

Grassroots Fundraising Journal

VOLUME 34 NUMBER 5 • SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2015

A PUBLICATION OF



Making Your Events Shine

Developing Criteria
for Your Fundraising
Event

The How, Why (and
Why Not) of Working
With Celebrities

Overcoming
Eventphobia



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The photos on our cover were taken by Ariel Cordero during Center for Story-based Strategy's (CSS) Flock Together event. By building a strong team of event organizers and being clear about their event criteria and goals, CSS celebrated their work and publicly announced their executive leadership transition while raising more than \$16,000 from their community of supporters. Learn more in our feature article, "Let's Do A Fundraising Event! (Or Not): Crafting Fundraising Event Criteria for Your Organization."

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PUBLISHER EMERITA

Kim Klein

EDITOR

Jennifer Emiko Boyden

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Chris Martin

COPY EDITOR

Sonny Singh

COVER PHOTOS

Ariel Cordero

GIFJ EDITORIAL BOARD

Yee Won Chong, Will Cordery, Ryan Li Dalhstrom, Dolores Garay, Priscilla Hung, Megan Peterson, Randall Quan, Michael Robin, Stephanie Roth, John Won

For subscription inquiries, to request permission to reprint *Journal* articles, and for advertising information, please contact: jennifer@grassrootsfundraising.org

GIFT STAFF

Jennifer Emiko Boyden
Communications Director
Nan Jessup
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GIFT: 1904 Franklin Street, Suite 705
Oakland, CA 94612

info@grassrootsfundraising.org
grassrootsfundraising.org

PHONE: 888.458.8588 (TOLL-FREE)
510.452.4520 (SF BAY AREA)
FAX: 510.452.2122

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All That Glitters Is Not Gold...

As we gear up for the frenzied fall fundraising season, I hope you have had the opportunity to relax and renew during the summer months. I am grateful to have worked reduced hours over the summer, which allowed me to pace myself and spend more time with my family.

With my daughter starting middle school this fall, I've been reflecting on my own adolescence and what a difficult period of life that can be. The motto I chose for my high school yearbook entry senior year was, "All that glitters is not gold"—my underhanded jab at the "popular" crowd, who I saw as shiny and in the spotlight, but often lacking substance, depth and authenticity.

This issue of the *Journal* is dedicated to supporting you in planning successful events, which can at times glitter but not turn into "gold" for your organization. Rona Fernandez opens the issue with a useful piece on the importance of developing criteria before committing to your next event. She shares how the Center for Story-based Strategy used strong criteria to help achieve their combined goals of publicly announcing their executive leadership transition while also raising money to support their work.

Priscilla Hung follows with an article to help you make the most of working with celebrities (can you get more glittery than that?), including potential pitfalls to look out for. We wrap up the issue with some tips for overcoming "eventphobia" by Christa Orth—for those of us who tend towards being more event-adverse.

We hope these articles illuminate important issues to consider when planning your next event, and that the lessons learned and practical tips help you reach your goals. Many of you have been planning your upcoming events for months now, and you'll have your own lessons learned to add to your fundraising toolkit.

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PHOTO BY ARIEL CORDERO

Center for Story-based Strategy (CSS) Board Member Celia Alario delivers the pitch at CSS's successful fundraising event.

Let's Do a Fundraising Event! (Or Not): Crafting Fundraising Event Criteria for Your Organization

By Rona Fernandez

YOU'RE IN A MEETING WITH SEVERAL OTHER PEOPLE from your organization trying to brainstorm a grassroots fundraising activity to do as a team. Someone proposes calling your current donors to ask them to give larger gifts—an idea that goes over like a lead balloon, met with nervous squirms and shaking heads. Someone else suggests doing an online fundraising drive, using email and social media to raise money for your cause on a high visibility day. That idea gets a warmer reception, but still doesn't generate a ton of interest. But when somebody says, "Let's do an event!" and then talks excitedly about the splashy gala they recently attended, the energy in the room changes. People perk up, their eyebrows lift, and they start to smile and chat happily about their ideas for fundraising events.

