PhillyCarShare™ *Our wheels. Your freedom.*™
a nonprofit organization

Over 50 years ago, Margaret Mead wrote, "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*"

In the fall of 2002, five Philadelphians, all volunteers, set out to reduce automobile dependence citywide. Low-emission vehicles on every block, available by the hour and round the clock, would replace people's need to own cars and overuse them. In a city known well for its many "firsts" but not for its pretension, PhillyCarShare's founders demonstrated the grassroots innovation and achievement that Margaret Mead once described.

The premise was simple: automobiles, while necessary in our society, are abundantly overused because they are priced inappropriately. If we simply rearrange the costs, we can reduce their use. And if the solution saves people money and feels convenient, it can be driven by the market: a market-driven environmental movement.

It made sense, in theory. Economics are a powerful force driving automobiles, because cars are such "lumpy" investments. It is possible to own one or two cars, for example, but not one tenth or one-and-a-half. Once a car is owned, almost all its costs become "sunk" and unrelated to miles driven. Consider that a ten-mile roundtrip in Philadelphia costs $2.60 on SEPTA but only 98 cents in gas. Driving seems cheap on the margin. Rationally, car owners choose to drive.

What if we could flip those economics -- if cars were virtually free to access but expensive to drive? What if owning cost $0, while gas cost $15 per gallon? We might expect massive changes in travel behavior. People probably would drive much less, choosing more often to walk, bike, and take transit.

PhillyCarShare's founders set out to prove this concept in practice. In November 2002, with nine members, two cars -- a hybrid Prius and Matrix wagon -- and the modest $23,000 they personally contributed, the volunteer founders set out to change Philadelphia. They washed the cars (Larry), executed the outreach (Clayton and Larry), developed the technology (Tanya), provided round-the-clock service (Tanya, Eli, and Clayton), and balanced the books (Nate) for the entire first year. Even Tanya Seaman, PhillyCarShare's first Executive Director, quit her well-paying job to volunteer full-time during her first four months.

Revenues from the first few members helped finance the third and fourth cars, while community connections helped generate additional interest.

After 12 months, the results seemed astounding: 535 members, sharing 13 environmentally-friendly cars, had given up 270 personal vehicles; each shared car had replaced an average of 23 occasionally-driven vehicles. Philadelphia was one of the first U.S. cities to establish these dramatic car ownership impacts, proving the concept could work outside of Europe.

The next year brought car sharing innovation to a new level in Philadelphia. In April 2004, the City of Philadelphia itself opted in, becoming the first government worldwide to share cars with local residents in a major fleet reduction effort. The pioneering project helped replace 330 municipal vehicles, saving taxpayers $6 million (so far). Progressive Berkeley (CA), Portland (OR), and Minneapolis (MN) soon followed Philadelphia's lead.

That same year, PhillyCarShare achieved financial sustainability, meaning revenues from the car sharing system covered 100% of operating costs. This achievement also was a first in the U.S. and marked a major milestone for the maturing car sharing industry.

PhillyCarShare focused on service innovations during 2005-2007, because in a market-driven solution, commitment to the customer is very important to achieving environmental benefits. We innovated to become either first in the U.S. or first in the world to offer eligibility to all 19-year-olds (July 2006), free rides on rail transit (July 2007), flexible reservation searches (July 2007), and a debit billing system that enabled even the lowest-income households to join (September 2005). We also deployed the densest car-sharing network in North America (2006), with car-sharing pods on literally every block or half-block of Center City -- closer to car owners than they could park their own vehicles on-street. And PhillyCarShare deployed the lowest-emission fleet of any large car-sharing system in North America, with over 50% of its vehicles comprising hybrids.

Today, an amazing environmental movement is happening in Philadelphia. Over 30,000 Philadelphians (to date) have traded in car ownership for PhillyCarShare, walking, biking, and public transit. Members, after joining, report driving 53% fewer miles, consuming nearly one million fewer gallons of gas, owning 8,000 fewer vehicles, and saving $33 million annually -- money that gets reinvested largely into Philadelphia's local economy.

Meanwhile, Philadelphia has embraced PhillyCarShare as an integrated part of its culture and its transportation system. An issue of Philadelphia Style Magazine, for example, highlights PhillyCarShare alongside SEPTA, biking, and walking, as everyday sustainable transportation options. And public agencies have supported PhillyCarShare's growth in virtually every way.

Philadelphia and PhillyCarShare are demonstrating how a market-driven solution can ignite an environmental movement that benefits the economy. Philadelphia demonstrates how a large city can embrace the innovation of a few of its own residents, to establish one of the most exciting projects in our city's rich history. PhillyCarShare is making our city less about cars and more about people. We think Margaret Mead would be proud.