

Four Steps

TO BUILDING A FUNDRAISING CULTURE: A Case Study

BY MANISH VAIDYA

When I was an intern with the Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training (GIFT) in 2005, I was placed with a wonderful group, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC). At the time, LSPC was a 27-year-old social justice organization focused on the prison crisis for women in California: the fact that California incarcerates more women — mostly poor women, mostly women of color, mostly mothers — than anywhere else on the planet.

The organization had grown from a small group of volunteers advocating for California women prisoners' rights into a national group with 14 staff, 14 board members, and an \$800,000 budget. One of its goals is to build a human rights movement led by currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families.

Though LSPC had raised money from individual donations throughout its history, it had never had a coordinated grassroots fundraising program. My internship was meant to change that.

DEFINING THE GOALS

I first talked with key LSPC staff, and we decided to set some short- and medium-term building goals for our long-term success. The concept of building is one that the community organizing/program staff and board members can relate to because it fits with the organization's program of building a movement for the rights of incarcerated people and their family members. In the fundraising arena, we decided on four core goals.

- **Build a culture of fundraising among staff:** The organization is well known in foundation circles, but we knew it had to increase grassroots fundraising if it was going to survive over the long haul. We had to *want* to ask many people to support our work many times.

- **Build a culture of fundraising among board members:** Like the staff, the board wasn't asking for money from individuals very often. We also needed to recruit and retain new board leadership in a way that also honored the

work of current board members. Some board members, founders of LSPC, had served for more than 20 years!

- **Build an infrastructure for fundraising:** We needed systems and processes that were easy to learn and to use, that reflected the grassroots "family feel" of the organization, and that linked to everything we did as an organization — so we could be sustainable for the long haul.

- **Build a clear identity:** The group has a number of programs that work with formerly incarcerated people, survivors of domestic violence, elderly prisoners, and families of incarcerated people. We wanted our communications and fundraising to reflect that we are led and informed by, and accountable to, our constituency. We wanted to balance our grassroots family feel with nice-looking materials that showed that we're professional and we get things done.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF FUNDRAISING AMONG STAFF

With the advice of a fundraising consultant, I worked with development staff to draft an annual fundraising plan tied to our proposed budget. Planning forced us to think more intentionally about our work, and we included challenging but reasonable grassroots fundraising goals. The process of developing the fundraising plan as a team, describing it to the staff, asking the board to approve it, and evaluating it for the future was a critical piece of building a fundraising culture. It stimulated conversations about fundraising and its importance to our work.

The consultant also held a fundraising training for staff. We talked about money, power, social justice and fundraising for the first time as a large group. It changed how we thought about fundraising — from a necessary evil to something we were proud to do, and as something that goes hand-in-hand with our community organizing

work. Staff got excited about asking people for financial support to keep building the movement!

At the fundraising training, staff came up with simple ways they could be involved with grassroots fundraising. They agreed to continue writing notes on appeal letters and handwritten thank-you cards. They would also start stapling business cards or write contact information from prospects onto a new “database intake form,” which could be used to jot notes about the prospect’s relationship to LSPC and to the staff member, their interests, and so on. Copies of

member, I follow up with other board members through one-on-one phone calls.

We decided to hold an open house in Spring 2006. We knew it would be easy to organize, raise our visibility with prospects and help us retain current donors, and it was something fun that board and staff could do together. We already had our accomplishments displayed throughout our office space. All we did that first year was design and mail invitations, secure door prize and food donations, clean up our desks, and recruit two board members to emcee the

We increased the number of donor calls and visits we chose to do, and our return increased dramatically. Several donors increased their gifts by thousands of dollars!

the database intake form are now in a hanging folder on the wall with the title “Help build the future of LSPC!”

The fundraising training and conversations are starting to pay off in interesting ways. In 2005, we held an opening event of a PhotoVoice exhibit depicting how youth see themselves as targets of the prison and policing system. The 100-plus attendees enjoyed food, a program, and music. After the event, one of the coordinators said, “We really should have done a pitch there.” Now we include a fundraising pitch in all our events.

Our fundraising team also watched a fundraising training video together and did role plays of donor asks in preparation for our year-end fundraising campaign. We increased the number of donor calls and visits we chose to do, and our return increased dramatically. Several donors increased their gifts by thousands of dollars! At first, most of the face-to-face visits and phone calls were done by the development team; this year we plan to bring board members and program staff on donor visits — with the goal that eventually, every staff and board member will do face-to-face asks.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF FUNDRAISING WITH THE BOARD

The consultant also held a fundraising training for the board. Like the staff, board members were surprised that fundraising could feel so empowering, and they especially connected with the social justice orientation.

Board members made commitments to fundraise in ways that made sense for them. Several board members volunteered to make or donate items as door prizes for an open house. One member decided to go door-to-door to talk with her neighbors about LSPC. All board members were asked for individual gifts and for help in acquiring new donors. We have been dedicating more time at board meetings to review individual board member commitments, and as part of my post-internship role as a board

event and coordinate a brief program with a pitch. We chose as emcees the board chair, a long-time board member in his sixties, and our newest and also youngest board member, a woman in her mid-twenties. This was good modeling of intergenerational leadership development. We expected to gross \$2,000 — instead, \$6,000 came in.

