

# Grassroots Fundraising Journal

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## Fundraising in the Political Arena



**Raising Money for a 501(c)(4)**

**Lessons from Running for Office**

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## FEATURE



Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, a 501(c)(4), at their 2011 “I Love Mountains Day” rally at the state capitol, calling for an end to mountaintop removal coal mining and a transition to clean energy jobs. Photo courtesy Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.

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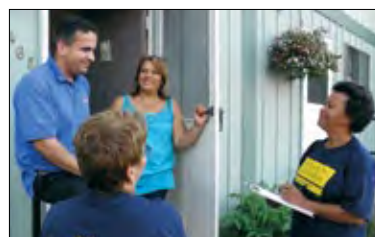
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Martinez, Ana Rodriguez, Virgenmina Perez, and Laura Woodyly.

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## What Political Fundraising Can Teach Us

Priscilla Hung

**FLASHBACK TO 2008:** We were all amazed by President Obama's historic campaign, which showed the power of what can happen when you bring together community organizing and grassroots fundraising. Fundraisers everywhere were marveling over the success of his online fundraising efforts and trying to figure out how to replicate them.

We're at the beginning of another presidential campaign cycle, and, with the rise of Super PACs, the grassroots fundraising is proving to be far less innovative. But this is hardly the time for the nonprofit sector to stay away from the political arena, and there are still fundraising lessons that we can learn from electoral campaigns.

With the wave of Occupy protests, tax policies directly affecting the funds available for education and social services, health care reform at the beginning stages of implementation, provocative discussions around the charitable deduction, and much, much more, there is a lot of governmental activity that nonprofits need to pay attention to.

As more nonprofits do advocacy and lobbying, and want to move beyond the limits currently allowed for 501(c)(3) groups, starting a 501(c)(4) arm or sister organization is an attractive option. But having to secure donations that aren't tax-deductible can feel like a daunting task. Dara Silverman shares lessons learned from three longtime organizations who did just that.

Perhaps we haven't been able to duplicate President Obama's success at raising money, but there are still valuable fundraising lessons those of us who run organizations can learn from activists who ran for political office. Jennifer Pae shares the top tips from her campaign as well as from others in office. Haile Johnston shares how the Center for Progressive Leadership helped him learn how to make the ask through their tips for highly effective fundraisers during his own run for office.

Those of you involved in political campaigns are likely to be communicating with your constituents and supporters through e-alerts and e-newsletters. To help make sure that you're getting all that you can for the time you're putting in, our columnist Nzinga Koné-Miller keeps us grounded with a no-nonsense explanation of what makes a good e-newsletter.

We round out this issue with highlights from the provocative and entertaining plenary debate from our last Money for Our Movements: A Social Justice Fundraising Conference, with the still-relevant topic of whether social justice organizations and leaders should focus on electing progressive candidates into office. Please join us for our 2012 conference this August 10-11 for additional timely topics and lively conversations. Early bird registration ends March 31st!

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“Jobs not Cuts” march - Maine People’s Alliance members gather in Maine’s capital city to rally in support of the American Jobs Act. Photo courtesy Maine People’s Alliance.

# Raising Money for a 501(c)(4)

## Building Your Toolbox for Civic Engagement

by Dara Silverman

**ASK MOST PEOPLE THE DIFFERENCE** between a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) and what you’ll get is a blank stare. But for a small swath of social justice organizations, efforts to engage in more political work and civic engagement has led to the growth of 501(c)(4) organizations. As more 501(c)(3) organizations deepen their political engagement, they often realize that to achieve the type of legislative changes their members are fight-

ing for, they need more tools in their toolbox. Beginning a 501(c)(4) allows organizations to engage more directly in lobbying and civic engagement, while protecting the tax status of their 501(c)(3).

Nonprofit organizations were created in the 1930s in large part to protect and house the wealth of the top one percent. They allow the wealthy to support the charitable causes of

their choosing without letting the government be the one who directs the giving through general social service programs.

501(c)(3) organizations are tax-exempt and can receive tax-deductible contributions. 501(c)(4) organizations are tax-exempt but donations to them are not tax-deductible. They are also allowed to engage in more political work and lobbying, but it cannot be their primary work. 501(c)(3) organizations can engage in an “insubstantial” amount of lobbying generally agreed to be less than five or ten percent of their overall time. (NOTE: Laws

grassroots organizing, advocacy on key issues and nonpartisan voter empowerment. Their 501(c)(4) focuses on legislative campaigns, voter empowerment drives in working class communities, and electoral education in support of progressive candidates.

“We use a few specific strategies to raise money for the 501(c)(4),” said Corey Kurtz, N2N’s Development Director. Specifically, N2N has had great success building up a base of individual donors who support them because of their more explicitly partisan organizing. In the late 1990s, when N2N shifted to focus on a

## THEY REALIZED THAT TO LAUNCH SOMETHING NEW—BUILDING A BASE IN WORKING CLASS CITIES ACROSS THE STATE AND ENGAGING MEMBERS IN BOTH LEGISLATIVE AND ELECTORAL FIGHTS—THEY WEREN’T GOING TO GET FOUNDATION FUNDING RIGHT AWAY, OR MAYBE AT ALL.

vary from state to state covering what activities are legal through 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4) and Political Action Committees (PACs). Please check in your state before pursuing the activities outlined in this article.)

For many grassroots organizations the prospect of educating donors about something new and dividing fundraising based on arcane laws governing 501(c)(4)s can be daunting. Organizations I spoke with that have formed 501(c)(4)s just in the past few years said they were still learning. Luckily, three organizations that have had active 501(c)(4)s for more than 20 years were willing to share some of their time-tested practices for recruiting, maintaining and growing a donor base for their 501(c)(4)s while simultaneously maintaining their 501(c)(3)s. Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts, Maine People’s Alliance, and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth all have gained a wealth of experience about the ins and outs of grassroots fundraising.

### Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts

Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts (N2N) was founded in the 1980s and has worked on a range of issues—from solidarity with Salvadoran and Nicaraguan peoples movements in the 1980s, to single-payer health care in the early and mid-1990s, to fifteen years focusing on well-paying jobs, safe and affordable healthcare, and housing rights as a part of a Working Family Agenda in Massachusetts. N2N started out with both a 501(c)(3) (the Neighbor to Neighbor Education Fund) and a 501(c)(4) (Neighbor to Neighbor Action Fund). “In all of our work, N2N is building power in low-income, working class communities on economic and racial justice issues,” said Juan Leyton, N2N’s Executive Director. “We want to have the broadest toolbox possible to support our members work.” N2N uses their 501(c)(3) for leadership develop-

ment, statewide Working Family Agenda, they brought donors from their previous efforts and grew their individual donor base. They realized that to launch something new—building a base in working class cities across the state and engaging members in both legislative and electoral fights—they weren’t going to get foundation funding right away, or maybe at all. N2N staff spoke with a key group of donors and laid out their plan for how to shift the state legislature—and built a key alliance. “Those donors have supported our work year in and year out,” said Kurtz. “Many of them have hosted house parties for us, offering a chance to reflect on our work and celebrate it—and to bring in new donors through their networks.”

### Maine People’s Alliance

“It’s a big shift for a lot of groups [to start a 501(c)(4).] We’re really lucky that 30 years ago Maine People’s Alliance started both,” said Bridget Surber, Maine People’s Alliance’s (MPA) Member Programs Director. “The majority of our 32,000 members give only to our c4—Maine People’s Alliance—which is the name most people know across the state,” Surber relayed. “Only about 300 to 500 people give to our 501(c)(3)—Maine People’s Resource Center—mostly high-end individual donors.” MPA also has a Political Action Committee (PAC), called MPA Campaign Votes, which endorses candidates.

MPA reaches the majority of their members via a door-to-door field canvass that runs year-round out of three of their offices. Ninety-nine percent of their members joined because someone knocked on their door. They have also been able to build up email and phone lists through online appeals and action alerts, but most of the asks happen in person at the door or at one of their monthly campaign meetings, or through their phone canvass, which calls



## Ten Fundraising Ideas for Your 501(c)(4) (That Have Worked at Other Organizations)

\*\*\*Please be aware that campaign finance laws vary from state to state and some of the activities included below may require a Political Action Committee in your area.\*\*\*

- 1. Ask for it.** Include regular asks at meetings, through regular mail and email appeals to donors for c4 money. Pair each financial ask with announcements of political developments, key legislative campaigns/wins, endorsed candidates, etc. (N2N)
- 2. Door to door canvass.** MPA runs a year-round door-to-door canvass, in Maine no less. If they can do it there, you can do it in your state. Every conversation is an opportunity to link your issues to a direct, face-to-face ask for support. (MPA)
- 3. Phone canvass.** This works the same as a door-to-door canvass, but happens via the telephone. Often there is the opportunity to engage in more nuanced political conversations with members by phone, and to involve them in taking political action by inviting them to participate in a local action and to renew their support for your organization. (MPA)
- 4. House Parties and other event fundraisers.** House parties are a great way to develop members' fundraising capacity and to build new pockets of membership through your current members' networks. With minimal support, you can hold regular house parties and engage a new group in a deeper political conversation. As well, people often give if their friends or colleagues ask, so it is a great way to deepen the pool of members, board leaders and others becoming comfortable pitching the 501(c)(4). (N2N, KFTC)
- 5. Phone bank people who get involved online.** Many organizations have taken to sending out moveon.org-style emails that urge action steps and make membership appeals. While the return rate is low, you can use online actions as a barometer, and follow up by phone banking to make additional asks for low-dollar c4 donations and to get people to engage with your campaigns. (MPA)
- 6. Ask donors to match any gifts given to the 501(c)(4).** Everyone loves a matched gift and this is a great way to develop your donors' political and fundraising buy-in. Especially for new 501(c)(4)s, this can be a great incentive to build fundraising capacity for this new area of your work. (Citizen Action of New York)
- 7. Ask labor unions to support your 501(c)(4).** Community groups can often reach neighbors and populations that are untouched by more traditional electoral work. Labor has a great understanding of the need for progressive power in low-income communities and communities of color and they often share members with community groups. Build long-term relationships with unions by partnering on legislative campaigns and making specific election-year pitches, including candidate endorsements, clear goals, and specific staffing needs. Labor relationships can take time to build, but once they have developed, labor support can be hugely helpful for building up your 501(c)(4)'s capacity. (N2N)
- 8. Ask candidates.** Ask candidates' campaigns to give to your organization directly. Some will donate to the campaign directly and some will fundraise for you from their donors. This can be invaluable in reaching new or unlikely donors to your organization. In many areas, political donors may have no idea about the important legislative and electoral efforts of grassroots groups. An introduction can be key in bridging their understanding of the importance of your work. (N2N)
- 9. Research campaign contributions of prospective and current donors.** All contributions to campaigns must be reported and are easily searchable online through the Federal Election Commission or your state election commission. This is a great way to find out who has maxed out to particular candidates and who is giving to other political groups like Emily's List, a PAC which supports pro-choice, usually progressive candidates. Kurtz from N2N says, "We've had the most success when we run these lists by our current donors and contacts, to identify people they know and can connect us with through a personal introduction." (N2N)
- 10. Mail to candidates' maxed-out donor lists (those who have given the maximum donation to a candidate or overall).** Some campaigns will share their lists of donors who have maxed out to the campaign, and your organization can mail appeals to the donors directly. You can also ask candidates to mail to their donor lists on behalf of your organization. They mail their own letter asking people to donate to your organization. The best introduction is if it comes from the candidate directly. Think carefully about who is the audience for these efforts. Quotes from other key elected officials, even from other parts of the state, can be excellent endorsements to the efficacy of your work. (N2N)