Before you know it, half a dozen different event ideas are up on the wall. But when someone asks, "Who's going to take the lead on one of these?" everyone looks at each other, and the lead balloon feeling returns. Then, the person who came up with the idea of the big splashy gala that will probably cost several thousand dollars pipes up and says, "I'll do it!" Soon a committee is formed and a date is being discussed for an event that you're not even sure will be profitable. That lead balloon is starting to settle on your chest, and you get a sinking feeling that despite the excitement in the room, this event may not be the best thing for your organization.

Or maybe your group has been doing events to raise money for a long time because they're the only kind of fundraising activity your team is interested in or familiar with—but the events never

seem to turn a profit, despite the amount of work you all put into organizing them. Now your team is getting frustrated and wants to give up this whole grassroots fundraising thing altogether. And who could blame them?

These are common situations that I see in my fundraising consulting work with social justice nonprofits. Learning how to use events judiciously is an important skill to develop if you want your organization to have a strong fundraising program, but the key word here is judicious—meaning “having, showing or done with good judgment or sense.” Unfortunately, when it comes to events and fundraising, common sense and good judgment sometimes get left behind in the excitement of putting on a fabulous party for a hundred of our best friends. Because who doesn’t love a party? Yet, experienced fundraisers know that events can easily be money-losers instead of moneymakers.

So how can you channel and not squash the excitement that board, staff and volunteers often feel about events—because let’s be honest, their excitement about anything fundraising-related is something to be celebrated—while still making sure that you actually raise (rather than lose) money? Three key ways that you can do this are to:

- 1) train your team on fundraising concepts and practices;
- 2) expose them to other types of fundraising activities besides events; and
- 3) create criteria for fundraising events for your organization to ensure that events are done in a way that makes sense (and money).

Plenty of great articles in the *Journal* have already addressed the first two steps. This article will focus on the third tool: creating a set of criteria for fundraising events.

Why Your Group Should Have Event Criteria

Organization-wide criteria for fundraising events can help focus your team on the primary goal of these events—making money—without making a response like, “No, we can’t do a golf tournament!” feel like a personal insult to the person who proposed it. Criteria can be especially useful when working with volunteers, board members, or anyone who hasn’t done a lot of fundraising. They are an important tool early on in the process of building your team’s fundraising skills. Without them, you run the risk of learning the hard way how much of a time- and money-drain special events can be on your team and your organization.

“The excitement of an event can be like a tsunami, it becomes unstoppable,” says fundraising consultant Holly Fincke, who works mostly with social justice nonprofits. “You just have to be prepared for the tsunami. You get ready the best you can.”

One way to avoid the dangers of this tsunami- or runaway-

train-like event excitement is to be proactive, by engaging your team in creating criteria for these events during a “neutral” time—as in, not when they are caught up in the excitement, but at a time when they can be more reflective and thoughtful. This can happen during an evaluation of a fundraising event, during annual planning, or at a fundraising training for your team.

“When you talk about grassroots fundraising with groups, introduce on the front end the criteria and the concept that events don’t always make money for organizations,” says Fincke. “Then you’re not squashing someone’s idea once they raise it, because 90 percent of their ideas will be events. Say something like ‘One thing many of us in this room are good at is putting on events, but the science of fundraising says this, so let’s look at these criteria.’”

Well-meaning nonprofit board, staff, members and volunteers usually turn to events as a go-to fundraising idea because they might not know of any other way to fundraise—or at least, they don’t think they do. That’s why having a big-picture-thinking team member, staffer or other leader in your group can help educate everyone about the wide variety of fundraising activities—of which events are just one—available to them. Criteria can be a great way to institutionalize this educational process because repeating the same information over and over—instead of just at a one-time training, for example—can help your team truly understand and embody good fundraising practices.

