

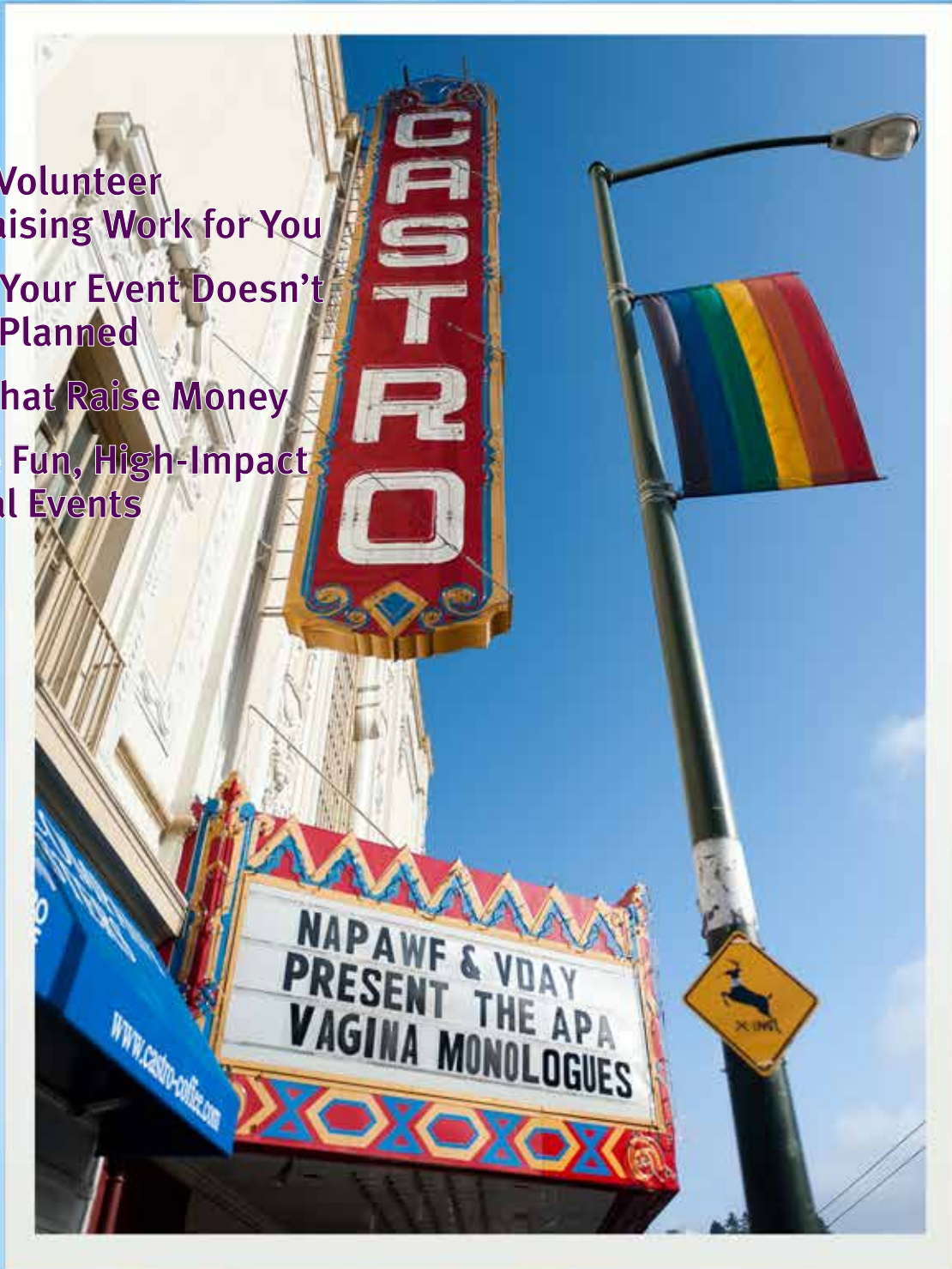
# Grassroots Fundraising Journal

VOLUME 32 NUMBER 1 • JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2013

A PUBLICATION OF



Make Volunteer Fundraising Work for You  
When Your Event Doesn't Go as Planned  
Raps that Raise Money  
Create Fun, High-Impact Special Events



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# Expect the Unexpected

## Lessons Learned from Successful Special Events

Volume 32 | Number 1 • January–February 2013

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The marquee at the historic Castro Theater in San Francisco, where over 1,000 people attended the May 2012 performance of the Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues.

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## Being Innovative & Nimble Along the Way...

By Ryan Li Dahlstrom

*“Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

**HAPPY 2013!** I hope you were able to enjoy some time off with loved ones at the close of 2012 and are starting off this new year with a rejuvenated mind, body and spirit.

We ended 2012 with some momentous and powerful struggles. From POWER's campaign win for free bus passes for 40,000 low- and mid-income youth in San Francisco, to a judge halting construction on Keystone XL pipeline, to growing Palestinian solidarity organizing and divestment campaigns.

All of these were inspiring achievements that wouldn't have happened without people's power, knowledge and organizing. They all required a level of invention and re-invention to determine the most strategic path forward.

Grassroots fundraising and resource mobilization also require invention, innovation and clear strategy, especially when planning special events. We have a lot of road maps for how to throw a successful event, but, like most things, it is important to share the lessons we learn along the way.

