



Millenium Bridge, designed in 1998 and opened in 2000, overlooking St. Paul Cathedral.

THE BEGINNING!

A short history of the origins of ASVI Social Change 1997-2001.

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By Marco Crescenzi, Founder of ASVI Social Change

“The best way to predict the future is to invent it” Alan Kay

Why and how was ASVI Social Change founded? What was happening in the world back in 1997?

What were the first challenges?

In a sort of unexpected time travel, Marco Crescenzi looks back at all the facts that happened between 1996 and 2001 and that contributed to the creation of ASVI Social Change, the leading nonprofit management school in Europe. .

The Cultural Climate.

A difficult beginning. ASVI was officially founded on 26 September 1997 at Campidoglio (seat of the Rome local government), in Rome. The lack of funds forced us to put together all the resources and ideas in the best way as possible. For example, the **first logo**, made up at home, was amongst the ugliest I had ever seen, probably as bad as the first Apple logo.

It was a very sunny and hot day and we were all sweating in an embarrassing way. The cultural climate in 1997 was also very hot and characterized by a fast growing and pervading digital innovation, in stark contrast with the existing analog culture.

On 3 August 1997, **Steve Jobs** launched the unforgettable “Think Different” video, challenging the older “Think” by IBM. Jeff Bezos and Amazon were challenging Barnes & Noble declaring, “We are the world’s largest bookstore”.

On 15 September 1997, at the Stanford University, **Sergey Brin and Larry Page** were working on the first draft of Google Inc, which would transform the concept of “reality”, completely.

On 12 July 1997 in Mingora (Pakistan) **Malala Yousafzai** was born. She is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate.

What about us? Who were we before that 26th of September?

Everything had started with two researches that led to two opposite outcomes.

In 1996 according to an authoritative research by Lunaria (Roma), *Managers in the Non Profit Sector believed that, the lack of funds were the main reason of the limits to the development of the sector and its organizations.*

Having in mind this research, a group of volunteers and I started a six-month analysis of all the funds available in Italy. It was really surprising.

We discovered a wide range of available funds at a European, national, regional and local level and a series of alternative strategies, such as fundraising, that most managers of the sector did not even know. They were not even looking for alternatives because they were only focused on their **comfort zone**: getting funds from Government.

Our research was later published in a volume called *Guide for financing Non-Profit sector and social businesses* (M. Crescenzi, S. Cecinelli 1999)

What emerged was that **what was missing were not the funds, but the managerial skills and competences** to identify and classify them and to get and organize the right resources. The Third Sector did not need more funds, but rather a more modern and better-organized management.

Why don't you ever tell me "Good job! Well done! BRAVO!"

Another thing that emerged from our research was that Third Sector Managers were not able to reward their resources even with a simple "Bravo!"

We decided to find out why and we were, once again, astonished:

Why should I tell you "Bravo!" if it is your job?

This opened a new scenario on the improper way of managing human resources and considering all employees in the third sector as volunteers or missionaries, rather than professionals with deep values. Everywhere I could see underpaid and exploited social workers. A Third Sector manager once told me "My organization is a Totem to which all workers should bow down to" and most of his colleagues shared and still share this idea.

A choice... for life. Since I was 18, I believed the Non Profit Sector could be the perfect option to shape a better society. As an entrepreneur, I could see its strong potential. I found the mismanagement of the sector outrageous.

In the spring of 1997, I found the courage to turn my life around and to concentrate on the development of the Third Sector. I founded what was initially called **ASVI-Agency for Nonprofit Development** and it was officially presented and launched in September 1997 in Rome.

In this choice, my two souls found their perfect expression and dimension: my social side - being a psychologist and a volunteer- and my managerial side - being an entrepreneur: I had found the project of my life!

From "funding" to "management". After the publication of *Guida ai finanziamenti per il Non*

Profit e l'impresa locale, we felt the need to produce a stronger impact from a managerial point of view. In 1998 we started to think about a book which could focus on the professional profile of the ideal Non Profit Manager. There was no volume, in Italy, talking about this topic. We decided to present our book to the best publisher dealing with managerial topics, Sperling & Kupfer (Milan). Within two weeks we received their enthusiastic feedback and by mid-1998, *"Il manager del*

Non Profit e le nuove frontiere dell'imprenditorialità sociale, was published with over 2500 copies distributed in Italy.