So what should your criteria look like? Here is a list of criteria categories that you can use to create your own, which should be more specific to your organization’s needs. They can be framed as questions (not requirements) that your team should answer as they brainstorm events and should be taken into account whenever you are planning a fundraising event. Essentially, these building blocks of a good event should shape your criteria. Most successful fundraising events have:

1. Clear goals, including at least one fundraising goal.

The event can have other goals that are not fundraising-related—such as helping to raise the visibility of a particular program at your organization. But for a fundraising event to be successful, it must raise a certain amount of money over and above costs.

2. A clear strategy for raising funds. This is where many organizations lose their way. Any fundraising event that does not have a clear strategy and system for how money will be raised will likely fail, not to mention frustrate both your team and the donors who want to support your group. So making sure that this strategy matches up with the fundraising goal and your organization’s capacity is crucial.

3. Alignment with your nonprofit’s mission and values.

The most memorable events are the ones that really help

your organization shine—they highlight instead of try to hide your organizational culture, celebrate your work, and reflect who you really are.

4. People power. A successful fundraising event plan must include clear roles about who is doing what—planning, getting food and drink, securing in-kind donations, logistics, etc. Does your organization have enough people to pull off the event that is being proposed? Would a different kind of event that doesn't require as much people power but could still meet your fundraising goal work, even if it's not as flashy or exciting? Most nonprofits don't have staff people waiting around for more work to do, so this question is especially important. You want your team to answer the eternal question: "So, who's going to do all this stuff?"

Why Are We Doing this Event? (Or Why Having a Fundraising Goal Is Important)

One of the most common mistakes I see organizations make when it comes to events is not having a concrete fundraising goal. Often, having a fun event seems to take precedence over having an event that actually raises money. So it's important for your team to have clear fundraising goals—which can include the dollar amount you want to raise, as well as questions like how many new donors you want to bring in or whether you want to use it as more of a thank you event for current donors. Having a clear money-raising goal also can help reality-check whether an event is a good idea or not.

"I always start with the money conversation," says Jessica de Jesus, a Bay Area-based event planner and former development director for social justice nonprofits. "I find that's where people get their reality check. I have had clients who have wanted to do an event for awhile—but it's more of a feeling rather than being grounded in real numbers or a real budget. So we'll build a budget together—what kind of event do you want? How many people? Sit down dinner, beer and wine, open bar?"

It is a good practice to create budgets for any kind of fundraising event that you do. Make sure that your budget is realistic as far as what is going to be spent and what is going to be raised. You could also include in your criteria that all fundraising events must break even, or earn at least 25 percent profit, for example. This will help you plan your fundraising events long before they are even a glimmer in a board member's eye, and can keep your team focused on what is usually the primary goal of such events: to raise money for your organization.

Of course, your events can and should have goals that are about more than raising money. You may want to raise visibility about your cause or issue, build a sense of community amongst your members, or get a specific message out to your supporters. For

example, one of my consulting clients, the Center for Story-based Strategy (CSS)—a national movement-building organization working to harness the power of story for social change—recently held a fundraising event that was also a public announcement of their executive leadership transition. So the program focused on celebrating the founding executive director's work and legacy as well as highlighting the incoming director's excitement and vision for CSS's future. But another key goal was to raise money for the organization.

"We wanted to increase our individual donations, create more connections with our supporters, and make the leadership transition announcement," says Megan Swoboda, CSS's special projects associate, who was the main organizer for the event. "We wanted to...leave a lasting impression about what this new chapter of CSS is going to look like...to inspire people to want to come back to the next [event] or to give later."

CSS also wanted the event to be profitable. Through the work of staff, board, and the event host committee (see below for more details), they raised more than \$16,000 the night of the event, while only spending about \$2,000.

But what if you don't know how much you might be able to raise? Before you decide to do a big event—such as an anniversary gala dinner—it's a good idea to test the waters and see if the sponsorship prospects you have will really be able to pitch in.