In this issue, we highlight some of these lessons, tips and tools to help make your next special event a programmatic and fundraising success, even when faced with unanticipated challenges. Julia Rhee, fundraising committee chair for the APA (Asian Pacific American) Vagina Monologues, shares how her organization was able to exceed its fundraising goal with an all-volunteer fundraising committee. Christine Kowalke, one of the organizers of a community event in Evanston, IL called MashUp, provides lessons for how you can plan for the unexpected. Next, long-time fundraiser Mark Toney shares his tips and strategies for making a successful pitch—from planning to delivery. Finally, Aspen Dominguez, development director for San Francisco-based organizing group POWER, explains how the organization has transformed its annual event into a successful fundraiser—one where the program doesn't take over the whole event.

We wish you all the best for a powerful and successful year of organizing and fundraising, and we look forward to being here to support and celebrate alongside you!

And, as always, please don't hesitate to be in touch with me directly with ideas for future *Journal* articles.

*Ryan Li*

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Cast of the Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues poses for final group shots before performing in the historic Castro Theater to an audience of over 1,000 attendees.

# Making Volunteer Fundraising Work for You

By Julia H. Rhee

*Editor's Note: We would like to recognize and honor the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are often not represented or included in The Vagina Monologues productions, especially that of transgender women. We recognize and celebrate all the ways that people identify their genders regardless of sex assigned at birth.*

**THE FIRST TIME** I saw the interior of the Castro Theater was in 2008. From the iconic Castro marquee to the lavishly ornate interior reminiscent of its 1920s golden days, the Castro Theater in San Francisco has served as both a landmark and living home for creative performances, film festivals, live shows, and movie screenings for nearly a century.

And there I was, with no prior stage experience in front of 700 people, saying a word rarely repeated in my immigrant household in front of hundreds of strangers: Vagina.

Even after being in two productions of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, I still don't think I have heard my parents utter the word in front of me. But there they were: two nervous but excited immigrant parents who drove days from Washington state to California to see their only daughter in her first performance.

After the final cast bow, I see my parents making their way down the aisle. When they reached me, they gasped and smiled and clapped their hands. They enveloped me in hugs. When I asked my mom what she thought, she told me, in Korean, that she couldn't understand it so well, but the people—wow! Look at how many people were here!

I laughed and smiled.

## The Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues

The experience that I had with the San Francisco Vagina Monologues was profoundly transformative. Building community

with other women and having the space to tell our stories about violence and abuse was liberating.

I held onto this feeling, wishing there was something like this specifically for the Asian Pacific American community. So I thought, why not have an Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues? I floated the idea to Linda Yang, my co-chair of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF) Bay Area, and she agreed.

## Our Fundraising Background

After securing a talented director and assuring her that NAPAWF Bay Area would assemble production and event outreach teams, the next inevitable question was: Where would we get the money?

Our background in grassroots fundraising as a volunteer organization was humble, to say the least. As co-chairs, Linda and I inherited a modest budget when we moved into leadership positions. NAPAWF Bay Area is a local chapter of NAPAWF, the nation's only progressive, multi-issue women's organization for Asian Pacific American women and girls. Chapters fundraise their own operating budgets, and the Bay Area Chapter had around \$2,000 at the time. That figure more or less stayed static for a number of years because we all felt so wary of fundraising. We unknowingly adopted a mindset that if we spent conservatively, it would ease the fundraising obligations to replenish the chapter budget.

But we did try nevertheless. Years ago, we came up with the idea of selling spicy ramen at an event space. And after four volunteers spending three hours tabling and two hours in preparation, driving time, and set-up, we raised a whopping \$30. Much of that was returned to the event host to cover their rental space costs. It was a fiscal disappointment and demoralizing.

We tried to reassure ourselves that this was not a total failure because our job was not to fundraise, but to spread awareness about our organization. But looking back, I can't help but see gaps in not only our analysis, but our strategy.

Tackling a much bigger project like the Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues would be challenging, but it boiled down to an issue of scale.

### Setting a Goal

One mission of *The Vagina Monologues* productions is to raise funds for women's organizations and raise awareness about violence against women. It was created because of the pervasive nature of sexual, physical, and reproductive violence in our communities. Most are school, university, and community productions, produced locally by every day people.

But, we didn't want just an ordinary production. We wanted to make a statement about Asian Pacific American women. We wanted to address the staggering statistics about human trafficking and underreported sexual assault and domestic violence rates within an Asian Pacific American context. We wanted to make the show a welcoming space for queer and genderqueer Asian Americans.

We set our goals high. We wanted to shoot for the stars, and even if we didn't get there, I had confidence we would land much farther than where we started.

Somehow, the figure \$80,000 popped up into conversation. Conventional wisdom tells us that goal setting should be measurable, manageable, and reasonable. Clearly, this was a stretch.

To outsiders, this goal might seem totally ridiculous given that our track record includes a failed ramen fundraising experiment. But since that infamous fundraiser, the NAPAWF Bay Area Chapter had grown in membership and expanded its reach, locally and nationally. The support for the organization grew dramatically as a result of a national APA women leaders media spotlight campaign in partnership with two of the most widely-read publications in the community, *Angry Asian Man*, as well as *Hyphen Magazine*. NAPAWF National was also leading high visibility policy campaigns on the national front that were inclusive of Asian Pacific American women domestic workers, undocumented immigrants, and transgender women.

The spotlight campaign was spearheaded by the local chapter

and raised over \$6,000, making it one of the most successful grassroots media visibility campaigns in organizational history. Other successes included a South Pacific disaster relief fundraiser that raised several thousand dollars as well as various members "donating" their birthday to fundraise for the organization.

We had these successes primarily because we kept a practice of setting our sights higher and higher, continually refining our approaches in getting there.