all members twice a year. “One shift we made six years ago when I came on staff was to start linking our calls to the campaign issues we were working on,” said Surber. “All of a sudden, people started giving larger gifts and giving more frequently—many people signed up to give monthly as opposed to when we used to call for membership renewals.” Surber, who previously worked for the Citizens Environmental Coalition in New York and fundraised at her college, shared, “It

approach to building power. From 1988 to 2004 membership declined from 2,500 members across the state to 2,000 members. In 2004, KFTC raised \$67,000 from membership, individual donors and events. “The board and the rest of the organization made a renewed commitment to building power,” said Abbott. By 2006, they had increased their membership to 5,000 people and their annual income through grassroots fundraising to \$200,000. Every year since, KFTC

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was the way I had been fundraising for a long time. We gave it a shot and it really worked.”

MPA often shares its expertise with others. “Groups need help educating their donors,” said Daniel Espinosa Krehbiel, Electoral Program Director at National People’s Action, a network of grassroots organizations across the country that works to advance a racial and economic justice agenda. They have seven member affiliates currently in the process of starting sister 501(c)(4)s. “There are affiliates who have membership programs for their c3s and are figuring out how to build a new one in the c4,” said Espinosa. “MPA and Take Action Minnesota have shared lessons from running successful canvasses with other affiliates.”

### **Kentuckians for the Commonwealth**

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) is another model of a successful—and growing—501(c)(4) organization. They have also had their 501(c)(4) since the mid-1980s. “We’ve long used our 501(c)(4) for lobbying work and since 2004 we’ve also integrated electoral strategies as a part of our overall approach to building community power,” said Lisa Abbott, KFTC Organizing Director. While they also have a 501(c)(3) (the Kentucky Coalition,) like MPA, they are primarily known across the state by the work and the name of their 501(c)(4)—Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. “Most of our individual members, events and grassroots fundraising goes to KFTC, which takes a lot of training and work,” said Abbott. “Our eleven chapters each hold at least one fundraising training each year. Fundraising is a part of the leadership ladder—at all staff meetings, member meetings, we hold ongoing fundraising training for board and staff and before each phone bank, house-party, and event.” But it wasn’t always like this.

In 2004, the KFTC board realized that in order to advance their political/policy goals they needed to take a different

has set annual membership goals and increased both the number of individuals and their support for the organization. By the end of 2011 they reached 7,500 members and raised more than \$389,000 in grassroots fundraising, the vast majority through the c4. KFTC membership dues range between \$15 and \$50 a year. Their goal moving forward is to build up their base of monthly donors, currently about 220 people.

Despite their success in building and strengthening their membership, KFTC faces other fundraising challenges. Two years ago, KFTC created a PAC with a different name. “It has been hard to raise money for it,” shared Abbott. “All our communication and image work was around the c4. The PAC requires people to understand that we are who we have always been—the PAC allows us to operate within the law and do the work most effectively.”

Raising money for a 501(c)(4) is pretty much like fundraising for a 501(c)(3), but the fear factor can make it feel more difficult. “When we’re asked at the door if the gift is tax deductible, we always say the same thing,” says Surber from MPA. “MPA is about building power for Mainers. We want to be the strongest voice we can and to lobby for the issues we care about. Ninety-nine percent of the people are good with that,” she adds.

Good grassroots fundraising is good fundraising. By educating your members and donors about 501(c)(4)s and how they can build the capacity and power of your organization, most donors will be happy to support your organization in a way that will build and grow your work the most. ■

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Dara Silverman is a consultant who works with small and mid-sized social justice organizations to build their organizing, fundraising and organizational capacity. She is the former executive director of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), and splits her time between consulting and teaching yoga. [darasilverman.wordpress.com](http://darasilverman.wordpress.com)



Candidate for Oakland City Council (District 2) Jennifer Pae speaking with voter Wendy Ng in Chinatown regarding the 2010 election. Photo by Mona Brooks.

# Successful Fundraising—From Nonprofits to Running for Office

by Jennifer S. Pae

**IF YOU HAD TOLD ME** I would be managing a national nonprofit at age 21 and then decide to run for office at 27, I would have said, “You’re dreaming!” But that’s exactly what happened.

I never imagined in my wildest dreams I would have the privileges and opportunities that have come to me. Especially growing up in the Central Valley in California and being raised by my mother, a first generation immigrant and single parent. She instilled in me the values of hard work and commitment to progressive change.

Growing up, I was taught not to ask for money. As a family, we were able to get through any hardship together by working hard and keeping our heads up. This made it very challenging for me to start asking for money when running for office. Culturally, it was a big jump. As a young Asian Pacific Islander woman, it would be

considered very bold for someone like me to ask people for donations. However, when your job or campaign is on the line, this is something I had to overcome. Once I truly understood the repercussions and successes would be solely dependent on my fundraising abilities, I knew I had to continue practicing and become more comfortable with fundraising throughout my career.