"For sponsorships, you can run up the flag pole of a couple sponsors and see if they are enthusiastic," says Fincke. "If your money is coming from sponsorships, you should have relationships [with potential sponsors] where you can have that kind of discussion with them. With events tickets, do a quick assessment: Do you have a history of selling, for example, \$100 tickets if you want to sell tickets at that price?"

Fincke and de Jesus both recommend using a gift range chart to help create realistic fundraising goals based on donors' and sponsors' past giving and other information you have about them. A gift range chart (learn more and view a sample gift range chart at bit.ly/1gnqKGu) can really help your team reality-check whether their fundraising goal is realistic in a fairly scientific way.

A couple of examples of criteria for event goals are:

- *The event needs a concrete, numerical fundraising goal.*
- *Our fundraising events should make a profit of at least 20 percent over and above costs, including staff costs.*

How Are We Going to Reach Our Goals?

Having clear event goals is important, but having a clear plan for how to reach those goals is equally important. This is another area where groups can fall prey to magical thinking. Making sure that your team is setting itself up for success by creating a solid

fundraising strategy and plan is crucial.

For example, if your organization wants to raise \$10,000 through house parties, break this goal down into smaller tasks and numbers in the form of a rough work plan that more accurately outlines what it will really take to reach that goal. Having even a rough plan in place will help avoid frustration for your team later on.

Making sure that the fundraising strategy is realistic is also important. For example, I have worked with nonprofits who want to raise money by selling raffle tickets or food at an event without charging much for tickets or getting sponsorships. If raffle tickets are very inexpensive—for example, less than \$5 each—having a fundraising goal of say, \$500 (selling 100 tickets) is more in line with a raffle strategy than a goal of \$5,000 (selling 1,000 tickets). If the event venue only holds 100 people, there is no way the group will come even close to meeting a fundraising goal of \$5,000 by selling raffle tickets alone. The time the event team would have to spend finding raffle prizes would probably be better spent either selling higher priced tickets (\$25 or higher) or securing sponsorships for the event (anywhere from \$250 up depending on your potential sponsors and the size of your event). So make sure that your criteria include requiring events to have clear fundraising strategies that line up with fundraising goals.

Turnout goals also require a plan for getting people to your event. Do a quick evaluation of what has worked for your organization in the past: What works with your community when trying to get them to turn out to an action or meeting? Does email alone work, or do people respond better to phone calls? If the latter, then make sure that your outreach plan for your event includes making phone calls to invite people to attend. A plan that does not take into account your organization's unique needs and culture is more likely to fail.

Lastly, don't assume that doing "less" as far as fundraising events go means you will raise less money. Low-maintenance events like house parties, informal cocktail parties, or even "open house" type gatherings held at your offices can raise a fair amount of money with minimal cost. The Center for Story-based Strategy event, for example, was a fairly low-key after-work affair, with minimal seating to promote maximum mingling, a short 30-minute program, and a strong fundraising pitch by a board member at the end. That pitch, combined with several soft fundraising asks via Facebook and through email outreach by staff and the host committee, helped them not just reach but exceed their fundraising goal.

"You can raise more money doing less with the program than a lot of people tend to think," says Swoboda.

A couple of examples of criteria you could have for creating

a plan include:

- *The event must have a clear fundraising strategy to reach its fundraising goal.*
- *The event must have a clear and doable plan for meeting its goals.*

Does This Event Fit Who We Are?

Let's face it, most of our groups are not the American Red Cross or the Boys and Girls Club—we are much smaller, often have informal organizational cultures, and have unique values. So think about whether your criteria should include something about making sure events are welcoming to the people that you work with, or at least feel in line with your organization's mission and vision. Often, groups find themselves in a bind because they want their events to be welcoming to their members, but they also want to raise a lot of money.

"There's always that tension between wanting to raise money and making the event inclusive of their community, who can't often pay for the \$150 ticket to an event," says de Jesus.

