
GETTING IT RIGHT FROM THE START:

Building a Grassroots Fundraising Program

BY DEAN SPADE

EDITORS NOTE: Many of the articles we publish in the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* are instructional in approach, explaining how to carry out different fundraising strategies to help you build a broad base of individual donors. We are often asked by readers if we know people who have been successful using these strategies and have actually been able to decrease their dependence on foundation funding. This article tells one organization's story of their doing just that — applying the principles of grassroots fundraising and finding out how well they really work.

In August 2002, I founded the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), whose mission is to provide direct legal services to trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming low-income people and people of color. A year out of law school, I wanted to engage legal strategies to address the severe and persistent discrimination and violence I saw in my community. I saw trans people experiencing disproportionate poverty, homelessness, and incarceration, being turned away from employment, education, and social services. I saw both police and street violence against trans people continuing at phenomenal rates. In starting SRLP, I imagined an organization that would provide services by and for trans and gender-non-conforming people in a supportive, politicized setting. In the two years since, I have learned not only about providing the services I had imagined, but also about finding the funding to keep the organization going.

To get started, I applied for fellowships, some available only to lawyers and some for broader categories of activists. As soon as we began, the project was flooded with calls from people in need as well as requests for public education and media work. It was immediately clear that I needed to develop long-term plans for the sustainability and growth of the project.

A few months later, one of my fellowship funders offered me an opportunity to attend a workshop on grassroots fundraising. The workshop was taught by the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal's* Kim Klein and Stephanie

Roth. By this time, we'd been applying for foundation grants and beginning to understand some of the obstacles we might face trying to raise money from foundations to do work that was still unheard of to many. It could be a long process of educating funders about the struggles of intersex, trans, and gender-non-conforming people in the context of incarceration, immigration, and poverty. Moreover, changes in the economy made it a particularly hard time to get foundation grants for new initiatives.

What we learned about grassroots fundraising radically changed our approach to fundraising and has produced amazing results for us. Perhaps most important, it was deeply empowering to think about aiming to fund our work from our community and its allies. Coming from a background of poverty and welfare, I had been uncomfortable with trends I saw or heard about in nonprofit fundraising. The idea that foundation funders would get interested in certain issues, and then the trend would shift, concerned me when thinking about the long-term sustainability of movements. Hearing about groups changing their principles or mission to meet funding demands also worried me.

Given all of these concerns, I was delighted to have the chance to learn about other methods of fundraising that would diversify our tactics. Learning strategies to build a base of sustainability from the community affected by the issues and its allies was very appealing.

RADICAL INSIGHTS

When we heard that only about 11 percent of the money the private sector gives to nonprofits comes from foundations, while close to 80 percent comes from individuals, and specifically from families with incomes of only \$60,000 or less, it made perfect sense to me. I had come from communities of people barely scraping by who were always helping each other out and never afraid to talk about money, which is apparently taboo among upper-class people. Now I could also see that seeking our support from our community matched our “by and for” approach to the work and would make us more accountable to the communities we serve.

We learned about using newsletters for fundraising, creating direct mail appeals, giving house parties, developing major donors and using the Internet to bring in individual donors. Our organization dug into all five of these strategies right away.

PUTTING THE STRATEGIES TO WORK

First Things First: Data Control

We started by agreeing that we’d better get a database and learn how to use it before doing any big fundraising pushes. We had lots of names to put in, as SRLP had already trained thousands of social service providers, lawyers, activists, medical providers and students about transgender awareness. We realized that these folks, who had given us their contact information after being energized about our work, would be a great place to start reaching out for support.

Next, a Newsletter

We published our first newsletter in August 2003. It was wonderful to have a chance to write articles about the court victories we had won, to make people aware of new services and materials we were providing, to profile activists in our community who were making a difference, and to let people know how they could support us. We included a quarter-page appeal that could be cut out and returned with a donation. We were surprised by the result — many people let us know that they had read the newsletter cover-to-cover and were excited to send in \$5 to \$500 (yes, we even got a \$500 donation from the newsletter!). The newsletter is a simple affair of three folded legal sheets, printed in black and white, and copied at the local copy shop. It has become our central way of communicating

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with activists and allies all over the country. We put it out twice a year, and we always have a great time deciding what to put in, coming up with graphics, and coordinating folding and mailing parties.

