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Echoing Green's Big Bold Benefit: The Future of Social Entrepreneurship

Nominees for Echoing Green's 2011 Fellowship program pitched pioneering enterprises that are destined to transform our world's social ecosystem. Lizzie Crocker reports on some of the most innovative ideas.

by [Lizzie Crocker \(/contributors/lizzie-crocker.html\)](/contributors/lizzie-crocker.html) | May 9, 2011 6:42 PM EDT

Last Thursday night, the nonprofit foundation [Echoing Green \(http://www.echoinggreen.org/\)](http://www.echoinggreen.org/) hosted its Big Bold Benefit, announcing this year's candidates for its [Fellowship program \(http://www.echoinggreen.org/fellowship\)](http://www.echoinggreen.org/fellowship) devoted to advancing social entrepreneurship. Thirty-eight people representing 26 organizations were selected from 2,854 applications to pitch their [innovative ideas \(/articles/2010/10/23/summit-cheat-sheet-the-daily-beast-innovators-summit.html\)](/articles/2010/10/23/summit-cheat-sheet-the-daily-beast-innovators-summit.html) and bring them to fruition with Echoing Green's help.

Introduced by [George Stephanopoulos \(/videos/2009/12/21/george-stephanopoulos-interviews-meryl-streep.html\)](/videos/2009/12/21/george-stephanopoulos-interviews-meryl-streep.html), anchor of ABC's [Good Morning America \(/videos/2011/03/10/tina-brown-on-good-morning-america.html\)](/videos/2011/03/10/tina-brown-on-good-morning-america.html), the candidates pitched their projects to a panel of judges who will ultimately select 20 social enterprises for Echoing Green's 2011 portfolio. "We wish you could all win tonight," said Stephanopoulos, before letting the first cluster of entrepreneurs take the stage.

Jennifer Schnidman Medbery was the first to present her "Bold Idea," which she began brainstorming while enrolled in [Teach for America \(http://www.teachforamerica.org/\)](http://www.teachforamerica.org/) at a middle school in [rural Arkansas \(/articles/2011/04/29/tornadoes-in-alabama-and-the-south-is-climate-change-to-blame.html\)](/articles/2011/04/29/tornadoes-in-alabama-and-the-south-is-climate-change-to-blame.html). She taught math there for two years before TFA recruited her to be a leading founder of a New Orleans Charter high school—Sci Academy. Jennifer was rewarded by her teaching experience but frustrated with the outdated methods educators used to chart student progress. "Many [teachers] used spread sheets, poster boards, or just kept mental notes," she said later in the evening. "And that wasn't sufficient for me." Her principal at Sci Academy had told her she needed to be data-driven, but she felt she was "data-drowning" while trying to keep track of her students' grades, reading levels,

behaviors, and preparedness for state tests.

Having graduated from Columbia University in 2006 with a bachelor's in computer science, Jennifer left the classroom at Sci Academy in 2009 to hone her technology skills in educational reform. With help from other New Orleans schools, she founded Drop The Chalk, an affordable-software company that builds easy-to-use data analysis tools to help teachers spot trends over time and adapt their teaching methods and curricula accordingly. Jennifer pitched [Kickboard](#) (<http://www.kickboardforteachers.com>)—the company's revolutionary software program—to the Echoing Green judges, gesturing with a colorful kickboard as she pledged that her venture would “fundamentally change the way teachers measure their own impact.”

Other contestants took the stage with props in hand. Ameca Reali and Adrienne Wheeler held up letters from Louisiana prisoners scribbled on brown paper towels. The pair's Cooperative Advocacy for the People aims to restructure the U.S. criminal justice system by bringing together a “membership cooperative” of prisoners, defense attorneys, plaintiff attorneys, and prisoner-rights advocates. Their roundtable vision proposes to address and reform criminal-justice deficiencies in Louisiana, where more prisoners are incarcerated than in any other state in the U.S.

“It's a lonely job being an entrepreneur,” said Echoing Green chairman David Hodgson.

Brenden Millstein and Raphael Rosen's [Carbon Lighthouse](#) (<http://www.carbonlighthouse.com/company/management/>) promises to take on global climate change by subverting the environmental issue into an opportunity for profit. Their service is a “one-stop-shop” where companies can quite literally dump their trash and make money in the process.

Described by Stephanopoulos as a “celebrity wrangler,” Davita Maharaj—a former teacher at a school in the slums of Bangalore whose students suffered child abuse and were at risk of being sold as slaves by their own parents—built a team of [Bollywood](#) (</articles/2009/02/24/the-best-bollywood-films.html>) musicians to make songs that teach human rights to children and parents. “I saw how Bollywood music penetrated hearts and minds and caused even my most abused students to come alive,” she said. Maharaj's “Children of the Land” mission is to fund and promote Bollywood music hits that resonate in India's illiterate communities.

It was only fitting that Echoing Green's chairman, David Hodgson, closed the evening with a few words about the fate of his organization's fellows. “It's a lonely job being an entrepreneur,” he said, winking at the crowd (Hodgson is managing director of General Atlantic, the private-equity firm that founded Echoing Green, which co-hosted The Daily Beast's Innovation Summit in 2010, in 1987). Before handing over the microphone to Echoing Green's president, Cheryl Dorsey, he repeated the mantra of Nike's legendary founder, [Phil Knight](#) (</galleries/2010/09/02/america-s-top-30-job-creators.html>). “A great professor once told him, ‘The only time you cannot afford to fail is the last time you try.’”

Lizzie Crocker is an editorial assistant at The Daily Beast. She has written for NYLON, NYLON Guys, and [thehandbook.co.uk](http://www.thehandbook.co.uk) (<http://www.thehandbook.co.uk>), a London-based website.

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