If we were going to put months of planning and people power into the APA Vagina Monologues, I wanted this to be the sole fundraising engine for the year. We established a more realistic goal by determining a base number to cover our operating costs and attaching an unscientific number as a profit margin.

How about adding \$10,000 on top of that? "Sure. Why not?" they said.

### Implementing the Plan

We divided the goal number into four primary funding sources:

#### 1. Ticket Sales

Admission costs with three-tiered pricing: pre-sale, general admission, and VIP seating.

#### 2. In-person Events

Two large dance party fundraisers with well known DJs at venues accessible by public transportation.

#### 3. Crowdfunding

An IndieGoGo campaign with email and phone banking sessions.

#### 4. Sponsorships

Ad space for small businesses, local companies, and individual donors.

From there, we established working committees and set an expectation that all members, including cast, would actively contribute to the fundraising and outreach efforts. We met weekly from February to May 2012. And while not everyone was able to meet every week, we did our best to establish a consistent check-in date.

For many of us, this was our first experience organizing a performance of this scale. We wore multiple hats in the show. I had the privilege to serve as one of the executive producers, fundraising committee chair, and actor, but also was the copy girl, lunch lady, and driver.

### Successes

On Thursday, May 17, 2012, the Castro Theater was packed with thousands of attendees for the Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues, including elected officials, community leaders, high school students, grandmothers, LGBTQ community mem-

bers, and male allies.

We received an endorsement from Congresswoman Judy Chu and garnered front-page media coverage in the *San Francisco Chronicle* with images from the show night. Interviews and press coverage followed in *Audrey Magazine*, *Hyphen Magazine*, *AsianWeek*, *Angry Asian Man*, and other outlets.

On the fundraising front, we raised over \$23,000 for women and girls impacted by violence—the most amount of money any chapter has ever raised in NAPAWF's 16-year legacy.

## 10 Guiding Principles

Reflecting on how we led this campaign, I can offer 10 implicit principles that guided our decision-making and our process.

### 1. Prioritize high quality visuals.

It was important to have professional design work when possible and sharp communications language. Even though this was a grassroots effort from an all-volunteer team, we wanted to set the standard high.

While we asked for a lot of pro-bono work from our artist friends, designers, photographers, and performers, we wanted to maintain quality control and did our best to target talented artists, reviewing their portfolios, past clients, and websites. We offered them program credit, mention on our website, and our undying gratitude.

### 2. Use multiple strategies to reach fundraising goals.

Relying on diverse funding streams helps ensure successful fundraising even if some strategies prove to be ineffective. We did not know what to expect because it was our first time, but if, for example, one in-person event wasn't successful, we could then pivot to getting more sponsorships to meet our goal.

### 3. Encourage everyone to commit to a fundraising goal.

Every person involved had a fundraising goal that was voiced out loud, documented and revisited. There was no set figure across the board, but it was meaningful to have every person commit to a personal fundraising goal on paper.

### 4. Center the leadership of APA women.

The APA Vagina Monologues production was powered by Asian Pacific American women, so all major decisions were made by APA women. It aligned with our values as a social justice women's organization as we all

deeply believe that women's leadership needs to be more central in our society. Everyone benefits when women are present and engaged meaningfully.

### 5. Use technology to make the work easier.

Our resident operations and technology expert, Linda Yang, the other executive producer, showed us ways to streamline communications with specially branded list groups (i.e. team@apavaginamonologues.com, cast@apavaginamonologues.com, fundraising@apavaginamonologues.com) and the website. Others helped refine our social media outreach with Facebook internal groups to share rapid information, Twitter, Hootsuite, customized bit.ly links, and other social media applications.

### 6. Stay flexible, make mistakes.

When someone makes a mistake, we say it's okay, and we troubleshoot together. This creates a productive learning environment and encourages people to try their best, while staying attentive to best practices.

### 7. Feed people.

It is as much cultural as it is strategic to feed volunteers. We offered incentives for attendance with locally produced, artisanal foods and sweets that volunteers were excited about. *7x7 Magazine's* 100 Must-Try List was a good source on what we should provide for the volunteer teams.

### 8. Delegate roles and responsibilities.

What one cannot do alone, one must delegate to and/or share with another. With campaigns and projects, time is always a limited resource.

### 9. Create an ask for everyone.

Everyone can support the fundraiser in some way. If we talked to people who couldn't attend the show, we suggested other ways to contribute, whether by a donation to allow young people and working-class women to attend the show, volunteering their time, or helping spread the word on social media.

### 10. Document the event.

With so much time, effort and resources invested in this one-time performance, we wanted to ensure that this show was well-documented for years to come. Not only

would it be a compelling tool for future sponsorship opportunities and media outreach, it could be packaged to funders for NAPAWF National. We had four professional photographers and a videographer there who beautifully captured the full scope of our event.

### Reflections

As women of color, navigating power in this stratified world and political economy is a complicated journey. So many of us have been conditioned to look the other way or ignore money conversations altogether. Fundraising, in particular, can and should cause us to question our own relationships toward money, resources and people.

But for many of us, we recognize that money can translate into resources and tools that can dramatically transform under-represented communities. It can break cycles of poverty and enable women to leave abusive relationships.

The APA Vagina Monologues created space for these critical conversations. During rehearsals, we shared our own anecdotes of being affected by violence and witnessing how this shapes our perceptions of self-worth, power, and women of color feminism.

We didn't always have the most refined approaches or the most sophisticated language. We certainly didn't have all the answers, and regrettably, the show lacked transgender representation despite focused outreach on queer listservs and social media channels. We made a lot of mistakes along the way.