While working with the U.S. Student Association, my main responsibility was to fundraise to maintain and oversee a \$1 million budget, in addition to managing staff and the overall functions of the organization. As a candidate in 2010 against the incumbent for the Oakland City Council seat for District 2, I was also responsible for raising funds (ultimately we raised \$85K), but fortunately the campaign manager was responsible for the overall campaign. In both cases, the success of the organization and the campaign



depended on me. However, asking for money for my political campaign was much harder.

Andrew Gillum, city commissioner in Tallahassee, Florida, and the director of National Leadership Programs of People For the American Way, where he runs Young People For and the

the campaign and calendar year to determine how much needs to be raised by specific deadlines.

After some planning, we learned that organizing an event was more resource intensive than me getting on the phone and calling donors. Over the course of the campaign we had the

## **WE'RE ALL PART OF A COLLECTIVE MOVEMENT THAT'S SEEKING EQUALITY AND JUSTICE IN OUR COMMUNITIES. AS A CANDIDATE OR REPRESENTING AN ORGANIZATION, MANY OF US ARE TRYING TO SHAPE THE SOCIETY WE WANT TO LIVE IN.**

Young Elected Officials Network, agrees with the obvious differences. He states that often it's easier to transition from being a candidate to being a nonprofit leader that asks donors and foundations for money. "There's an altruistic component when you have an organization you're trying to sustain, rather than an individual's political campaign."

Jane Kim, representative for District 6 on San Francisco's Board of Supervisors and former youth organizer for the Chinatown Community Development Center, also agrees. Supervisor Kim says, "It's a market shift when running for office and fundraising for myself. It's a lot easier to raise money for youth and for the cause, but it was really hard to articulate fundraising for myself. There are not a lot of people that are naturally good at it."

But here's the thing: We're all part of a collective movement that's seeking equality and justice in our communities. As a candidate or representing an organization, many of us are trying to shape the society we want to live in. Each of us is a piece of the puzzle, including the donors we're trying to bring on board to understand the bigger picture and help support our work. I had to get over my reluctance to "making the ask" because there was just too much at stake.

Here are some helpful tips I've learned along the way. You'll see that whether you're fundraising for a nonprofit or fundraising to run for political office, the same lessons hold true.

### **"If You Fail to Plan, You Plan to Fail"**

This is something I learned as a trainer for Wellstone Action. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of setting goals and a realistic budget when developing your fundraising plan. For my campaign for Oakland City Council, we developed small, intermediate, and maximum budgets. This helped us, mostly me, to manage the pressure of how much we needed to raise in order to get our operations up and running. It's important to know what you're trying to accomplish and what will be sacrificed if you don't meet your goals. It also sets the benchmarks throughout

capacity to host just two large-scale events; the rest of the time was spent on the phone "dialing for dollars" and in one-on-one meetings. It was clear in our plan that our limitations in volunteer capacity and budget did not allow us to host an additional event. In my case, it was more productive for me to be locked in a room and be held accountable for making fundraising calls. Fortunately, we could assess our fundraising strategies in our campaign plan and what would ultimately be most successful.

### **Good Data, Good List**

Over the course of the campaign we kept growing our lists. This meant our voter list, email list, volunteer list, and finally our donor list. For our email list, we were able to add an additional 1,000 email addresses by the end of the campaign, which expanded our network and access to individual grassroots donors. Our donor list grew significantly from 478 to 839. We started with my personal list and as I continued to meet new people, they were added to our fundraising list as possible donors. I mention these numbers because it's important to have good data that will support a small grassroots donor campaign. You need to know who you're targeting as a donor, their contact information, their past giving history, etc. The better the data and your list, the more successfully you can track and build ongoing relationships with them and continue to grow your donor base.

Although we had over 800 people on our donor list, ultimately 475 donors contributed to the campaign. In this case, the "rule of halves" applies to our campaign, which means half of those that I contacted and asked to donate were able contribute. Due to our data collection, we were also able to track that 75 percent of our donors contributed \$100 or less, 50 percent contributed online, and 11 percent of our donors gave multiple times. This campaign may have been the exception to many rules because we had an online donor base that surprisingly gave each time we sent a compelling email. But nothing can compare to face-to-face conversations and strong relationships with your donors.

## Relationships Matter

For Representative Kevin Killer, first elected in 2008 and re-elected in 2010 to the South Dakota State Legislature (District 27) and founder of the Native Youth Leadership Alliance (NYLA), the best skill he has developed is being able to talk to individual donors. For NYLA, they've seen the need to invest in building up an individual donor base because of limitations in foundation contributions. Individual donors are your main investors, especially family and friends; they are your seed funders and, potentially, you can move them into the habit of giving.

In order to get to the point where you are comfortable asking a donor for a significant amount of money, you must build a personal and authentic relationship with them. Don't lose contact with your donor base; treat them as the core component of your constituency and continue to cultivate the relationships. Sometimes it's easy to just go to your donors when you need to ask them for money, but it should be an ongoing relationship. Continue to update them on the progress of your campaign or organization, celebrate the victories, and plan for regular communication (of course, not necessarily every day or too much so they don't want to talk to you).

## Understand Your Donor Base

After getting over my fear of asking people for money, I had to get over my fear of asking for a dollar amount. In some cases, if you cultivate your smaller donor base to get into the habit of giving, they may often increase their giving over time. Commissioner Gillum shared that in 2003 a friend who was a college student at the time gave \$25 to his campaign. Fast forward some years later and this same person contributed \$500 to his most recent re-election campaign. It's a great skill and asset to move your donors from smaller contributions to medium and then to larger ones. I have found that this is possible with individuals you have the strongest relationships with; this emphasizes the importance of building long-lasting and healthy relationships with your donors.

