

# The Boston Globe

*CANDIDATES FOR SENATE | THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR*

## **KHAZEI'S OUTSIDER CAREER TAUGHT DEEP POLITICAL LESSONS**

BY JENNA RUSSELL  
November 18, 2009

It was a daunting task for two inexperienced college interns to plan a legislative hearing on Capitol Hill. But Alan Khazei and Michael Brown had lobbied for the assignment. And they were going to make Washington sit up and take notice.

To Brown and Khazei (pronounced "Kay-zee"), HR 2500 was the future. If it passed, Congress would spend \$3 million to study ideas for a national service program. At Harvard, during late nights in their dorm, the roommates had already hatched a plan for just such a venture, a domestic Peace Corps.

"We believed it was the best idea to change the country," says Brown. "Alan was saying, 'What can we do to make this hearing amazing?'"

It was the moment Khazei had been waiting for. He was only 21 that August in 1982, exuberant and naive, but his guiding vision, of a volunteer army transforming broken cities, had been lodged in his head since high school. That vision would ultimately take him on a path far from Washington, making him, in many ways, an unlikely Senate candidate.

His is the least recognized name in the four-way Democratic race and the most unexpected resume. He has never held public office, but he is not a true outsider, either. The seeds of his unconventional trajectory - away from politics and, 27 years later, on a quest to return where he started - were sown as he worked feverishly on the hearing that summer.

He recruited friends to pack the hearing room, commissioned a poll to show public support, and solicited a slew of testimony.

But then, after a hearing that was roundly praised as a political feat, the bill simply died, and Khazei left Washington disillusioned. He and Brown would eventually make their project a reality, launching City Year in Boston and expanding over the next two decades to 20 cities, graduating 12,000 volunteers, and making it a model for the federal Americorps program. But they would do it on their own.

“We felt like, ‘Wow, we can affect the system,’ and then nothing happened,’ ” Khazei said. “We realized it wasn’t going to come out of Washington.”

On the campaign trail, the City Year story is a tidy, triumphant paragraph. In the beginning, though, it was Khazei and Brown and two friends in a closet-size office, cold-calling potential donors.

### **Off to a tough start**

“I had never solicited anything before, and they sent me to try and get 100 copies of a flier made for free,” said Spencer Blasdale, a volunteer who was 20 at the time. “We were literally just going out there hustling.”

Their early pitch was rough. Jeff Swartz, chief executive of Timberland, remembers the first letter he received from City Year.

“It was, ‘We are 50 young people; we can cure cancer and make the blind see; all we need is boots - you have them - send some - sincerely, City Year,’ ” he says, paraphrasing from memory, for comic effect.

Appalled yet intrigued, Swartz sent the boots. Then Khazei asked for a meeting. Swartz assumed it was to thank him.

“He said: ‘You think it’s your job to make boots and my job to save the world, but you’re wrong. It’s our job to save the world, and I need you to get up from that desk and spend a half day with me doing service,’ ” Swartz recalled.

He did and said that Khazei awakened a sense of corporate responsibility that transformed the company.

There was plenty of early skepticism about City Year, especially of its founders’ lofty goal of “completing the civil rights movement” by teaming white suburban volunteers with black urban youth. The program suffered an emotional blow in October 1990, when a young recruit, Tyrone Gunn, was shot and killed outside his Roxbury home. Some critics blamed the program when other volunteers dropped out, saying it did not provide enough support.

But applications surged, and many participants thrived. Stephen Spaloss, ordered into City Year by a judge, credits Khazei with changing his life. “He refused to let me see myself as anything but endless potential,” said Spaloss.

Brown and Khazei were savvy marketers. They made sure the corps was a visible presence, performing morning calisthenics on City Hall Plaza in their trademark red jackets. The media took notice. Politicians latched on.

Then, in 1991, City Year caught the attention of a campaigning Bill Clinton. He came to its office in Fort Point Channel and spent two hours talking with corps members.

At the end of the meeting, Spaloss took off his sweatshirt and gave it to Clinton. A year later, CNN showed footage of the jogging president-elect. He was wearing the black City Year sweatshirt.