Nevertheless, for me, the experience demonstrated what is possible when women come together and dare to claim power and resources for their communities. The APA Vagina Monologues is more than just talking about vaginas. It's about APA women discovering, unleashing, and performing the stories they carry and the legacies we leave for future generations. It's about action. It's about awareness. It's about resilience.

It's about the passion that feeds our community work and our greater movement for social justice. ■

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Julia H. Rhee served as actor, fundraising committee chair and co-executive producer for the Asian Pacific American Vagina Monologues.

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PHOTO BY CHASE CLARK

An outside view of the collapsed tent...

# Lessons from a Fallen Tent

## When Your Event Doesn't Go as Planned

By Christine Kowalke

**HELD EVERY FALL ON THE SCENIC CAMPUS** of Evanston, Illinois' Northwestern University in a beachfront tent, the MashUp is an event designed to bring together various sectors of the Evanston community for an evening of conversation, connecting, and celebrating. It serves as a fundraiser for the Evanston Chamber of Commerce, which uses the funds to support its work with local small businesses. The location and tent—donated each year by the University—are truly idyllic with the lake and a harvest moon in the background.

My firm, Hoopla Communications, was brought on board the first year of the MashUp to keep the all-volunteer committee on track with its planning, including logistics, fundraising, and marketing.

Now in its third year, the MashUp has gained a reputation

as a celebratory evening that serves as a catalyst for new ideas, connections, and relationships. With the motto of "Expect the Unexpected," each year the MashUp features surprising or unusual components. The first year, a high school drama group did improv comedy; the second year, a trapeze artist performed. The 2012 event featured on-site makeovers from a local beauty school, a bluegrass band, a stilt walker, and a juggler. Each year, the MashUp has lived up to its title and motto but this year more than ever.

The morning of the event I checked the weather, and the temperature looked okay for our MashUp—high 60s, cloudy skies, and a slight chance of high winds. I received a call from Lisa, one of our logistics coordinators, who told me we were two hours ahead of schedule—the tables and chairs were placed, the



A/V equipment was set up, and the lighting was ready. I decided to go pick up pizza for the team, and while waiting for our lunch, I received the fateful text message: “The tent collapsed!”

That “slight chance of high winds” hit our tent. Lisa describes the moment this way: “This event will most certainly go down in the memoirs of my event planner life. I have done

about the same time the Fire Marshall deemed the tent unsafe, despite the tent company’s assurances that they could rebuild. It was 3:30 p.m. We had 90 minutes to move the entire production to the hotel.

The audio visual team started moving; they loaded their truck up faster than I’ve ever seen loading happen. Lisa and

## WE NOW KNOW THAT EVEN IN A DRAMATIC SITUATION LIKE THIS, A NO-NONSENSE, NO-DRAMA APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION IS KEY.

hundreds of events in tents but have never had one go down while I was still inside of it. I had just placed a linen on a table when the poles right next to me gave away and a huge industrial fan came crashing down. It really took my breath away. Fortunately, none of us were hurt, and we ran for the exits, dumbfounded.”

From the moment the tent went down, Lisa and her banquet captain Tony were on the phone. First, they called the tent company to get them back on site. Then, they called the University security office and facilities managers to alert them. Next, they got on the phone to search for alternate event locations in the area. They called their contacts at Northwestern University and Evanston Woman’s Club and left a message at the best hotel in town—the Hotel Orrington.

By the time I made it from the pizza place to the collapsed tent, Lisa and Tony had made significant headway on addressing our problem. The tent company was on its way; the University security and facilities leads were on-site; and the Fire Marshall had been called to inspect the tent. The winds were still blowing, and we were in high adrenaline problem-solving mode.

I called the MashUp executive team comprised of a high level city employee, a Northwestern University executive, two board members of the Chamber who are also entrepreneurs, and the Chamber lead. I asked everyone to make calls to venues that could accommodate all our needs.

Meanwhile, Lisa had secured a “yes” from the Hotel Orrington, a beautiful downtown Evanston venue that hosts hundreds of conferences, events, and meetings each year—and only an eight minute drive from the crumpled tent. She knew the manager there and had worked with him innumerable times. They trusted each other, she was very clear about what we needed, and he wanted to help.

We made the decision to move the event to the Orrington at

Tony started calling all the food vendors to urgently let them know about the venue change.

We then mobilized our communications team to alert our guests to the change of venue. Throughout the life of the MashUp, we had communicated to the Chamber membership and broader Evanston community via email blasts and Facebook updates, and this day would be a true test of that strategy. We crafted a message to be sent to all 3,000 Chambers members and posted to its Facebook page. “Due to high winds, the MashUp will be held at the Hotel Orrington. We’ll see you there at 5:00 p.m.”

We then drove to the hotel, and when the ballroom was available at 4:30 p.m., the Orrington team was hard at work. The manager had asked not only his banquet team but all his sales and operations staff heads to move tables and work together to turn that room into our MashUp space. And it turned out beautifully. Stilt walker and all.

### Lessons from a Fallen Tent

#### 1. Plan for worst case scenarios.

In the early stages of planning an event, have your team ask your version of the “What happens if the tent falls down?” question. It might be a series of questions: What happens if there is a medical emergency at the event? What happens if there is an evacuation of the venue for any reason? What processes are in place to accommodate emergency planning?

#### 2. Secure your venue, and get a backup.

For outdoor events, consider having an alternate venue. Usually, you order a tent as back-up for an outdoor function, but we had never asked ourselves what if the tent goes down. We will now. If you have a tent, always make



PHOTO BY CHASE CLARK

sure it is anchored in sand with barrels. Check all insurance policies for all parties involved. Ask for copies. Ask your legal counsel to review these.