In this volume, we were able to demonstrate how the traditional marketing techniques and the HR management methods could not automatically be transferred from the For Profit to the Non Profit Sector. They simply did not work because the cultural background was too different. What was needed was a completely different and revolutionary **school of management**. There was no such institution in Italy. The UK and the US were already a different story.

"You'd better give up, guys!" Unfortunately, our enthusiasm and energies had to fight against the strong cultural skepticism and opposition of the existing establishment. The head of a governmental body for the Third Sector suggested we gave up on our project as he could not identify a possible market for our project. To him no one was interested in a school for managers in the Third Sector. Whenever our colleagues heard us speak about **professionalization and acquiring managerial skills**, they expressed their skepticism because they thought it meant losing the passion and spontaneity typical of the Non Profit Sector.

Talking about fundraising also caused some resentment as well. A manager once told me "I am not sending my volunteers to beg out in the streets". In general, everyone in the sector wanted to remain in its comfort zone. They did not feel the need for a more structured education. We felt this necessity; they did not!

Those who had supported me up to this point, decided to go back to their previous activities. The only person who still supported me was Caterina Vannini, mother of my three kids, and the person in charge of managing the Administrative Office and a few committed volunteers. We never gave up, both in good and bad times.

Two “impossible challenges”.

I strongly believed that training Managers in the Non Profit Sector was the only way to create the best and strongest social change.

I was interested in education and training in general, I was more concerned about creating social change. I was not a teacher; I was an activist with a talent in training people. I was determined and I was convinced that, eventually, we would get the support of our colleagues.

By the end of 1997, the newborn ASVI had to face two challenges that seemed insuperable.

The first challenge was to become the first training school for Non Profit Managers in Italy. It had to be solid and based on alternative and modern strategies such as Europrojects and Fundraising.

Provided we succeeded in convincing professionals in the sector to train themselves, it would have been impossible to convince them to spend months in classrooms and to travel from different parts of Italy during weekends for the seminars. We had no resources such as the executive MBA managers coming from the For Profit Sector.

There was also a second challenge we had to face. We had to offer an accessible training program, both from a financial point of view and in terms of “delivery”, we had to take into consideration a long distance didactic method.

First Activities '97-'98. Workshops. By the end of 1997 and beginning 1998 we started with an

intense series of seminars mainly dealing with European and national financing (two trend topics at the time). At the beginning, we had very

few students, but as time went by they started increasing and we were holding classes in my house in the countryside where Caterina had to welcome the students, take care of the financial administration, look after our kids and cook for everybody and... our kids were welcomed into the room by every student! This is the Non Profit, people!

Since the very beginning, we worked hard to find the best trainers in the field who could hold classes, but who would also be open to suggestions from colleagues.

We have always believed in the importance of creating a professional and **caring environment**, which up to this day represent the strong points of our Career Service, Managerial Development, Internship and Personal Project.

However, the seminars were not exactly what we were looking for. They were not the kind of training method we wanted to offer managers in the sector.

Workshops not up to the standards we had in mind, in class Masters not flexible enough. What to do?

Introduction of the first long distance- “blended” learning formula in Europe.

We found a possible answer in what was defined as **Distance Learning**, at the time (as nowadays E- learning was not yet in use back then). The key point was to deliver our training through the Internet in order to overcome barriers in terms of costs and distance. We were the first to introduce this method in Europe in the Non Profit Sector.

We started working on a **“blended formula”** delivered both via Internet- mainly e-mails- and through 3-4 workshops in house, in My house literally. Looking back at it now, the approach was very naïve and the coaching informal, due to the small number of students attending, but it was dense in human caring. The general feeling was extremely positive. We were on the right track!

Nowadays, many people believe that with the introduction of the MOOC (Massive On Line Open Courses) the future of education is in online videos. In ASVI Social Change we believe that the future of **Our Training method will always be based on the Relationship** – both in class and via e-coaching.

The first Non Profit Masters Programme in Italy and in Europe. ASVI decided to offer three master programs. 6 months courses and mainly addressed to professionals in the sector.