Brown and Khazei called each other when the image flashed on the screen. “Did you see that?” they both asked.

It was a heady time. Khazei met his future wife, Vanessa Kirsch. Clinton sent a top adviser to study City Year, Congress created Americorps, and federal funds followed. City Year, which was in only two cities, expanded to four more.

But the rapid growth was hard to manage. Khazei flew around the country giving pep talks to overwhelmed young organizers. Federal auditors raised concerns about missing documentation for \$2 million in salaries, and ordered City Year to return \$250,000 in federal grants earmarked for scholarships that were used for other purposes. Vendors reported unpaid bills.

Some community leaders worried that the nonprofit’s priorities had drifted away from service toward publicity and expansion. Some seized on City Year’s cozy relationships with its corporate sponsors, questioning its habit of providing rows of fresh-faced volunteers for sponsors’ board meetings and photo opportunities.

The corporate partnerships were always meant to be mutually beneficial, Khazei says, and that helped make those relationships long lasting. Accounting problems exposed by the federal audits were the result of poor management during the break-neck growth, Khazei says. But he felt compelled to seize the moment. Such a chance might not come again.

Even as a boy, Khazei was enchanted by government. In his childhood home, on a woodsy road lined with stone walls in Bedford, N.H., he listened over and over again to recordings of old speeches by John F. and Robert Kennedy.

“My dad revered the Kennedys,” said his younger brother, Lance. “I remember listening to those speeches, the idealism, the idea that people could determine their own destiny. . . . Alan fell in love with the idea of America as a kid.”

It was the same love their father had. Amir Khazei was born in Iran, but left as a teenager to seek an education in Switzerland, where he never felt at home. He came to the United States at age 29, became a surgeon, and married a nurse, Carmeline Picardi.

To him, democracy was sacred. But he also believed it was fragile, in part because he had seen his homeland’s democratic hopes dashed in the 1950s, when Mohammed Mossadegh, the elected Iranian leader, was ousted by a coup. The coup, the world learned later, was planned in part by the CIA, to protect American oil interests.

It deeply troubled the elder Khazei that such high ideals could be scrapped for the sake of expediency, and he often told his children the story as a cautionary tale. Alan grew up with the conviction that loving America meant fighting against such lapses.

As Alan came of age, his father found a prep school for him, the elite St. Paul's School in Concord. Founded in 1856, the private boarding school offered Gothic architecture, mandatory morning chapel, and a silver-plated roster of alumni including J.P. Morgan Jr. and William Randolph Hearst.

In the 1970s, many students came from long lines of alumni. But Khazei, a first-generation student, was unintimidated. "I think St. Paul's is a good school, but there are changes, improvements that should be, that can be made," he wrote in a letter to his classmates after his election as senior class president.

At Khazei's urging, the student council instituted a new program for students who broke the rules, requiring them to labor on campus alongside grounds crews.

"He thought it would make sense for them to give something back . . . and get a better understanding of what it took to run the school," said Bill Matthews, the school's rector, who was then its college adviser.

### **Bolt of lightning**

When Khazei heard a speech at the school by a St. Paul's alumna, that idea crystallized into an epiphany. The alumna, a surgeon who had been inspired by his work with the poor, told the assembled students he dreamed of starting a national service program to better the country. The thought blossomed in young Khazei's mind.

"My mom taught me that every person has potential, and my father taught me that America was the greatest country in the world," Khazei says. "So I thought, if we had national service, every young person would have a chance to realize their potential, and it met my father's vision of how to make democracy work, because we have a system that says citizens are in charge, but there's no institution that gets people to be active citizens."

When he talks to voters on the campaign trail, Khazei injects his message with crackling urgency. "We only have 55 days," he told a half-dozen people in Weymouth last month. "An hour is like a day in this race."

Still, he is sometimes swept up by the moment, as when he invited his 7-year-old daughter to take the microphone at a well-attended women's forum or when he danced his way to the end of a black church service in Worcester, then showed up late to the opening of his own new campaign office.

Such unselfconscious exuberance has leavened Khazei's other half, the side of him that emerged early in life as intense and relentlessly focused on the pursuit of his goals.