Supervisor Kim noted that sometimes her friends who work at nonprofits give more than those at for-profit jobs, even though they have less, because they know that their contribution means a great deal to the candidate and the campaign. People who give often have less, but they get it; there's a sense of shared experiences. Some organizations that have made a strong connection to their community are still successfully fundraising even during the economic recession.

It is much easier to ask for money when the potential donor believes in the cause or the candidate. If you know your donors'

interests and successfully tap into what gives them hope, this will compel them to want to give.

## Volunteers Matter

In addition to building relationships with his donors, Representative Killer is also building relationships with his volunteers because he's dependent on them as his only staff. It's important to acknowledge that all contributions may not be financial. Energy and time are most valuable assets to an organization and a campaign. When I ran for office, we had over 200 volunteers who took part in our campaign. Most of the volunteers were dedicated to voter contact. Fortunately, I also had support from a small fundraising team of five volunteers who made donor follow-up calls and helped with thank you notes.

Your volunteers should be ambassadors for your work. Sometimes the most compelling "asks" come from your volunteers when they tell donors why they came to your organization and why they're still a part of it. Similarly, volunteers on our campaign asked their networks to donate, and they can also do the same as you pitch to donors on behalf of an organization. In each case, volunteers should be supported through trainings and intentional leadership development. This can include providing opportunities for your volunteers to hold leadership roles in your organization and/or campaign and encouraging them as they increase their responsibilities.

## Sometimes There's Sacrifice

Here's the thing, as you may know, there's no shortcut in fundraising. It's often the hardest thing to do, but probably the most important. When you run for office already having a background in the nonprofit sector, it's often easier to understand the sacrifices. Sometimes you may not get paid, but if you see the bigger vision, it's worth the struggle. The money may not come at first or you may not win your first campaign, but if the community sees your commitment and wants to invest in you, then you learn from your mistakes and continue getting sharper to win. Continue to believe in what you're doing and all the sacrifices will pay off in the long run. When your values and mission are relevant to the community and the issues they care about, it's worth the time and energy. ■

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Jennifer S. Pae is a first generation college graduate from U.C. San Diego where she was elected president of the student government. Following graduation, she became president of the United States Student Association and served as the executive director, representing over 2.5 million college students. She currently serves on the board of the Oakland Asian Cultural Center and the Oakland Community Policing Advisory Board.



# How Running for Office Helped Me Make the Ask

by Haile Johnston

**OUR NONPROFIT FUNDRAISING STORY** is similar to many others: We had found a place of quasi comfort. In fact, there was an unexpected harmony that accompanied the foundation dance at first. Perhaps it was because we were so new to the game or maybe because the nice people from the foundations seemed so happy to be funding our work. We were able to get enough money from a few funders to make our early vision for real change in our community. The payroll was being met, the kids at the after school program had art supplies and we could finally invest in making the gardens grow. Things were good! Only time would teach us what so many small community-based organizations know—that relying on foundation support alone is not a sustainable path to community building.

Our organization was one of the lucky ones—we did not have to learn the hard way at first. This notion of income diversification came to us in the form of earned revenue. It made sense, so we got on board with the new city program to “transform” our neighborhood. Contracts to improve vacant and blighted land both fit our environmental justice mission and also gave us the ability to create jobs in our under-resourced Philadelphia community.

Our organization was growing, money was coming in from a few different places, and the community was beginning to see and feel the impact of our work. In all of our perceived success in “diversifying” income through grants and contracts, at no point had we developed the critical skill of asking an individual donor for money. We also did not realize how quickly things can change.

It happened almost by accident after years of growing frustration with our community’s collective condition. There is this epiphany moment that those dedicated to service sometimes reach. I wondered, if my entire life was spent doing the good work of our community, would things be markedly different for the next generation? My conclusion was nuanced, of course, so rather than settle on an answer I asked another question: Was this the best way for



us to effect change? What began as my first inquiry into “systemic thinking” ended in a political campaign. The direct connections between the state of our community and our apathetic leaders could not have been clearer at that moment. How had I not seen it before and what was I going to do to change it? I decided to run!

I quickly learned that the skills of running a nonprofit were different from running for office. I was comfortable talking with grant managers and contract agents, people whose job it was to dispense other people’s money. The dance was so easy with the foundation folks, the steps so clear. The proposal writing acumen that so fluidly translated into success in wooing contracts would not serve me here. Most of the tools that had made me an accomplished breadwinner for our 501(c)(3) were unsuitable for a candidate. The foundations and grants, the contracts and bids were all gone. I had also missed years of opportunity to engage people in our community and connect them directly to our work. We had unknowingly deprived them of the chance to have an investment in improving our neighborhood. Until then I had not realized my weakness in asking people for money.

Some skills are transferable. Fundraising at its core is about relationship building. It is rare that the blindly submitted proposal

gets funded. It often takes time cultivating relationships, demonstrating capacity and building trust. My strength in connecting with people became the bedrock in my electoral fundraising campaign but I still struggled to make “the ask.” This would change but not without some timely training. Had I not run for office I might have never understood the importance of individual fundraising nor would I have developed the skills to do it successfully.

The hard part was getting out of my own way. I was amazed at my own creativity in avoiding the simple act of picking up the phone and asking people to support my vision for a stronger community. That dedicated space where the candidate works the phones, dubbed “call time,” was where my focus eluded me. I was methodical in my planning. All of my prospects were identified and organized, but why was it such a challenge to make the ask? The people I was afraid to call had supported me in everything I had done in life yet I could not ask them for their money. Well, I discovered that my own personal relationship with money was informing my ambivalence. There were the decades of my own struggles with money; attitudes formed over generations within my family; and habits developed across centuries within my culture. Class, culture, race, sex, age, religion, etc.—all coalescing against me in my desire to carry forward the dreams of my community for a better tomorrow.