“**Management del Non Profit**” (1998) was the first in Europe together with the one in Università Bocconi; “**Europrogettazione e Progettazione Formativa**” (1998) and “**Fundraising e Comunicazione**” (1999); these were the very first in Europe. The first edition of the Master in Fundraising was very basic and mainly executive. One of the most outstanding students was Daniela Fatarella, today Marketing & Fundraising Director at Save the Children and with whom we still have a solid friendship and professional collaboration.

First Assessment. The first evaluation after two years was very interesting. I would say rather astonishing considering the scarcity of resources we had. Here is a list of a number of European records we achieved by planning everything in house:

- The first volume on “Manager del Non Profit” that gave a meaning and dignity to a job that many carried out without realizing it was a job;
- The first Master Programs in Europe dealing with Non Profit topics;
- The introduction of distance learning in the Non Profit sector;
- The deep understanding of Non Profit Managers, their problems and cultures.

Up to this point it might appear just as any other story of one of the most recent and innovative start-ups. It was not!

2001- Almost bankrupt!

As I previously said, I had given up all my activities in order to concentrate all my energies

on the founding of ASVI. Unfortunately, a training school that had to pay me for a series of classes I had held on the topic “Youth entrepreneurship” went bankrupt and I had no money left to finance my start-up!

In the words of the co-founder Caterina

Vannini: *“We were forced to ask our friends for loans. In 1998 there was a month in which we had no money to buy milk for our kids. I was not working because I had to look after them. The little money we had saved was finished.”*

Our dreams and our finances were in deep contrast. In order to launch the three masters we were up to our eyes in debt. We had had to invest a lot of money in advertisement in some of the major and most important magazines in the sector. We remained in deep trouble until 2001. We had to re-think our breakeven point.

Nelson Mandela. Unfortunately, I never had the chance to meet him in real life, but in hard times, I always looked up to him and his biography for inspiration. I used to say to myself

“if he was able to survive all this and to go through so many years in jail, why can’t I overcome a couple of years of financial difficulties?”

I used to say that ASVI was engaged in the “**Long journey towards management**”. I felt it and I still feel it just like a father feels and foresees his kids’ path.

Gandhi has always been another role model in my life, but I have never appreciated his way of dealing with his family and his kids in particular. Among my other inspiring personalities, I would like to recall Emperor Hadrian (as in the masterpiece of M. Yourcenier), Yunus and the young Steve Jobs, all “Apple & Zen”.

NY- 11 September 2001: the turning point.

Just when we were about to close down the school and to give up on our project, the turning point arrived like in the best suspense movies: **the September 11 terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center** in New York.

The event had a multiplier effect on ASVI and on our effort. We started communicating in a very evocative way on the importance of training to become author of social change. Many managers from the For Profit Sector decided to turn their lives around and enrolled in ASVI because here they could give a complete new meaning to their lives, finding the right practical tools, the language and the courses they had always been looking for. In quite a short time, we became 'The School for managers looking for a career in the Non Profit Sector, but soon also early graduates started showing their interest in our courses.

October 2001: the assessment was positive and met the goal of reaching the break even. We decided to go on. We delivered two editions each year for each master. Today we have four International Masters Programme.

The identity of ASVI Social Change. It was in those first, difficult years that we set the bases for ASVI's values and principles.

Since the early days of ASVI we believed in high quality, "fair" training open and accessible to highly motivated people and not restricted to an elite.

We have always invested in our students because we believe in their ability to "make the difference"; we can foresee their potential to become authors of Social Change. We invest in and support people who have the right determination and the ability to fight for what they believe in, without being afraid of moving away from their comfort zone.

We strongly believe in the courage to have a dream and the skills to fulfil it, as part of a network not as solitary heroes. Even in ASVI Social Change, today, we carry out all our activities in team!

Our students are increasingly becoming our icons. They inspire us with their personal stories, their struggles, and their personal changes during the course

Through the years, we have coined a series of terms, which have become keywords to describe ASVI: dream, competences, impact, social transformation, social innovation, "make the

difference", "be the change". They are not just slogans; they embody the staff mission and values.

A series of rituals also started taking shape in ASVI.

From the didactic point of view, the key moments are: the first day of a new Master Edition, the closing of a Master Course with the Diploma Ceremony, the beginning of a new Master Program- from the initial project to the actual launch (with the collaboration of valuable partners) and all the new students in class ready to start their journey in ASVI.

Through the years, we have shaped and defined the identity of our School: its engaging and inclusive dimension combined with distinctive characteristics.