As a government major at Harvard, he volunteered as a tutor at Jefferson Park, a Cambridge housing development, and soon decided that the complex needed money for new programs. He planned a benefit, a 24-hour dance marathon, but no one on campus would give him a venue for

the all-night event. Call by call, he worked his way up the administrative ladder until he reached Derek Bok, then the university's president, and persuaded him to provide a space.

He could be impatient and demanding, but friends say he was also loyal, a skilled listener whose advice was highly valued.

One of the people most in tune with Khazei's preoccupations was Michael Brown. The two met on their first day at Harvard, where both were assigned to the same room in Grays Hall. Brown was from Belmont, a fellow Star Trek fan who shared Khazei's sense of social justice, and they hit it off at once. They would live together for the next 14 years, until Brown's wedding day.

### **Buys into the idea**

Khazei soon sold Brown on his vision of a national service program. The two schemed plans and together won their congressional internships, Khazei for New Hampshire's Norman D'Amours and Brown for Leon Panetta of California. Khazei persuaded his boss to let him produce a massive report on national service while Brown convinced his to stage the hearing.

After their hearing and the failure of the national service bill, Khazei returned to Harvard dispirited. He and Brown began trying to hammer out details of a program they would launch themselves. How much money would they need? Where would they get it? What form would the service take? Still, Khazei harbored hope that a political patron would emerge. And when, in 1983, he learned about a dark horse presidential candidate who was touting national service, Khazei postponed plans to enter Harvard Law School and went to New Hampshire to campaign for Senator Gary Hart.

Hart was seen as not standing a chance, but Khazei worked 12-hour days, knocking on doors and writing personal notes to voters. On Primary Day, he called registered voters three times to make sure they had gone to the polls.

Hart stunned the country, winning the closely watched primary by almost 10 points. His campaign would later falter, but on that snow-swept night, Khazei was electrified, and the memory of it would propel him for years to come: A small band of believers had made something impossible happen.

"When you're on a campaign like that, with everything against you, and you are successful," said Susan Casey, the codirector of Hart's Granite State campaign, "you learn that you can do anything."

The phone call that threatened everything came in 2003. It was from the Washington office that ran Americorps, and it rocked Alan Khazei to the core.

Almost overnight, the Republican-controlled Congress had moved to wipe out 80 percent of Americorps funding, obliterating the program. Friends told Khazei to get busy raising money, to protect City Year, which was now in 13 cities and relied on the government for 30 percent of its funding.

Angry and defiant, he refused. Instead, he would go to war.

Khazei rallied his colleagues and started calling senators: Kennedy, Clinton, McCain. He solicited editorials - 80 newspapers came out against the cuts - and recruited mayors, 150 in all, to sign on. Then he staged a massive publicity event, a four-day, round-the-clock Capitol Hill demonstration that he dubbed a "citizens' hearing," where 700 people from 42 states, including 50 members of Congress would testify.

The show of strength beat back the Republican offensive. The funding was restored, plus \$100 million more the following year. It was a victory ("How many people can say they took on [former House majority leader] Tom DeLay, as a citizen, and won?" Khazei asks) but it had delivered a stark realization: His life's work could be dismantled at any time.

"That was a turning point," he says. "And I realized I had to move to advocacy, to politics."

As early as 2004, when Senator John Kerry ran for President, Khazei thought about a run for the Senate if Kerry prevailed. In 2006, he left City Year and launched a nonprofit, Be The Change, to shape public policy.

His first undertaking was to partner with Senator Edward M. Kennedy, a longtime City Year supporter who Khazei calls a mentor, to push the passage of the Serve America Act. The legislation, later named for Kennedy, calls for the largest expansion of national service since the New Deal.

Khazei had come full circle.

His success in building City Year is now at the heart of the case Khazei is making to voters: If he could do that as a citizen, he says, imagine what he could do as a senator.

But he has also had to reconcile his pursuit of the office with his long-ago decision to leave Washington behind.

"A lot of people in the service movement think politics is nasty, corrupt, too partisan," he says. "They think, 'I can go build a house, and get something done; you can't get anything done in politics.' But you've got to care about politics. That's where decisions get made."