

# Innovate Long Island

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## Bold step has ambitious STEM startup thinking global

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By GREGORY ZELLER //

A muddled marketing message hasn't stopped We Connect the Dots from changing lives across Long Island – but sharper marketing could carry its unique STEM-education formula around the world.

That's the thinking at the multifaceted educational organization, which has hired a professional marketing team to help scale its successful technology-training model across the United States and beyond.

In September, We Connect the Dots joined forces with Raffa Social Capital Advisors, a unit of Marcum LLP's Nonprofit & Social Sector Group – a bold step toward the fulfilment of the 2013 startup's original mission, according to founder Laurie Carey.

“Our mission, our vision from the beginning, was always to be a global organization, with as much impact as possible,” Carey told Innovate LI. “And to be that kind of a visionary company, you need the right people in place.”

Enter Raffa Social Capital, a philanthropic middleman between “social-impact investors” and change-the-world “social entrepreneurs.” The Marcum spinoff has worked with “500 of the world's leading change agents,” according to its website, while helping to funnel some \$20 million in private investments.

That sounds fairly ideal to Carey, who's eager to explain her creation's dual nature – the organization boasts both nonprofit and for-profit divisions, creating a spectrum of professional-development opportunities – and to expand.

“We want to scale,” she noted. “We're in our seventh year as a not-for-profit and fifth year as a for-profit, and we're at a tipping point.”

“We have amazing programs and we need to deliver them to other communities,” Carey added. “But we need help aligning our message, and making sure that as we grow, we grow with the proper governance in place.”

That’s pretty much Raffa Social Capital’s sweet spot, up to and including We Connect the Dots’ interest in new capital investments. But hiring a marketing team wasn’t Carey’s first thought when she initially approached Marcum.

She actually went to the tax and accounting giant with hat in hand, hoping to score a private investment from the national consultancy – which promptly turned her down.

But the Harvard graduate and former Microsoft executive wouldn’t take “no” for an answer, pestering her Marcum contacts with follow-up emails and even a barrage of video links showing exactly how aligned We Connect the Dots’ mission was with the national firm’s technology focus.

“I didn’t let go,” Carey noted. “I was like a pit bull.”

Representatives of Raffa Social Capital eventually found their way into the email stream, and Carey’s focus shifted.

While We Connect the Dots has been successful – hundreds of students and mid-career professionals trained on Long Island, with organizations in three other states calling – even the founder admits “we’re a complicated organization,” and it was quickly evident that her new connections could help.

“It can be difficult to explain to people who you are and what you do,” Carey said. “But the people at Raffa are amazing at this.”

Financial terms of the Raffa Social Capital alliance were not disclosed, but Carey noted a “three-month commitment” with the mission-driven, diversity-focused Raffa team, which will focus on both messaging and funding.

“They help find funding, they help create a mission statement, they refine your messaging,” Carey said. “They package you better, and that’s what we need – somebody who can help us package who we are and explain the complexity of this organization.”

The duality of the half 501(c)3 charity/half for-profit professional-development organization might be confusing, but We Connect the Dots’ focus on the technology sectors, and its devotion to disadvantaged populations, are right in Raffa’s wheelhouse, according to Raffa Social Capital Director Rich Tafel.

“With our ever-changing economy, it is crucial for more at-risk students to gain awareness of jobs in the tech sector and gain access to training that prepares them,” Tafel

said in a statement. “We’re excited to help support WCTD’s goal of pioneering this growing sector of tech-credentialed careers.”

Exactly where We Connect the Dots will expand first remains to be seen. For starters, the organization is eyeing a 100,000-square-foot space in Uniondale – hopefully the next stop after its “temporary home” in Syosset, according to Carey, who’s sitting on a \$100,000 state stipend and a \$250,000 private investment, but estimates We Connect is still about \$350,000 short of its Uniondale buildout plan.

Those out-of-state inquiries come from schools and private partners in Pennsylvania, Ohio and South Carolina, according to Carey, but work with Raffa Social Capital is in the “very early stages” and “decisions on where (to expand) haven’t been made yet.”

“They are helping us package our messaging,” she noted. “Next we’ll evaluate the income streams of [the nonprofit and for-profit] organizations.”

The for-profit side is the newly branded Nebula Academy, which Carey launched in 2015 as Laurie Carey Consulting. The academy provides tech-focused training and professional development, both in person and online, to adult and non-traditional learners and educators, as well as professional tech consultations to corporate clients.

Focused on Long Island and Greater New York, the Nebula Academy has grown slowly but steadily – it’s in the running for several professional-development grants and has scheduled a 22-week app- and website-development boot camp, complete with Amazon Web Services certification, to begin in November.

By essentially picking up where the nonprofit division leaves off, the academy adds to We Connect the Dots’ ongoing professional-development mission – first preparing underprivileged students for post-secondary and professional success that might otherwise be out of reach in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, then helping mid-career professionals and other adults keep up with the evolving 21st century workplace.

That will be the primary message to come from the Raffa Social Capital collaboration, according to Carey.

“People don’t always understand us,” she said. “We are disruptive, we are transforming education and we’re doing something very different from everybody else.

“But our model works, and our kids need it,” Carey added. “Now is the time for us to ... offer tech education to more at-risk kids, both in the Long Island area and across the nation.”