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This Nonprofit Is Funding Good Ideas From People, Not Big Organizations.

It's part of a new philanthropic approach to improving neighborhoods.

Giacomo Ciminello had a pretty good idea: projecting massive versions of old video games onto blighted buildings. It draws people into neighborhoods they might not otherwise visit and highlights structures in need of an overhaul.

The way Ciminello got the funding to execute his plan wasn't a bad idea, either.

The Haile U.S. Bank Foundation is a leading philanthropy in Cincinnati, routinely writing seven-figure checks to support civic functions such as schools, parks and streetcars. But lately, it's been trying a different approach, giving money not to nonprofits, but to individuals like Ciminello.

It's done through a spinoff of the foundation called People's Liberty. The organization provides fellowships to a couple of people who present good ideas for making life better in and around the city; the fellowships allow recipients to take a year off to try to make their idea happen. Other grantees receive five-figure sums to carry out local initiatives that are innovative and achievable within a set time frame.

The aim is to reach beyond the usual pool of nonprofit groups and potentially tap creativity from anywhere within the community. Plenty of people bat around good ideas for revitalizing empty storefronts or overgrown lots, says Jake Hodesh, vice president of People's Liberty. The foundation not only gives them cash, but also helps them get set up.

It's an experiment in philanthropy that's drawing attention from groups around the country curious about the potential upside of spreading money through unusual channels. Giving money directly to individuals carries risks, as Hodesh acknowledges. Working out the kinks with the IRS took time, and there's clearly less accountability than dealing with a standard-issue nonprofit.

But working with individuals opens up lots of new ideas — an indoor urban gardening project, say, or educational popups teaching kids about science and music. People's Liberty is funding an apprentice program that links retired trade workers with younger homeowners looking to rehab properties.

Ciminello says he never would have been able to afford a projector big enough to light up an entire building if not for the unexpected grant he received. "I can't tell you how many people you come across who have a great idea but don't know where the money can come from," Ciminello says. Now, "the local preservation groups are constantly calling us to light up a block on a weekend night to highlight some activities they've got going on."

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BY ALAN GREENBLATT | NOVEMBER 2016