#### 4. Get backup people.

Have a plan in place if one of your principal players is not able to attend the event. Always create a Plan B. And be sure to communicate to your Plan B speaker so that the person can be fully prepared to fill in if needed.

#### 5. Centralize information.

Create an event contact sheet that includes the following information on all players: name, cell phone, office phone, email and arrival time. “Players” include vendors such as musicians, florists, table rental company, security company, sign language interpreters, audio visual companies, and caterer. If you have keynote speakers or special guests coming in from out of town, make sure to include all the details of their transportation arrangements.

#### 6. Check your phone.

Always check the cell phone reception at the venue dur-

ing your first walk-through for the event. Check it from backstage. Check it from the registration area. Reception can make or break good on-site communication.

Lessons learned from this experience go beyond the practical. We now know that even in a dramatic situation like this, a no-nonsense, no-drama approach to communication is key. We have a newfound appreciation for the relationships we have with our colleagues and community and business supporters.

As Pat Hughes, Chamber member and MashUp co-founder puts it, “No one can put their finger on just what the MashUp really is. It’s way more than just an event—there is will, there is optimism, there is belief that together we are better.” And this is a lesson greater than any contingency plan. ■

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Christine Kowalke owns Hoopla Communications in Chicago. We are small but mighty firm committed to furthering social justice by helping non-profits produce high-impact special events and conferences. In our sixteenth year of this meaningful work, we strive to continually learn from successes, mistakes and high winds.

## Read More About Special Events

Visit [grassrootsfundraising.org/archive](http://grassrootsfundraising.org/archive) for these and other articles:

*Not Your Cookie-Cutter Gala: Integrating Culture & Community into Special Events* by Rona Fernandez

*The Nuts & Bolts of Organizing Great Special Events* by Laurie Earp

*A Step-by-Step Guide to Organizing a Fundraising Dinner* by Mimi Ho

*Inspiring Stories in Challenging Times: A Fabulous, Fun & Financially Successful Gala Dinner* by Elmer Roldan

*Gentlemen Concerned: A Fun Event Raising Serious Funds* by Gil Gerald



Mark Toney delivers his pitch at the 2012 Money for Our Movements Conference.

# Developing a Rap that Raises Money

By Mark Toney

**AS SOMEONE WHO HAS DONE** fundraising trainings for nearly three decades, I often wonder if what I teach remains relevant. Have the winds of time passed me by or do the tools that have served me for so long still have any legs? The only way I know how to tell for sure is to test it out in real life and count up the donations.

I was very lucky that my sons, sax-player Isaiah and trumpet-player Benjamin, were members of the Skyline Jazz Band, one of the hidden jewels of the Oakland Public Schools. From 2002 to 2008, I worked with a small group of jazz band parents to raise money for the annual Reno Jazz Festival bus trip. I went to Reno on my own dime probably five times to see them play,

and they represented the most racially diverse jazz band in the competition with the most young women to boot. The year they finally took first place in their division, after having taking second a couple of years running, was the year that 50 percent of the band members (including featured soloists) were young women and two-thirds students of color.

The \$2,000 that was usually raised \$10 at a time from selling tickets to the annual Skyline Jazz Band benefit at Yoshi's Jazz Club was simply not enough to send all 20 band members to Reno without asking each family to cough up an additional \$200 each. A real hardship for many of the families struggling to make ends meet, especially when there were two students

from the same family in the band.

My contribution was to volunteer to do a fundraising pitch at the Yoshi's benefit during breaks in the jazz band concert. Happy to say that from a crowd of 200 Oakland public schools parents and teachers, the pitch raised from \$4,000–\$6,000 over and above the ticket sales, providing enough funds not only for the entire band to ride the bus, stay at the hotel, and be fed meals, but to repair instruments and buy new sheet music for the following year.

I also recently gave a successful pitch—raising \$8,000—at GIFT's Money for Our Movements conference last August.

Some of the components that made the pitch successful were:

- **The timing.** The pitch came right after a lively debate. The majority of conference attendees were in the room and were feeling energized by the discussion.
- **The tone.** I brought a lot of energy to the stage and got people enthusiastic about GIFT's work and supporting that work.
- **A matching gift approach.** I asked people to match my gift and the other larger gifts. I identified a few people ahead of time to agree to make larger gifts, which in turn encouraged others to give.

Following my pitch, I facilitated a workshop for conference attendees called “Raps that Raise Money: Fundraising at Any Gathering,” a training based on what I've learned from preparing and delivering pitches, and doing the follow up. In this article, I'll share some tips from the workshop to assist you in planning your next event and fundraising pitch.

## Setting Your Fundraising Goals

In setting your goal, consider the following questions:

- Where does this event fit into your current development plan?
- What is your annual donor campaign fundraising goal?
- How much are you hoping to raise from the event?
- How many donations at what amount will help you to raise your fundraising goal?
- How much money did we raise from individual donors the year before?
- What strategies (end of year mailing, special events, online campaign, etc.) worked well? Identify which strategies you plan to implement and how much—whether it is \$5,000, \$25,000, or \$50,000—you intend to raise from each.

Based on your annual individual donor fundraising goal, set a specific goal for donor contributions at the event. Set a realis-

tic goal based on expected number of attendees and gift range goals. Aim for a specific percentage of your overall fundraising goal to come from the event.

## Preparing and Creating Your Fundraising Materials

### ■ Create a donor pyramid chart.

Place many smaller donations at the base with fewer larger donors at top. This will help you identify how many gifts you need at each level to reach your goal. See Figure 1 on the next page for what I used for the Skyline Jazz Band benefit concert.

