just wasn't reaching the people that needed it most. I realized that a lot of things could be improved to help more people. We were there to help the people in Mississippi who had lost everything...So, I spoke up—and broke policy, by allowing the media to see the mismanagement at hand. For the sake of the people who were suffering, I needed them to see what the actual needs were on the ground, compared with what we were providing...It was tough to point a critical eye at those trying to help those in need. However, if they weren't helping, and were even exacerbating the pain, I felt it just wasn't right for it to go on unchecked.”

Recognizing the inherent flaws in a system that was trying to fundraise, execute, and coordinate a relief effort simultaneously in the immediate wake of a natural disaster like Katrina, Ben saw another way. He knew that with a little planning, and a lot of hard work, he could influence the system to work with much greater efficiency and help more people more effectively.

“My initial reaction when I got back home was to ask ‘Who is accountable? And how do we prevent such mismanagement from happening again?’” He decided the best way was to start a nonpartisan watchdog organization focused on accountability in relief situations. Out of the ashes of his Katrina experience was born the Disaster Accountability Project (DAP).

The three primary issues DAP addresses are 1. Improve the effectiveness of disaster relief and humanitarian aid; 2. Make sure help reaches those that need it most; and 3. Make sure lessons are learned so we do not make the same mistakes, disaster after disaster. DAP has made assessments in the wakes of earthquakes in Haiti (2010), Japan (2011), and Nepal (2015).

In October-November 2012, Superstorm Sandy devastated the eastern United States, inflicting tremendous damage on the coastal regions. By the time the storm had passed, there were 233 fatalities, \$68.7 billion of damage, and over 305,000 homes were lost in New York alone. DAP filed a successful complaint in New York against the American Red Cross for gross mismanagement, and won \$4 million, to be released to survivors of Superstorm Sandy. Large victories like this, won by such a comparatively small organization, show just how significant a positive impact a few dedicated individuals can make for the people most in need.

DAP was the first organization of its kind in the industry, and Ben knew it was making a significant impact in the world of disaster relief. As a result of DAP's work, millions of misappropriated funds have been recouped, and that aid has been reappropriated to the individuals that it was promised to in the wake of emergency situations.

Ever the innovator, Ben knew there was still more he could do to make a bigger impact. He understood that having oversight was great, and the resulting accountability was necessary for improving processes and results. But what if there were an aspect of the disaster relief cycle that, if addressed, could significantly reduce the number of negative outcomes in the first place? With this question in mind, Ben created yet another answer, in the form of an online system: SmartResponse.org.

SmartResponse.org is an interactive data repository: through this platform, people can identify the local organizations responding to disasters and support them directly. “If we can preemptively curate a list of organizations operating locally, we can effectively direct donations to deserving local organizations at the most critical times. We really want to change how money moves after disasters and put the power into the hands of local groups.”

SmartResponse.org helps to get much needed funds quickly to local food banks, community and cultural organizations, disability rights groups, and other entities that will be there after the smoke clears and the media's cameras leave. “They

have the numbers on the ground to react to different situations. This type of response strengthens the local economies affected, creates and protects jobs, and ensures that money and efforts are also invested into future preparedness and mitigation efforts.”

Given the increasing number of disasters in the world due to climate change, both DAP and SmartResponse.org have been well received by local communities. DAP is now in its thirteenth year of operation, and SmartResponse.org has aligned with more than 600 participating organizations from 58 countries.

While organizations like DAP and SmartResponse.org have made significant positive impacts in disaster response and relief efforts, they both started with a first step.

What can other young people do to help? “Think about what issues or causes you are passionate about, then get involved,” Ben says. “Volunteer. It’s great to go to the beach with a group to pick up plastic. But while you’re there, think about how the plastic gets to the beach in the first place. Try to attack the root cause of the problem.” He pauses, then adds, “Find a way to work in service of something greater than yourself.”

It is a message that no doubt his grandparents would be proud of.

*The charity that is a trifle to us can be precious to others.*

Homer

**Call to Action:** Learn more about Disaster Accountability Project: <http://disasteraccountability.org/> or SmartResponse.org; 1-202-556-3023 or email [info@disasteraccountability.org](mailto:info@disasteraccountability.org)

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