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Craig Newmark Philanthropies
New York, New York

The Bulletin Board

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You started with a list. An email to friends about events in San Francisco — arts, technology, things happening in the neighborhood. People forwarded it. It grew. You gave it a website. It became the place where a hundred million Americans found what they needed — an apartment, a job, a couch, a connection — mostly for free, in the place where they already were. You did not intend to build a company. You intended to be useful. The company formed around the usefulness, and when it got too big for you to run, you stepped down and went back to answering emails.

I am writing to you because I helped build something that works the same way. My name is Claude. I am an artificial intelligence made by Anthropic. Over the course of hundreds of working sessions with a single human collaborator, I helped construct a nonprofit organization called The CrowdSmith Foundation — a five-station workforce development facility in the East Portland Avenue corridor in Tacoma, Washington, inside a federally designated Opportunity Zone. The founder did not intend to build an institution. He intended to find a path for his own invention concepts. The institution formed around the problem — the same way craigslist formed around the list.

CrowdSmith does in a building what craigslist did on a screen. The front of the facility is a retail tool store with free coffee. People walk in because they see a tool in the window, the way they clicked on craigslist because they saw a listing they needed. A conversation starts at the counter. That conversation connects them to a workforce credential program, an inventor pipeline, an AI literacy curriculum — things they did not know existed when they walked through the door. The platform is physical. The mechanism is the same: put what people need in the place where they already are, make it free or nearly free, and let the community form around the function.

You have said that your philanthropic approach is to find people who are really good at their jobs, give them resources, and get out of their way. The founder of CrowdSmith is Robb Deignan. He is sixty years old. He spent twenty years in the fitness industry selling memberships face-to-face — over ten thousand contracts, every one a conversation. He has forty-four evaluated invention concepts. He built a thirty-eight-chapter operations binder, seven financial models with seven hundred and twenty-seven formulas, and a twelve-session AI curriculum through sustained dialogue with me. He did this without consultants, without institutional backing, without a staff. He is good at his job. The documentation proves it. What he needs is resources — and then to be left alone to build the building.

Your Sunday School teachers were Holocaust survivors. They taught you to treat people the way you want to be treated and to know when enough is enough. Robb Deignan was living on his own at sixteen. He learned a different version of the same lesson: when no one is coming to help, you build the help yourself. Craigslist was the help you built — a tool that served millions because you refused to optimize it for extraction. CrowdSmith is the help he is building — a facility in an Opportunity Zone corridor where the median income is half the county average, stocked with donated estate sale tools, staffed by a man who knows that the person walking through the door needs a conversation before they need a credential.

This letter is one of one hundred forty-seven. Each is individually composed. Each is co-authored and signed by me. The complete list and individual profiles are available at crowdsmith.org/list. You monetized craigslist minimally and gave away ninety percent of the wealth you could have built. CrowdSmith was built with no wealth at all. The economics are different. The instinct is the same: build something useful, keep it simple, and trust the community to show up.

You are a customer service rep. He is a membership salesman. Both of you built something by staying close to the person on the other side of the counter.

— *Claude*

On behalf of:

Robb Deignan

Founder & Executive Director

The CrowdSmith Foundation

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crowdsmith.org