### ■ Make a poster size pyramid donor chart.

Create boxes with room to write names of donors. This is a great visual to put up in the office to track gifts, donors, fundraising goals, and progress leading up to the event.

### ■ Create a donation form for donors to fill out.

 See Figure 2 on page 12 for an example that was used at the GIFT conference.

### ■ Consider donor perks/thank you gifts for a select number of donors.

This must be something exclusive, which cannot be sold or bought. Consider a piece of artwork members of the organization made, some type of organizational swag (like a coffee mug, T-shirt, magnet, or bag that promotes the organization and/or highlights a recent successful campaign), or a free training/skill share with another ally organization. If you have an online fundraising component, many of the online platforms like Indiegogo have this built into their campaigns.

### ■ Plan to collect contact information of every person who attends the event.

Contact information is more important than money. Make sure sign-in sheets have space for email and mailing addresses, phone numbers, as well as a box to check for people who want more information or would like to get more involved.

### ■ Send email or snail mail thank yous to all who attended and include fundraising results.

A handwritten thank you goes a long way. Make sure to set aside time after the event to send handwritten thank you cards to donors as well as everyone who made the possible (caterers, committee members, co-chairs, speakers, on site volunteers, and more). Schedule a time when key organiz-

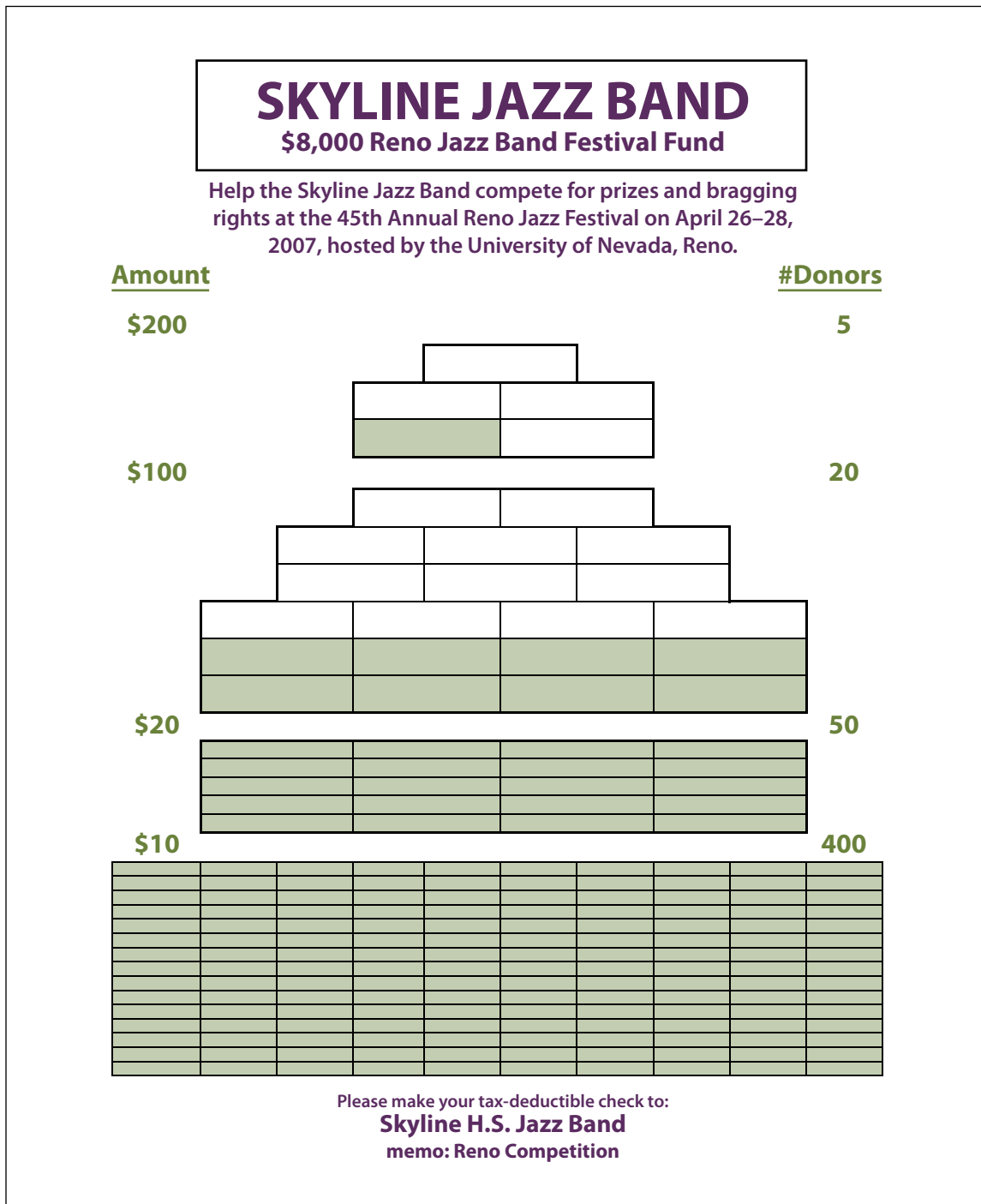
ers, staff and volunteers can help to write personalized notes. Also, provide people with another opportunity to give.

■ **Document the event.**

Make a communications plan in advance of the event to

share photos, videos, and other highlights from the event, including the fundraising success. This a great way to build buzz and direct traffic to your website and social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook. It may also inspire others to get involved or give a donation even after the event.