A good friend suggested—implored, rather—that I apply for the Political Leaders Fellowship program offered by the Center for Progressive Leadership. Knowing of my aspirations to enter the political fray, she pushed me to invest in my capacity as a leader. She had the benefit of having participated in the training the year before and the will to point out my shortcomings.

Founded in Pennsylvania, the Center for Progressive Leadership (CPL) is a national political training institute that develops diverse leaders who can effectively advance progressive political and policy change. CPL is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that recruits and empowers leaders from communities that have traditionally lacked access to political power, including women, people of color, and GLBT individuals. For more information about CPL and our training programs, please visit [progressive-leaders.org](http://progressive-leaders.org).

The CPL training was truly transformative in helping me overcome my fears of making “the ask” to become an unapologetic, visionary fundraiser. The Political Leaders Fellowship also taught me to speak and lead from my values and to be a stronger collaborator. While empowered for success, my run for Philadelphia City Council was not victorious and I returned to the nonprofit sector better prepared. My strong belief in the efficacy of CPL’s programming led me to seek the position of Pennsylvania State Director in which I have served since 2008. Among other topics, fundraising is now one of the trainings I facilitate in our programs that have helped hundreds of nonprofit leaders, prospective candidates and aspiring change agents excel in their work.

The majority of the nonprofit leaders and prospective candidates we have trained come to our program with little experience raising money from individual donors. Nearly all of them have the same learned fears of asking people for money that I had when entering the program in 2007. Our team continues to help folks from all walks unlearn their fears, build skills and develop the good habits of highly effective fundraisers. After observing the success of some of the best there is in the fundraising world, CPL developed the following list of habits to build.

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## Center for Progressive Leadership’s Habits of Highly Effective Fundraisers

- 1. BE UNAPOLOGETIC AND VISIONARY WHEN FUNDRAISING** How many times have you heard someone apologize before asking for money? You may have even developed this bad habit yourself. “I am sorry...” or “I hate to have to ask you for help but...” Fundraising for the work that we are passionate about is not begging and should never be something to apologize for. Our excitement for what we do and the impact we seek to create should be infectious when engaging prospective donors. We are giving them the opportunity to be a part of something larger than themselves. One should know something about the prospect—their interests, values, etc.—and the interaction should be about aligning the work of your organization and that which the prospective donor cares about. Each and every pitch should be personalized and connected with the person you are engaging. Come with the passion, the energy and the vision. Be inspiring!
- 2. TAKE RISKS** So many take a risk-averse approach to fundraising and measure success by claiming a high “win” ratio. One Fellow in our program told me that he was “great at fundraising” because no one had ever told him “no.” While it is true that few people like rejection, if you are not hearing your fair share of “no’s” when asking for money, you are probably not reaching your full potential. To hear a greater percentage of no’s during call time as a candidate or nonprofit leader means that you are reaching beyond your own comfort zone and outside of your natural constituency. You are beginning to reach people who are less familiar with your work and make asks that are closer to a prospect’s giving threshold. This is the space where you are forging new relationships and expanding your base so success should be measured in ways that capture what you are building and not just in money alone. There is some truth to the cliché correlating risk to reward.



3. **YOU MUST INITIATE CONTACT** One thing you can count on in your fundraising campaigns is that donors are not going to come and find you. The process of developing prospects, building real relationships based on shared values and trust can take time. The best way to build a fundraising base is just to start now. Even if you are not a candidate or have no funding needs at the organization you work for, find a cause that you care passionately about and begin engaging your networks to support it. Over time you will build a base of supporters who give to initiatives you champion because they trust and believe in you. If you are a candidate or have organizational financial needs, you should be doing this already. Earlier I mentioned that I missed the opportunity to empower and connect my community to our neighborhood nonprofit work. It became much harder to make the ask to these same people when I became a candidate. Make the connection, send the email, make the call, MAKE AN ASK—initiate a new relationship each week.
4. **CREATE CONCRETE URGENCY** There should be no ambiguity about what a donor's gift is going to support. Part of your ask should include the specific need, allocation and timing that conveys the importance of "now." Candidates often ask for donations to meet certain filing deadlines or near the end of the calendar year to meet campaign finance laws. This is an effort to signify the viability of their candidacy relative to their competitors. For nonprofits and candidates alike, events like fundraisers and parties are successful at creating a deadline for giving. Find the "event" or goal that will be action-inducing for your fundraising base.
5. **BUILD A TEAM** You will assemble your fundraising team from your base and your inner circle of associates. The nonprofit team will begin with key staff, your board and key constituents. The candidate will have staff, volunteers and a finance committee. The greatest fundraising team players will be those who you have mentored and invested your time in before you need them. From these pools and other associations you will build your host committees and find partners to do joint call time. Building a team will allow you to leverage networks beyond your own personal ones.
6. **LISTEN** I often joke that this point should be first. The most rewarding time for me as a candidate was canvassing from door-to-door, standing on the stoops of my neighbors' homes, listening to their hopes and dreams for how we can collectively improve our community. Too often, people asking for money feel like they have to have the perfect pitch. They have rehearsed what they are going to say and once they start talking they do not stop. Even if they get out the ask they do not stop talking long enough to hear the reply! Again, fundraising is about relationship building, and healthy relationships maintain a balanced exchange of dialogue. Stop and listen to what people care about. Take a moment to connect to their vision for change and how it connects to the work you want to do. And if you get around to making an ask, have the courtesy to listen to their response.
7. **FOLLOW UP** Be as profuse in your praise as you are visionary in your ask. Follow up with your donors and thank them in writing. Again, remember the relationship part of this. Donors are not ATMs and therefore you should be reaching out to them at times to include them in activities beyond just fundraisers. These are often people who are invested in you as a leader and want to support your vision and your work. They trust you to help them connect to activities that are going to create change. Follow up with your supporters with regular communication.
8. **BE PERSISTENT** Persistence will help open doors. There is one particular donor relationship that helped me overcome my fear of asking for money. He was kind in denying my request for a contribution, which allowed me to separate the word "no" from a rejection of me. I realized the response was not, "no, you are a bad person" or "no, not now, not ever." It was simply bad timing. From what I knew of the man based on his interests, values and past contributions, I was confident in our alignment. Persistence came in the form of a real relationship that developed over time and after repeated refusals to contribute dollars to my subsequent projects. He did give me his time though, and was very generous with that. After several years he finally did make a fairly significant contribution to a recent initiative and was enthusiastic in doing so. More meaningful than his money is the path of growth that I have walked as his friend. In this way, persistence helped me become more effective in my work and a little more fearless as a fundraiser. ■

