Imagine you have this idea (and I know many of you do). However it came to you, through your career or childhood or during a personal crisis, you've arrived at this vision of a nonprofit organization you're sure could make a positive impact on your community.

All the best intentions of helping others can come to a crashing halt, though, when met with the realities of starting and running your own nonprofit. There are mountains of IRS paperwork, questions about legal and business matters—and then comes the search for funding. Where do you learn what you need to know, find support and gain credibility? Where do you begin? For more than 80 nonprofits, the answer has been: You go to MarinLink.
Forming MarinLink
After decades as a school nurse, Nancy Boyce, cofounder and president of MarinLink, had an idea: Why not create a definitive manual to help preschool staff deal with the most common medical issues that arise? Several years after doing just that and introducing it to area schools, she began thinking of founding a larger-scale medical resource library for Marin citizens.

That's when Boyce ran into Mary O'Mara, who, as a teen, had taught Boyce's children how to swim. O'Mara was now an experienced educator and administrator, a founder of Five Keys Charter School inside San Francisco's county jail, and in the process of getting her MBA at Dominican University in San Rafael. O'Mara offered to help Boyce's library dream in any way she could.

As they moved through the process of setting up the nonprofit, gathering volunteers and completing paperwork, the world began to change. With the growth of the Internet, an increasing amount of medical information was now available online. When it became clear the library wasn't going to work, they decided to put what they'd learned about starting a nonprofit and their own philanthropic connections to good use.

"We decided that we could help people in similar situations, who have a great idea but aren't able to do it on their own, by coalescing community resources," says O'Mara.

In 2004, MarinLink opened its doors at the Northgate Mall in San Rafael, with the Boyce family's foundation providing the original funding. O'Mara says the idea didn't initially get a warm response from others in the nonprofit field, who were already busy working in their own silos, but the two persevered and began encouraging people to bring their best ideas to see what help they could offer.

How it works
MarinLink acts as an incubator and ongoing support system for great nonprofit ideas by offering fiscal sponsorship and support that's often not available when working in isolation. Most are based in Marin County, but the organization also supports several projects based elsewhere that want to grow something into a replicable model. It also helps those interested in designing nonprofit arms for their for-profit businesses.

"The litmus test for us is: What is the community benefit?" says O'Mara.

MarinLink welcomes nonprofit ventures related to the environment, education, arts, business communities, spirituality and health. "We decided we wanted to be very broad based in our mission," says O'Mara. "We didn't want to be just about the environment or spirituality, for instance, so we have tenets that make sure we cross all sectors."

MarinLink manages several projects in-house, such as Project Warm Wishes, which packs 5,000 backpacks full of cold weather gear for the homeless each year (to be distributed by more than 40 agencies throughout the Bay Area). It was founded 20 years ago by Bill Hamm as a stand-alone nonprofit, but later came under the MarinLink umbrella when Bill's wife and cofounder, Nancy, died from a brain tumor. When the Marin Arts Council disbanded in 2012, MarinLink was able to take two of its programs, including Marin Open Studios and the county's Poet Laureate program. "We're supporting a grassroots team of former Marin Arts Council employees and art-loving volunteers to ignite a new, broad-based arts organization, marinarts.org," says O'Mara.

Fiscal sponsorship is at the core of MarinLink's mission, however, with more than 80 nonprofits currently taking part in the program. Sponsored projects are separate legal entities, managed individually by their founders or staffs, but each one falls under the umbrella of MarinLink's 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, so they don't need to complete the same costly (and time-consuming) IRS filings or create a board of directors.

Donations to the sponsored nonprofits are processed and released through MarinLink (which retains an administrative fee on each transaction), so donors can be assured that funds are managed and spent in the manner intended by the donor. Access to free or discounted business services, workshops, volunteer training and meeting space is also available. Professional advisers, including several members of MarinLink's board of directors, are also willing to lend their expertise. Volunteers from the community can be matched with programs that best suit their interests.