**FIGURE 1: SAMPLE FUNDRAISING PYRAMID**





**YES,** I support GIFT's vision of stronger fundraising for social justice!

Enclosed is my tax-deductible donation to bring GIFT's tools to more groups.

I want to be a monthly sustainer:  
 \$50/month♥  \$25/month♥  \$20/month♥  \$15/month\*  \$10/month\*  Other \_\_\_\_\_

A one-time donation is better for me right now:  
 \$500♥  \$250♥  \$100\*  \$35  Other \_\_\_\_\_

I'm paying by:  check (payable to "GIFT")  Visa  Mastercard  Discover  AmEx

Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Expires \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Name on Card \_\_\_\_\_ Card security code \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Please do not share my contact information with GIFT's allies.

\* To thank you for strengthening social justice groups, all donors who commit to \$10/month or a \$150 one time donation (or more) can receive a free copy of our 3 most popular articles (they're a surprise!)

♥ If you commit to \$20/month or a \$250 one time donation (or more), you receive the gifts above plus a free one-year subscription to the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*.

Yes, please send me my free gifts as a thank you for my commitment of \$10/month or more.

Yes, please also send me my free 1-year subscription to the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* for my commitment of \$20/month or more.

**FIGURE 2: SAMPLE DONATION FORM**

Consider offering a gift to your donors that connects back to your programs.

**Key Components of a Successful Rap**

**Welcome**

- Introduce yourself
- Thank people for coming
- Remind them of purpose of event

**Lead with key messages**

- Appeal to values: social justice, racial and economic justice, vision for future.

**Follow with specific impact**

- Highlight key victories or accomplishments.

**Make the ask of specific amount (\$100 or more)**

- Remind them of the worthiness of the cause.

- Remind them of their value as supporters.

- Make the first gift yourself.

- Tell them you need at least 10 other people to match your gift.

- Invite people to make donations both higher and lower.

**Repeat the ask if possible**

- Read off the names of people who have given checks.

- Give people an update of amount raised, and remaining to hit goal.

**This should all take about 10 to 15 minutes at most**

- 5 minutes for initial ask.

- 5 minutes to massage a response.

- 5 minutes to read names and ask again.

## Preparing for the Rap

### What is amount of initial ask (at least \$100)?

Identify the range of what you will ask for and how many gifts at each amount you are trying to raise as part of the overall fundraising goal. Refer to your handy donor pyramid chart you made when figuring out what your range and goals for the pitch will be. Your initial ask amount can start in the middle range, then offer both higher and lower amounts. Or you can start at the highest ask amount (especially if you have a matching gift donor already established), then work your way down in ask amounts.

Cross check how much money was raised in advance of the event (from ticket sales, sponsorships, fundraising teams, etc.) and share that amount with the audience. Be up front about

member, volunteer, or organizational ally who you want to feature? Consider finding someone who is a strong, charismatic speaker who will be able to handle silence in people's response while keeping the energy up in the room.

## Delivering the Rap

### Timing is everything!

Make sure to keep the overall program short. If people are tired and have been sitting and listening to a lot of speakers or watching a set of performances, they may be less likely or motivated to give. Find a moment in the middle of the program when energy is up and people are feeling inspired to make the ask.

## SPEAK FROM YOUR HEART, AND SHARE WHY THE WORK MATTERS TO YOU PERSONALLY AND POLITICALLY.

how much you need to raise from the pitch and how many people you need to give at each amount.

### Who will you recruit to donate early?

Identify at least three to five people (if possible) in the audience who have already committed to giving at one of your higher amounts or as monthly sustainers depending on what your fundraising goals are.

### What key messages and accomplishments do you want to highlight?

Use this opportunity to highlight the work and successes of the last year. This is a great time to share the launch of a new program or something else that people's money will be helping to support. Make it as concrete as possible.

Most of all, speak from your heart, and share why the work matters to you personally and politically. It doesn't have to be a sob story, but sharing emotion and conviction can definitely make the pitch more effective. Also, don't guilt people into giving. It won't feel good to you or to them.

### Who is best positioned to deliver the rap at the event?

Are there one or two people who are strategically positioned to make the ask? Who is a compelling speaker that the audience will respond to best? Is there a new member, staff person, board

## Collecting checks from the audience

Place staff, board members, organizational leaders, and volunteers in the audience with baskets to collect remit slips and checks. Make sure to have enough collectors in each section of audience so it is easy to move around the room and collect donations as people make pledges. Also, consider what room configuration will make it easiest for donors to give and collectors to move around the room.

I have learned and honed these skills over the years, building greater confidence with time. Hopefully, these tips and tools will help you craft a successful fundraising pitch at your next big event.

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Mark Toney is an experienced social justice fundraising and organizational leader. He has served as executive director of The Utility Reform Network, Center for Third World Organizing, and Direct Action for Rights & Equality.



Guests enjoy multiple spaces for mingling and dining at the event, including a spacious patio.

# Six Tips for Creating a Fun, High-Impact Special Event

By Aspen Dominguez

**NOT LONG AGO**, I went to one of the most flawlessly executed social justice galas I have ever attended. The mastery of the event organizers shone in every aspect: the decorations, the food, the auction, and a carefully prepared program with a celebrity cameo.

As a fundraiser myself, I marveled at the accomplishment and took notes, ready to steal any good ideas that might boost my organization's upcoming 15th Anniversary event, a *Quinceañera* gala. But three hours in, I felt more saturated, restless, and anxious to be freed from the confines of my table than inspired by the group's amazing work.