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Based in Philadelphia, Haile Johnston is a resident of the Strawberry Mansion community where he and his wife founded East Park Revitalization Alliance. He is also a founder of the Common Market, a nonprofit distributor of locally grown food. Haile has served as the PA State Director of the Center for Progressive Leadership since 2008.



# Debating Our Role in Government

**A SIGNATURE FEATURE OF GIFT'S BIENNIAL CONFERENCE,** *Money for Our Movements: A Social Justice Fundraising Conference*, is our plenary debate. We invite prominent social justice activists and thought leaders to debate key issues of our time.

Our 2010 conference debate is especially relevant to the theme of this issue of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*: *Should social justice organizations and leaders focus on electing progressive candidates into office and work with politicians to advocate for change on the inside?*

Here are some highlights from our invited debaters:



**KIM KLEIN**  
Founder and Publisher  
Emerita of the *Grassroots  
Fundraising Journal*



**LIBERO DELLA PIANA**  
People Before Profits



**RINKU SEN**  
Applied Research Center  
and ColorLines Magazine



**MIKE ROQUE**  
Denver Office of  
Strategic Partnerships  
and former executive  
director of GIFT



**ABDI SOLTANI**  
ACLU of Northern  
California

“During the 2008 presidential campaign, there was a debate over whether it was the preacher or the president that made the civil rights movement successful. Hillary Clinton said Dr. King’s dream began to be realized when President Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964; it took the President to get it done. Was it the President or the Preacher?”

“The government is the only sector that has the resources to fight a war on poverty, provide health care for all, ensure early childhood education, and protect the environment.”



"The best likelihood that we can keep a government accountable to a social justice agenda is to build a social justice constituency. Without that constituency building and exercising its power, even the candidates who are most sympathetic cannot do very much once they are in government. Access to power is not the same thing as power itself."

"Elections require large numbers of people to make small gifts. By engaging in elections you're going to build the donor base, you're going to broaden the number of people exposed to our ideas, and that in turn is going to sustain the movements we are trying to build."

"Government can start wars, but it doesn't seem to be able to stop the war. Government could end poverty, but it has chosen not to. The system is broken. It works to consolidate power amongst wealthy people."

"We have the job of popularizing progressive ideas and of educating people as to why the current system doesn't work and what alternatives exist. If we don't do that through the media and by the hard work of person-by-person organizing, then all those good people in government won't have anybody to point to in order to say that there is an actual constituency for these tax and policy changes."

"What are you more inspired by? A progressive movement that has rallies or a progressive movement that takes control of the government to the best of our ability? The problem is not just that progressives are on the sidelines. The problem is that we don't even know where the game is being played."

"Any power we have on the inside is made possible by the power we have on the outside. Our job is to speak from the outside, to speak from the margins, to give voice to the marginalized. Our job is to address the root causes of social problems and organize for structural change. The money we are able to raise and the energy we are able to mobilize must be used for the work of building a movement."

Want to hear more? Visit [grassrootsfundraising.org/conference](http://grassrootsfundraising.org/conference) to view video highlights of this debate and register today for our August 10-11 2012 conference at the Oakland Marriott. Early bird registration ends March 31st!

*Please note that the opinions shared in the debate are not necessarily the opinions of the debaters or GIFT, but were a way to start dialogue on these issues.*



# What Have You Done for Me Lately?

## Building Healthy Relationships through e-Newsletters

by Nzinga Koné-Miller

**IF YOU HAVE AN ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM**, odds are your constituents are used to hearing from you. They probably like you. Heck, they might even like you a lot. And if yours is like many organizations, they're hearing from you when you need them most—when you're in the midst of a fundraising campaign, or to sign a petition, show up at a meeting, or call their elected officials. This is great—this is you getting your supporters to help you do what you need to do in order to make a difference in the world.

But your relationship with them is just like any relationship you might have in the “real” world—it's a two-way street, and it needs to be nurtured. Part of this is making sure your supporters don't only hear from you when you want something from them. The care and feeding of these relationships requires that you remind them what you're doing in return for their actions and donations.

So what have you done for your supporters lately?

It's not so much that your communications need to tell them what you've done for *them* per se—depending on what you do, that might not make sense. But how do you convey what you've done to deserve their attention, support, and trust?

One answer? The e-newsletter.

Do I hear the sound of the needle being pulled off the record? A collective groan? Why do e-newsletters have such a bad rap? Sadly, they're all too often poorly executed and a source of organizational conflict over what's included, and they can wind up being a huge time suck with little payoff. But you can't afford for them to be.