We Tackle Direct Mail

In November 2003, we sent out our first direct mail appeal, a letter outlining a case we were working on of a young trans woman being held in the juvenile justice system. This case was an example of the horrific conditions our clients face and the vital need for our work. The woman quoted in the letter was eager to share her story, knowing that so many other youth faced the same conditions. We saw the direct mail appeal as not just a fundraising opportunity but, like the newsletter, a chance to educate about the dangers that trans people face when we are incarcerated in sex-segregated facilities according to birth gender, and denied medical care.

We have continued sending direct mail letters twice a year, using them to get the word out about significant cases and emerging needs in the community. Our next letter will focus on recent changes to the Medicaid system that are causing sudden denials of care to thousands of trans people. We’re hoping to generate support for a lawsuit we’re developing against the State of New York for its illegal policies that deny care to trans recipients.

Jumping Into the Internet

Our use of the Internet so far has been limited to having a “donate now” button on our web page, but our volunteer web designers are adding a page about our Medicaid Equality Initiative. Our lead donor, Nick Gorton, a trans doctor helping to raise money for the campaign, has agreed to send an e-mail to his extensive contacts (medical professionals who are trans or who treat trans people) about the Initiative that will include a link to that page.

House Parties Rock

Our house parties have been the most fun and most surprising part of our individual donor work. Many people who are attracted to SRLP’s work are pleased to serve on host committees, inviting their friends and colleagues to find out more about our work. Great apartments have been donated to host the parties in, and creative volunteers have found food donations through culinary schools, stores, and talented cooks in the trans community. Recently, interns and volunteers coordinated a silent auction at a party, charming donations of art supplies, electronics, meals, and more out of businesses all over

New York. The house parties have generally raised \$3,000 to \$5,000 each and have generated lists of donors and potential donors who continue to give and support the organization in many ways.

As we've become more sophisticated, we've begun shaping the house parties around certain audiences, such as medical and mental health providers, or legal service providers, or artists. This has created parties that are not only fundraisers, but networking opportunities as well. They have also provided a chance to generate other kinds of support, such as pro bono medical experts for our cases or reliable referrals for certain legal matters. People are also attracted to these parties because they meet others who are approaching their work with a commitment to trans justice, and they get a chance to share strategies and resources.

Stepping Up to Major Gifts

What we learned in the grassroots fundraising course has also been central to developing our major donor work. Like many people who first learn about grassroots fundraising, I assumed we wouldn't have much luck with major donors because our community is so disproportionately poor and I personally couldn't think of folks I would ask. What I learned at the workshop, however, changed the way I thought about who could give and helped me become more willing to ask and be turned down. It made sense to me to see that giving away money is a radical political act in the capitalist context in which we live, where we're always encouraged to think of the world through a lens of scarcity. Becoming empowered to ask for money, and being comfortable hearing from people if they can't give, makes perfect sense to me if I see myself as an activist working for the redistribution of wealth and power, and if I believe that the work of SRLP is vitally important to the self-determination of my community.

I moved from feeling that asking for money was somewhat embarrassing to realizing that I am doing something that is good for the donor as well: giving them an opportunity to support great work. Of course, I still get nervous, and we are still refining our strategies for following up with donors and working to have them make a long-term commitment that will keep us stable and afloat for the

future, but the fact that we are working on these strategies is the first step to ensuring the sustainability of our work.

MEETING MISSION

I feel very lucky that SRLP had the opportunity to learn about developing a donor base in our first year of operation and to begin institutionalizing that work from the beginning. Of course there's no doubt about it: putting together mailings and events and maintaining relationships with individual donors is time-consuming work. At every stage, though, we have found that this work is directly in line with our mission and enhances our work beyond just fundraising. It keeps us in touch with our allies and supporters, it spreads the word of our innovative strategies so that they can be replicated, it brings together people in our community, which is still one defined by isolation.

We have used the help of dozens of committed volunteers, as well as a consistent stream of interns, to accomplish our individual donor work, and this has built new skills in our community and helped us create new strategies for effectively directing the enthusiasm our community expresses for our work. Being an organization committed to low-income people, to a grassroots approach to social change, to using a non-hierarchical, collective structure of governance that maximizes accountability to our community and that is fundamentally focused on the redistribution of wealth and power, these fundraising strategies make perfect sense for us. They promote communication, transparency, skill sharing, and the creation of community spaces and celebration.

I am proud that last year we raised 30 percent of our budget from individual donors and other non-foundation sources. I know that this percentage will continue to grow, will be essential for maintaining our work, and will contribute to the organization staying responsive and connected to the needs and values of those we serve. **GFJ**

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