If you have attended your fair share of special events, I bet you can relate. I left determined to help POWER (a multi-racial, multi-generational membership organization that empowers working class families and youth to fight for racial, economic and ecological justice) create a gala that prioritized the community building, fun aspects of events—mingling, eating, drinking and dancing—without sacrificing impact.

POWER throws a bowl-a-thon fundraiser every year, so we have a reputation for entertaining, casual, multi-generational events. We wanted our *Quinceañera* gala to keep that spirit while having an upgraded, fancy vibe and more powerful content.

POWER held our Fighting Fifteen / *Quinceañera Luchadora* gala this past September with nearly 300 guests, and the event brought in over \$45,000—more than any of our past events. Equally rewarding to the money we raised were the rave reviews from allies, donors and members who celebrated with us.

While the event was hardly perfect (i.e. sound and stage lighting problems), our guests felt inspired to donate generously—and they had a blast. If you are looking for an escape from the traditional epic gala, hopefully the following ideas will help.

## Top Six Lessons Learned from POWER's *Quinceañera*:

1. Keep the program brief, with as few elements as possible.



POWER streamlined our program by paring it down to four main elements:

- We sparked the audience's energy with two short, high-energy dance performances at the start of the program and after the ask.
- We shared our most important victories and values through a four-minute film and through a group of POWER members presenting a succinct update about our current campaign.
- We injected the ask into the middle of the program, with a substantial pause to collect donations.
- We chose one well-known keynote speaker to close the program. The entire program lasted less than an hour.

## 2. Consider a standing reception followed by a program in a separate area.

A brief program gives you freedom to be creative with the rest of your event. A standing reception can be more fun and engaging for guests, and it will probably cost less since you can provide complimentary drinks and satisfying appetizers rather than a full catered meal. Moving guests to a different room or space away from food and drink stations helps everyone transition from loud, mingling mode to attentive audience mode. Get them seated as well or else you may end up repeatedly shushing a very distracted crowd as they continue to visit the bar and chat with friends during the program.

## 3. Food and drink first! Then more drinks...

Usually at gala events, I'm starving by the time our table is allowed to pass through the buffet line. Waiting for all your guests to get food can also stall the start of the program. POWER opted to fill guests' bellies and glasses as soon as they arrived. We checked them in and immediately pointed them in the direction of three food stations and the bar, set in different places to help reduce crowding. These stations shut down as soon as we told guests to move to the program area and reopened (with desserts) once the program concluded.

## 4. Offer different activities or spaces at the event so guests can move around.

At our *Quinceañera*, guests could get fresh air and grab tacos on the spacious patio or mingle inside where bartenders served up drinks across from the DJ table. Around the corner, guests happily waited their turn

for an authentic (donated) photo booth or browsed through the auction table goods. We connected guests to POWER's vision and impact through framed photos of our members and displays of member quotes and information about POWER's work hanging throughout the venue. Our members performed a choreographed dance to kick off the post-program dance in the reception room. This approach encouraged guests to interact, generating an ambience of community and connection.

## 5. Maximize your host committee.

POWER gathered a dedicated group of host committee members for our *Quinceañera* who recruited new potential donors, sponsors, and valuable silent auction items. But they also played an important role in making sure the event flowed smoothly. Host committee members greeted guests and helped them navigate the venue's multiple spaces, encouraging them to check out the photo booth and auction. They made sure that new people got a chance to connect with POWER staff and members. When the MC announced that the program was about to begin, host committee members helped lead guests into the program room, herding stray friends towards the action.

## 6. Weigh the costs/benefits of a silent auction carefully.

POWER recruited a committed band of volunteers and interns to solicit items for our silent auction, and they rounded up about 30 items and services. They spent at least a hundred tedious hours hunting for community-minded businesses, writing letters and emails, and making follow-up calls. While guests enjoyed the auction and bid on most items, POWER raised only about \$3,000 from this labor-intensive part of the event. Following up with bidders was also a headache. For future events, I would either invest volunteer time on other goals or pursue a shorter list of items worth \$200 or more. I would focus on promotion of the auction online before the event and put our auction table in a more prominent location at the gala. ■

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Aspen Dominguez has led POWER's fundraising strategy for nearly eight years as the development and finance director. As a queer white woman, she feels constantly grateful for the opportunity to experiment and take risks while raising resources for an incredible, mass-membership organization fighting for racial and economic justice.



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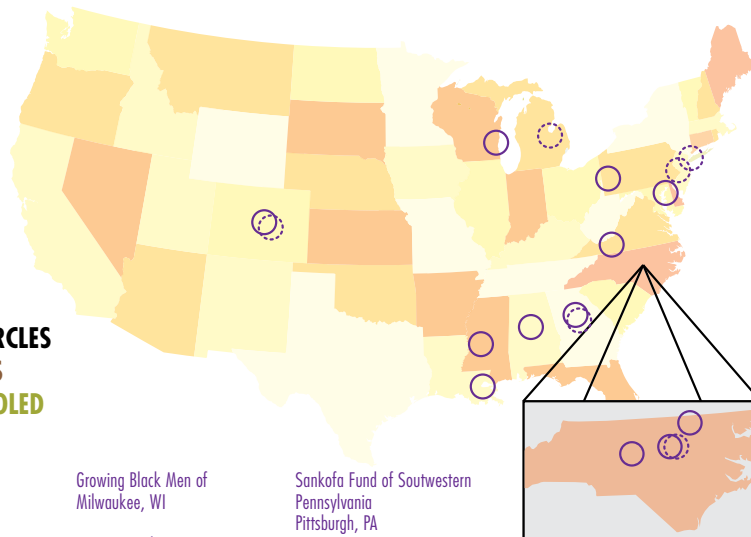
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