One large organization we worked with used to produce an e-newsletter that required upwards of 90 hours a month to produce. This simply isn't a reasonable amount of work for most organizations, regardless of the potential bigger picture return. And unlike a donation appeal or action alert, for the most part you can't track your success rate or ROI from an e-newsletter.

So sending them can sometimes seem like sending an email blast out into a proverbial black hole.

Some organizations manage to tell their constituents what they're doing for them (and the cause) effectively without an e-newsletter. Using standalone cultivation emails, they report back to action takers on the progress of a campaign, tell donors how close they are to their goal, and update volunteers about new developments in a project or plan, without asking for much in return.

The downside? This can mean a flurry of single-issue emails and complicated segmentation. And the reality is that no matter how exciting a new development is to our organizations internally, our audiences typically aren't as jazzed about topics like website redesigns as we are—and we should think twice about dedicating a single email to spreading the word press release-style. This is where an e-newsletter can especially come in handy.

So how do you avoid the common pitfalls and implement your e-newsletter efficiently and effectively?

### Who's the Boss?

First and foremost, someone has to own the e-newsletter, just as someone should be overseeing your online program. That person should be thinking about your e-newsletter in the context of your larger messaging strategy. They must be empowered to make decisions—including saying “no” when content isn't appropriate to the medium and your mission.

### Don't Send for the Sake of Sending

If you find that you're putting content into the message just because there's empty space in your email template—or because someone in the organization wants to send an update and no one has the heart to tell him or her it's not e-newsworthy—then drop your mouse and slowly back away from the launch button.

There's no rule that an e-newsletter has to be sent every



month or that it must adhere to a fixed format. Committing yourself to an inflexible schedule can increase the likelihood that you'll send out messages that inspire yawns from your supporters. And a rigid vision of how an e-newsletter "ought to look" could be a hurdle to getting a message out when you have timely, juicy news to share. Some organizations we work with send e-newsletters in formats that are looser, more narrative, more like a letter. Other groups send their e-newsletter bimonthly or quarterly. These are all acceptable alternatives to the traditional monthly launch and may give you the flexibility you need to make the most of this communication tool.

### Make It a "Newsy Letter"

To avoid putting your audience to sleep, your e-newsletter must not become the dumping ground for the updates that don't warrant a standalone email. Likewise, they should not be the clearinghouse of news stories that are only vaguely (or not at all) connected to your work or your organization.

Your e-newsletter should contain—you guessed it—news, though not in the strictest sense. We're talking generally of news about your organization and the work you do. Good news, bad news (though bad news should never be the sole focus), campaign updates—ideally delivered with a conversational, newsy, storytelling tone, in a way that highlights the impact your organization is making.

Stories that are focused on your impact should be front and center, as they establish the case for the "value" you provide—which is important to reinforce repeatedly as it ultimately contributes to the case you make when you ask your supporters for contributions.

### So...What Does a Good e-Newsletter Look Like?

e-Newsletters provide a great opportunity for you to showcase what (and who) makes your organization stand out, so avoid using a dry, institutional voice. Consider having the e-newsletter consistently sent from the same person, and begin the message with a short, personal introductory note from her or him. The note should be in a friendly first-person tone that can be warm, welcoming, inspirational, thoughtful, or even humorous when appropriate. Employing authentic personality and emotion in the message, particularly in the introduction, is a great way to "hook" your readers and draw them into the rest of your content.

Whether you use a standard template with pockets for individual content or a more narrative format, make sure your e-newsletter features a clean layout and concise, timely content that can easily be scanned. e-Newsletters will typically contain bite-sized content, and that content will often drive readers to your website where they

can "read more" about a topic or story that interests them. This medium isn't the place for a long, direct mail-length message or press release. As is often the case with digital content, you've got a few seconds to capture your readers' attention, get them to read your content and/or click through to your website—so you'll want to keep it short, sweet and readable.

While it's important that your e-newsletter cultivate your relationship with your supporters, this doesn't mean you can't give them something to do. If you're in the midst of a big advocacy, fundraising or awareness campaign, highlight it and invite your readers to participate if they haven't already.

Make your e-newsletter more interactive by adding a Q & A section. Or find a way for supporters to submit feedback that would be featured in an upcoming e-newsletter: for example, a "What We're Reading" section featuring mission-appropriate books, blogs, or other websites selected by list or staff members. One organization that works with women in developing nations used to feature a short snippet from a supporter alongside one from a beneficiary. The snippets, accompanied by photos of the featured individuals, spoke about the organization's impact on each of them. In addition to being a great way to highlight the ways the organization was making a difference, this feature served as an excellent way to make a nameless mass of beneficiaries into distinct individuals—and in doing so highlighted the shared humanity of beneficiary and supporter, despite differences in geography, culture, and privilege.

In addition to integrating interactive elements into your e-newsletter, take full advantage of your readers' attention to include a passive ask for a donation. Think less generic "support us," and more specific: "Like what you see? Help us do more x with your gift today." After all, this is when your readers are most engaged and interested. They've just opened your e-newsletter and we hope they've read content illustrating your impact in the world, so including a contextual donation ask with a button that stands out in the layout of the e-newsletter is fair game.

You likely will not have many readers donating directly from your e-newsletter—and that's fine as that is not your primary goal in launching it. But odds are that your supporters who receive cultivation messaging like e-newsletters will be more likely to donate down the line. Striking a balance between give and take in your communications will contribute to your supporters experiencing your relationship with them as a two-way street, instead of a one-way trip to the ATM. ■

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Nzinga Koné-Miller is an Account Director at Watershed, a consulting and services firm designed expressly to help organizations build, grow, and sustain relationships with constituents online. [watershedcompany.com](http://watershedcompany.com)



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