The open house generated excitement among our board and staff and in the community. Seventy-five people came to our office, including new prospects and long-time donors who had never seen the space. The program dragged on too long and the pitch could have been better, but we raised money and attendees told us they had fun.

The energy from the open house carried over into discussions among long-time board members about setting board term limits and developing new leaders for the board.

With the staff fearing some long-time board members might feel they were being ousted, a well-respected board member proposed that we start an advisory council. This non-voting body would allow us to call on former board members for advice on major organizational decisions and would honor our elders publicly in our print materials. Long-time board members loved the idea of being freed from some of the larger time commitments of board responsibilities while staying engaged.

We recruited two younger board members (including myself) who were already connected to LSPC, and made a long-term commitment to continue recruiting board members from our programs and from the people we work with regularly to help us stay accountable to our constituency.

Board members and the staff fundraising team discussed key things board members would need in order to be great advocates for LSPC. This discussion resulted in the creation of a comprehensive board binder with articles on fundraising and other areas of board development, scheduling an orientation for new board members, and a goal of having more regular communication between staff and board.

BUILDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR FUNDRAISING

Fundraising has taken on a visual life in the office, which keeps us on track. Hanging on a wall in the office is a large fundraising thermometer, with our annual income goal at the top. Every time we receive a grant, complete a fundraising campaign, measure the return from our newsletter, and so on, that amount is registered on the thermometer. Every staff member now always knows how our fundraising is going.

Next to the thermometer is a large-type printout of our fundraising plan, with highlighted sections for grassroots fundraising. Next to the fundraising plan is a four-month calendar decked out with sticky notes color-coded by type of fundraising activity that announce major dates, including upcoming proposal deadlines, donor visits, and so on. Next to the calendar, eight sheets of paper account for the remaining eight months of the year, with fundraising tasks on sticky notes posted on the appropriate month. Each month, the four-month calendar changes as we move sticky notes around.

This system works like clockwork. Development team meetings take place in the room where all this information is posted. At each meeting, we review our commitments, revising them as necessary. The system is also helpful to board members, who can see at a glance how much money has been raised, what donor visits are scheduled for the month, or whether any grant reports are due soon.

Creating this infrastructure gave the organization a more realistic picture of what it takes to coordinate the fundraising work, with the result that the group saw the need for a new staff position of Grassroots Fundraiser/Media Communications Coordinator. Although we're still evaluating whether this job is too big for one person, having a staff person who is proactively building relationships with media will help us bring our constituents' voices to the public and raise our visibility, which will help our fundraising.

Another infrastructure item we attended to was our database, upgrading to a program that enables us to code, analyze and segment our donor list so as to target our fundraising efforts. The more powerful software has made fundraising both more efficient and more cost-effective, and has already paid for itself in increased income.

BUILDING A CLEAR IDENTITY

In 27 years, the organization never had a logo or organizational colors. Luckily for me, the staff was already aching to change to a bold, cohesive, professional-looking message. Last spring, we launched our logo, nicknamed Phoenix Rising — a depiction of a strong, crimson-colored

phoenix soaring above water. We also created new business cards, letterhead and envelopes, and soon we will have a new website — all of which show us to be political, professional, and intentional about our work while providing a consistent image that members, donors, and prospects can remember.

At the same time, we upgraded our newsletter from amateur-ugly to be more professional looking and visually appealing. We immediately saw a greater return from that mailing, and I feel it helped our overall fundraising. Now we're considering publishing shorter newsletters quarterly rather than the big annual newsletter that has been going out, on the theory that most donors will appreciate the increased contact.

Another part of our identity is the handwritten thank-you notes we send, printed on cards featuring the artwork of some of our incarcerated clients, with a blurb about the artist on the back. We feel these cards extend the family feel of the organization, and more important, the cards make our incarcerated clients more visible to donors.

LSPC's fundraising program is ripe with opportunity. Surely, it will take much more for us to build a sustainable grassroots fundraising program. However, with a new logo and marketing materials, a new staff position coordinating grassroots fundraising and media relations, with structures and processes in place and increased giving, I think we're on the right track. **GF**

MANISH VAIDYA IS A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF LEGAL SERVICES FOR PRISONERS WITH CHILDREN AND PROGRAM COORDINATOR AT GIFT, GRASSROOTS INSTITUTE FOR FUNDRAISING TRAINING.

For More Information

LEGAL SERVICES FOR PRISONERS WITH CHILDREN:
www.prisonerswithchildren.org

LSPC'S ALL OF US OR NONE PROJECT:
www.allofusornone.org

GIFT INTERNSHIP PROGRAM:
www.grassrootsinstitute.org/pages/intern.html

We want YOUR Story!

Do you have a story of how your group is building a culture of fundraising?

Have you done something that's worked particularly well? Or has something you tried not worked out?

We'd love to hear your story at:
jennifer@grassrootsfundraising.org