We dislike the incapacity of the For Profit Sector to act for the common well-being and at the same time we cannot stand the politically correct attitude of the voluntary sector. Neither do we appreciate the hypocrisy of the third sector and the presumption of those who define themselves as charismatic founders. We are also disheartened and disappointed to see that many aspiring students are simply looking for an ordinary job instead of being inspired by a

"professional dream". We cannot stand the backwardness and presumption of universities trying to approach the sector just for business and without even attempting to understand its culture.

For all these reasons, we endorse the Bible saying

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."... but keep them away from us!

As far as **Leadership and Governance** are concerned, in ASVI we have developed "power" and "responsibility" in synergy with each other.

The Master Directors, the Trainers, the Alumni, the Advisers, the Scientific Committee, all contribute to the writing of ASVI Social Change management.

It is very complicated to be open to new influences and in the meantime to manage and organize the daily activities. You need to handle

stress; you must have strong opinions but also **be flexible and open to suggestions.**

Constant improvement is difficult; you need to be passionate: it is essential to ASVI Social Change staff.

For years ASVI Social Change has been looking for smart, clever and extremely committed staff; sensitive and able to make the difference in complex situations: at the end of the day, **people make the difference, not procedures.**

In the future, we will need a staff that identifies itself in a Social Change community. One that is able to transfer these values and a sense of social identity to all the students. Once again, I want to state that we are not a training school as such; we are a school of social transformation. We are the Social Change School: the best school in the world to become Professionals and Managers in the Non Profit Sector.

Acknowledgements.

Most of all an heartfelt thank you to the over 1000 students who enrolled to our courses since 1998, coming from all over the world and engaged in bringing about social change in all corners of the planet today. If they had not believed in their dreams, ASVI Social Change would have remained a dream, a mirage itself.

In the words of Rasmia Salah: *“ASVI Social Change gave a meaning to my ambitions and life perspectives! It gave me the strength and courage to fulfil my dream. It gave me exactly all the practical skills I needed to start working in the Third Sector. I decided to leave my job in the For Profit Sector, I invested in the master, and I would do it a hundred times again! Best wishes ASVI Social Change!”*.

Marco Crescenzi is the founder and President of ASVI Social Change and lives in Madrid after living in Rome and London for most of his life.

Specialized in Experimental Social Psychology, Non Profit Management and journalism, since 1978 he has been involved as a volunteer in managing Non-Profit organizations.

Over the last ten years he has been engaged as:

Coordinator of the **‘Observatory on Nonprofit Labour Market’** (Italy) ‘2003-2008’.

Co-founder of **Euclid Network**, Association of European Non Profit Managers (London/Paris 2006-still member);

Co-founder of **I-SIN, Italian Social Innovation Network** (Rome/Naples 2011-still member); Responsible for **Leader2Leader, Co-ordination of Italian Non Profit Managers** (2008- 2010);

Member of the Management and the Scientific Committee of **Symbola-Foundation for Italian Quality** (2005-2008), ACEVO member, since 2006

Before ASVI Social Change he also worked for over 20 years in the For-Profit Sector as an entrepreneur and manager.

Since 1998 Marco has written a series of Italian successful books on the Non-Profit Management and professional profiles, like:

“Il Manager del Non Profit’ the first volume in Europe on this theme, published by Sperling and Kupfer (1998);

“Manager e Management non profit: La sfida etica” (ASVI Social Change 2003 ed.),

“Guida Internazionale alle professioni del non profit’ (EMI 2005 ed.)

“Valutare la Qualità del Non Profit e dell’Impresa Sociale: casi esemplari del terzo settore” (ASVI ed. 2008- a series of Third Sector case studies to evaluate the quality of the Non Profit Sector and Social Business), ‘Social Innovation and Social Business’, (Graphofeel 2012).

Marco has three sons, Sophia, Giordano and Elena, living in UK and in Rome, he is a passionate semi-professional tennis player, a lover of Epistemology and he attends meditation classes with Art of Living Foundation in Madrid where he currently lives.

His favorite quote is from ‘Hadrian’ by M.Yourcenair:

“I felt responsible for the beauty of the world. I wanted the cities to be splendid, full of light, irrigated by clear water, populated by human beings whose bodies were possibly not marked by the misery of slavery, nor by the growth of vulgar wealth...”