

## 2021 NONPROFIT INNOVATION LAB



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### **What Cheer Flower Farm Wins Nonprofit Innovation Lab, Secures \$50,000 in Seed Funding to Expand Its Reach to Children**

*Program of United Way of Rhode Island and Social Enterprise Greenhouse culminated last night with a “Shark Tank”-like pitch competition aired on Rhode Island PBS*

**Providence, R.I.** (February 8, 2022) — From a group of six nonprofit finalists pitching their new ideas, **What Cheer Flower Farm** emerged last night as the top winner of the second-ever Nonprofit Innovation Lab. They secured \$50,000 during the program’s SPARKED! final pitch competition to help bring their idea to life. Coming in second to receive \$25,000 was **Community Care Alliance**, with **Spectrum Theatre Ensemble** placing third for \$15,000. The final competition, which is “Shark Tank”-like in nature, aired on Rhode Island PBS on February 7. At the finals, **Women’s Fund of Rhode Island** was announced as the \$5,000 Public Choice Award winner.

“The Nonprofit Innovation Lab has been an incredible experience, not only for the Farm but in helping to change the landscape of social solutions in Rhode Island,” said Destenie Vital, executive director of What Cheer Flower Farm. “This funding will help us serve and bring joy to the youngest members of our community struggling with stress due to COVID and other factors. From a pilot program to now having a waiting list, the demand has been remarkable and we’re so thankful to now be able to reach more kids.”

The Nonprofit Innovation Lab is a joint program of [United Way of Rhode Island](#) and [Social Enterprise Greenhouse](#) that helps organizations to accelerate their ability to hone and implement unique ideas that create social impact. For nearly a year, six nonprofit fellows received coaching, resources, and networking opportunities to transform innovative ideas into reality. At its end, the fellows presented their pitch to a panel of judges that included Lori Sullivan, director of content, Rhode Island PBS; Dolph Johnson, executive vice president and chief global human resources officer, Hasbro, Inc.; and Sonia Millsom, advisor for health & technology collective, DIALOGUE. Each participating nonprofit created a [video](#) to capture their innovative idea.

The winning pitch by [What Cheer Flower Farm](#), an organization that brings comfort and happiness to those in difficult situations by donating 100% of the flowers it grows, took its mission and expanded it to serve children. The idea, which was met with consensus enthusiasm, was to reach kids in stressful circumstances and alleviate their anxiety through creating with fresh flowers and educational programming. It was lauded for its sustainability, keeping partnership at the forefront, and extension of mission. “There is palpable, yet powerful, simplicity to the idea — when parents struggle, children struggle, too,” said Dolph Johnson.

“Nonprofits are not only extremely resilient, they are tremendous innovators who are constantly evolving to meet the needs of the communities — and they deserve to be seen as such, and not merely as charities,” said Cortney Nicolato, United Way’s president and CEO. “Strengthening our nonprofit sector is vital to moving Rhode Island forward, and that’s exactly what this program strives to do.”

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In placing second, [Community Care Alliance](#) detailed its plans to train individuals in all aspects of running a business, from direct service and management to marketing, via STARCleaning — a cleaning service focused on environmentally friendly strategies. For [Spectrum Theatre Ensemble](#), the organization set its sights on creating a program to standardize and codify sensory friendly practices to better serve neurodiverse audiences, helping to make the entertainment industry more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming.

“As complex social challenges continue to persist, ranging from the consequences of COVID-19 to staggering inequities, innovation is critical to solving these challenges and getting to their root cause,” said Kelly Ramirez, CEO of Social Enterprise Greenhouse. “This year’s Nonprofit Innovation Lab fellows are leading the charge with truly unique, replicable, and impactful interventions that will engage and inspire diverse stakeholders and undoubtedly make our communities stronger and better.”

The other nonprofit organizations to make their pitch were Children’s Friend, Providence Preservation Society, and Women’s Fund of Rhode Island.

It was Women’s Fund of Rhode Island that won the program’s Public Choice Award. From Jan. 19 to Jan. 24, Rhode Islanders were invited to watch brief videos online prepared by the program’s participants and then vote for their favorite idea. The Fund’s vision to establish a nonpartisan support initiative for newly elected/appointed women in local government to build communication skills in a male-dominated environment helped them secure \$5,000 in funding.

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#### **About Social Enterprise Greenhouse**

Social Enterprise Greenhouse creates positive social and economic impact by providing social entrepreneurs and enterprises with the tools and networks they need to thrive. It fosters an ecosystem of diverse stakeholders who work to enable a more just, equitable, and resilient economy. The organization operates throughout Rhode Island from programming sites in Providence, Newport, and Pawtucket/Central Falls. Its network of 600+ social enterprises and 250+ business and community leaders contributes time, expertise, and funding to grow Rhode Island’s social impact ecosystem. Learn more by visiting [segreenhouse.org](http://segreenhouse.org).

#### **About United Way of Rhode Island**

United Way of Rhode Island is uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders. A member of the world’s largest nonprofit network, we bring together individuals, businesses, nonprofits, community leaders, and government to tackle the root causes of inequity and achieve specific, measurable goals. Our programs include 211, the statewide front door connecting Rhode Islanders with social services, resources, and vital programs. Both directly and through grants to nonprofits, we are investing to build economic opportunity, advance childhood learning, expand philanthropy, and drive policy and participation. To learn more, visit [unitedwayri.org](http://unitedwayri.org), or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Twitter](#).