

Single Stop USA Helps the Needy

Doing good is in the blood of Elisabeth Mason, CEO of Single Stop USA, a nonprofit that helps low-income students connect with government resources.

by [Grace Lichtenstein](#)



One day last year, Elisabeth Mason was doing a video interview about [Single Stop USA](#). This nonprofit helps economically vulnerable individuals apply for government



programs that provide food stamps, child care, health insurance, transportation, and other basic necessities. It also offers free financial counseling, free tax preparation, and free legal advice. Right now, the emphasis is on setting up programs in community colleges to help students find these services.

“The majority of students are doing everything right,” declared Mason (left), the organization’s CEO. “They’ve faced many barriers in their life, including having to juggle putting food on the table or paying for their books. They’re still in school. They’re still trying to make a better life for themselves, still trying to pursue the American dream. But more than half drop out.”

Her voice wavered. “These are the young heroes of our society, and we’re failing them by not providing the resources for them to stay in school.” With tears welling up, she asked the videographer to stop taping for a moment so she could compose herself.

Single Stop began in 2001 in New York City community-based organizations such as food pantries and settlement houses where counselors began connecting low-income people with government benefits intended for them.

Mason has given this talk, or a variation on it, thousands of times. Yet every time, she speaks with unapologetic emotion. In an era where “poverty” has become a politically incorrect word and too many social programs are being cut back, this 46-year-old Harvard graduate and Columbia-trained lawyer brings to her work the evangelism of an old-style New Deal liberal.

“Elisabeth Mason brings abundant energy and creativity to the social-justice movement,” says Julian Bond, the civil rights legend who is on Single Stop’s advisory board. “She is a tireless advocate for fairness.” And she bristles when anyone suggests that by helping financially struggling students and families get government benefits, Single Stop is putting people back on government support.

“We’re doing exactly the opposite,” she insists. “We’re trying to leverage government support to move people out of the assistance pod and into long-term independence.”

In only four years, the budget of Single Stop USA has grown from under \$1 million to more than \$20 million. Currently it is focusing on community colleges, working with the six that are part of CUNY (the City University of New York), as well as Miami Dade College—the largest community college in the country; City College San Francisco; and Essex County College in Newark. It also continues to work with people at traditional social service locations such as Harlem Children’s Zone, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, and the Henry Street Settlement here in New York; Newark Now in New Jersey; and JobTrain in California. (Single Stop has 90 locations in five states.)

In 2010, Single Stop helped 120,000 households access \$412 million worth of resources, including free financial and legal advice and free tax-return preparation. It owns the software that simplifies and streamlines enrollment and tracking of individuals who are eligible for government benefits. Yet Mason always says that her biggest wish is eventually to put Single Stop out of business—to see community colleges and social service organizations from coast to coast adopt the Single Stop model, redeploy billions of dollars of resources appropriately, and thus help millions of families get out of poverty.

Right now, though, her days are devoted to creating even more Single Stop partnerships with community colleges. At the same time, she and her husband, Paul Cohen, a lawyer, are raising their two young sons, Simon, 8, and Nate, 6. Why work so hard when she

could have remained in a far more lucrative career in international law? The answer is that doing good is in Elisabeth Mason's blood. She grew up in, and still lives in, East Harlem, a few blocks from Single Stop's headquarters. Her parents were urban pioneers who were among the first white families to move there in the 1960s. (Her father was a beloved teacher and administrator at the Dalton School for 44 years, until his death in April.) East Harlem at the time was one of the poorest communities in the country, located right next to one of the richest. As a child, she says, she felt the need to do more than simply witness that kind of economic disparity.

She became involved in education and anti-poverty efforts in early high school. While she was a student at Harvard, she majored in history and spent a semester in India working with Mother Teresa's nuns in a leper colony. It was a life-altering experience.

After graduating she joined the Peace Corps in Costa Rica. In her early twenties she founded an organization whose mission was to help children living and working in the streets. She spent nearly seven years in Latin America growing that agency and co-founding a movement that led to both practical and legislative reform in several countries around children's rights.

After a brief interlude in the for-profit world of a major international law firm, she engaged in the work of high-stakes venture philanthropy, first at the Robin Hood Foundation, a very large antipoverty charitable organization, and then at Atlantic Philanthropies.

Single Stop began as a project of the Robin Hood Foundation in 2001. When the opportunity came in 2007 to take it national, Mason, in partnership with Robin Hood and former *New York Times* editorial writers Michael Weinstein and Herb Sturz, led the effort. She's been at the helm ever since.

With the help of a \$1 million White House grant earlier this year from the Social Innovation Fund, Mason currently is scouting additional schools for Single Stop's community-college initiative. The organization also connects the students to legal professionals for issues such as immigration, to financial counselors for help in consolidating debt, and to free tax preparers who are able to get hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars returned to them.

"It's a service I believe belongs on every campus in the country," she says, "both for our own sake and for the sake of our competitive future."

Grace Lichtenstein is a former *New York Times* reporter and bureau chief, the author of six books and a contributor to numerous national magazines. She currently works at Single Stop USA as a Communications Officer.

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