Perhaps most important, fledgling nonprofits can be connected to MarinLink's wide network of funders and grant makers. O'Mara says that, despite the recession, Marin's residents have largely continued their commitment to area nonprofits.

"The big funders are still being very astute and generous, but I'm also seeing amazing amounts of smaller donations being pulled together because of Kickstarter and Indiegogo [both online crowdfunding sites]," reveals O'Mara. "We were surprised when we crunched our numbers and had more than $1 million come through here last year."

O'Mara says people bring their nonprofit concepts to MarinLink for different reasons and at different stages. "Sometimes they're just looking to go to the next level, whatever that is," she says. "Some don't want to have to do it all by themselves and would rather go under someone else's organizational umbrella. Some come to us because we already have a large network and can bring people to the table to get things done."

When MarinLink first started a decade ago, environmental projects were very popular. After the recession hit in 2008, the environment was eclipsed by projects promoting entrepreneurship and innovation.

"We had a lot of people who weren't working and figured they might as well do that thing they'd always wanted to do," says O'Mara. "A man came to us the other day saying, 'The first part of my career I used my head, the second I used my hands and in the third, I want to use my heart.'"

Some of MarinLink's sponsored projects have now "linked and launched," meaning they've gone on to get their own 501(c)(3) status, but there are no limits on if or when organizations must move on to that next level. Launched nonprofits are still welcome to access any available services.

"We always feel they're part of our family, whether they've gotten out there in that way or not," says O'Mara. "We want to help them test the waters and make sure this is really what they want to do."
The Away Station

After years of watching her clients' perfectly good home and building supplies head to the landfill, organization and repurposing expert Carrie Bachelder had an idea: What if there was one place where people could easily dispose of and shop for reusable items?

That idea has turned into The Away Station, a one-stop, drop, then shop for the collection and resale of reusable consumer goods. Located in (and around) a lumber shed on the grounds of Fairfax Lumber in Fairfax, the site is a gold mine for builders and designers hunting for a just-right antique door and do-it-yourselfers looking to save money on surplus cabinets and roofing supplies, while artists strike inspiration among the miscellaneous salvaged treasures.

Bachelder first approached MarinLink with her concept in 2006. "I had this great idea and didn't know what to do with it," she recalls. "I don't remember how I'd heard about MarinLink, but I knew it was a nonprofit that helped other nonprofits get started."

Working with the team at MarinLink, Bachelder began the process of clarifying goals, finding volunteers and soliciting donations, but securing affordable real estate in Marin County was another matter. Her brother, a contractor who worked with Fairfax Lumber, suggested she approach the employee-owned business because of its ongoing commitment to green practices. By the second meeting, Fairfax Lumber had agreed to house the nonprofit, which officially opened in 2010.

Bachelder is confident that her association with MarinLink helped seal the deal. "It gave me validity when this was just in the infant stage, and I needed that," she says. "MarinLink gave me all the resources it could offer, but also the space to do it my way."

The Away Station now accepts a long list of items, including good quality doors, windows, sinks, tubs, hard furniture, countertops and cabinets. Hardscaping and landscaping materials, like slate, plants and pots, as well as de-nailed wood and architectural salvage, are also received. (You can find a full list of what's accepted and what's currently for sale at www.theawaystation.org.)

Walking through the rows on a recent morning, I noticed granite remnants, windows, woodstoves, what appeared to be a row of stadium seats, and a stash of white porcelain tile that made me wish I was ready for a remodeling project myself.

The Away Station has now "linked and launched," but Bachelder says she still uses MarinLink's conference room, attends nonprofit workshops and calls in with the occasional question. She's also enthusiastic about the accounting and bookkeeping assistance she's received.

The Away Station has created full-time career for Bachelder, along with three other full-time, green collar jobs for its employees, several part-timers and a dedicated group of volunteers, but she dreams of expanding the nonprofit's model into a sort of shopping center for reclaimed and repurposed items, which would include drop off, donations consignment resale shops and qualified repairers onsite. She sees that, by creating a successful model in Fairfax, it can now spread to other locations in Marin and beyond.

"My goal is to make reuse a way of life," says Bachelder.
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$50 before Dec. 20th
$65 at the door
Kids 12 and under $20

Dr. Tina Gabby with Savannah May
campers are Gabby’s patients, but many others are referred to her by local school professionals and camps that have seen the program in action. Gabby has received requests from parents in Sonoma County, San Francisco and the East Bay looking for similar programs for their children, and she’d love to see the idea expand.

“We touch a lot of people in the community: kids, parents, teens who volunteer, local schools and camps,” says Gabby. “We have a really wide reach.”

Fibershed
In 2010, while living in Fairfax, Rebecca Burgess had a thought: Can I lessen my impact on the environment by only wearing clothes whose fibers, dyes and manufacturing are sourced within a 150-mile radius of my home?

This wasn’t a random notion, considering Burgess’ passion for natural dyes and fabrics. She wrote a book, Harvesting Color, on creating natural dyes at home, and grows indigo to supply a local denim jean project. Since 2010, she’d been advocating for the creation of bioregional textile cultures, or “fibersheds,” in which local communities create their own unique and sustainable textile production chains. These chains could include everything from the harvesting and processing of plant and animal fibers, the creation of plant-based dyes, local manufacturing of clothing pieces, retail outlets to sell the products and the production of clean energy to fuel it all.

Her year-long experiment in dressing local was both a success and a challenge. She garnered lots of attention in the press, learned about where the gaps in the production chain were, and united a wider community that supported her vision. Burgess decided to start a nonprofit, called Fibershed, to educate people about the effects of the modern textile industry on our environment and to help create more sustainable, permanent alternatives. Its maxim is “Local fibers, local dyes, local labor.”

Dustin Kahn of San Anselmo, Fibershed’s graphic designer and administrator, has been working with Burgess since she first decided to form a nonprofit. In 2007, Kahn cofounded Permaculture Marin, a nonprofit that had been sponsored by MarinLink. It was Kahn who suggested Fibershed approach MarinLink about fiscal sponsorship. It became a fiscally sponsored project in 2011.

“I had this relationship already with MarinLink, so when Rebecca and I started talking about creating a nonprofit for Fibershed, they seemed like the natural choice,” she says.

Kahn says volunteers from Permaculture Marin used some of MarinLink’s training resources, while Fibershed has taken advantage of discounted fees on liability insurance for its own events and workshops. Because Burgess had already built a strong community presence beforehand, Fibershed’s first and greatest need was to be under MarinLink’s 501(c)(3) status.

Fibershed plans to operate under its own nonprofit status in the future, but being part of MarinLink has allowed it the freedom to grow and evolve during the process. “We’ve been working with the IRS and a pro bono law firm to get our own [nonprofit] status, but the process can take a few years, so this has given us some breathing room,” says Kahn.

Today, Fibershed is involved in many aspects of sustainable textiles. Its educational programs and symposiums are educating people on both the benefits of fibersheds and the practical skills of contributing to one. It’s created membership programs that provide local farmers and artisans with a means of marketing themselves and creating community, as well as affiliate programs that help others launch their own projects. There are now 17 affiliated fibersheds worldwide, including in Canada and England.

Why not?
O’Mara is thrilled at the thought of nonprofits like Fibershed, started here in the North Bay, taking off globally. “Why not?” she asks, smiling. “One person can make huge changes, and we really believe that because we’ve seen it.”

She’s hoping to see MarinLink continue to grow, so it’s able to meet the ongoing needs of the community but also stay flexible enough to jump in when opportunities arise or projects need additional support.

“That’s our role: to be supportive,” says O’Mara. “People come to us with these great ideas, saying this is what they go to bed thinking about, what they wake up thinking about and, we say, ‘OK, here we are. Let’s do it.’”