If you find that this comes up within your organization, it may mean that your fundraising goals need to be revised, or that you need to take a closer look at your fundraising strategy to make sure you have prospects who can help you reach your goals. But an event does not have to be exclusive to wealthy people in order to be a successful fundraiser. It's important for an event to reflect your organizational culture and who you are, because that is what will make donors and sponsors more likely to support you.

For example, when I was the development director at Californians for Justice (CFJ), we had a big, year-long 10th anniversary campaign, which included events in all four of the regions where we did organizing. But as a youth organizing group, we deliberately did not want to make these events feel too fancy or buttoned-up. After some collective brainstorming, our events ended up featuring a fashion show in which our youth members modeled T-shirts from all of our campaigns from the previous 10 years. The fashion show was a lot of fun for both our youth and adult supporters, it highlighted CFJ's history, and it was in line with our values and culture. Don't be afraid to be creative and encourage your team to think outside the box for what will work for your organization (you can also check out my article, "Not Your Cookie-Cutter Gala: Integrating Culture & Community Into Special Events" in the *Journal* archive).

Your team may also hear about a fundraising event offer by a local company—eat at such-and-such restaurant on a certain night and a portion of the proceeds will go to your group. I often discourage my clients from doing those types of fundraisers. They can be a lot more work than you think (see next section). And

even if you are able to get your supporters to attend those kinds of fundraisers, it may hurt your overall fundraising program because they might see their dinner out as their donation, in lieu of making a direct gift to your organization when you do an appeal.

“You should think about it in the self-determination and controlling your message frame,” says Fincke of these types of events. “When you are hooking onto someone else’s thing, unless you have a lot of donors, you are losing your shot with people. For example, if you’re selling tickets for a local theater, unless the play has a tight connection to your mission, it won’t help you, because you’re not conveying much about yourselves. Or you’re getting donors who are not replicable donors, and you won’t hear from those people again.”

However, these types of events can make sense when there is a close connection to your mission and programs. Fincke shares an example from her previous work as the development director at the California Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (CCIRR).

“When Anna Deveare Smith was doing her show *Twilight Los Angeles*, it was worthwhile for us because it hooked in with CCIRR’s mission—it was about the connections between Black, white and immigrant communities. We made money off of it, and it wasn’t that much work,” she says.

A couple of examples of criteria for having your events be mission-oriented include:

- *The event must match up with our organization’s values and culture.*
- *The event must be something we think our members, volunteers, staff and board members will get excited about attending.*

Who Is Going to Do the Work?

Your event criteria should encourage your team to think through who will be able to make the event happen. This is probably the most important part of organizing events. Events tend to take a lot of work, so some careful thinking before your team gets carried away with a fun idea can prevent you from having a bad event experience down the road. Write your criteria in a way that encourages your team to think of different ways to engage volunteers—not just staff—in getting work done for your event. Often, staff are seen as the fallback/Plan B if volunteers are not able to follow through. But this is not really fair to staff, who usually have more than enough work to do already.

Thinking back to the example of the local restaurant fundraiser above, this event may seem like an easy one to pull off, but in reality these types of events often don’t raise a lot of money even if you put a lot of work into them. Ask your team questions about

Sample Criteria for Fundraising Events

In order to ensure the best use of our time and resources, Good Folks for Justice has created these criteria for our fundraising events. All events should:

- have a clear and realistic numerical fundraising goal;
- make a profit of at least 20 percent over and above costs, including staff costs;
- provide space for deepening relationships and building community;
- align with our organization’s social justice values and culture;
- be accessible and relevant to the communities with whom we organize:
 - wheelchair accessible
 - accessible by public transit
 - Spanish-language translation and interpretation
 - family friendly and/or childcare available;
- be something we think our members, volunteers, staff and board members will get excited about attending;
- have a team of at least three people who are willing to plan and carry it out successfully; and
- have clearly defined roles for staff, board, members and volunteers that are in line with the size and scope of the event.

such events: “Who will publicize and turn people out to the fundraiser?” If it’s the restaurant—which it rarely is—then that’s great. But if your team has to do it, help them think through whether that is a great use of their time.

“Most people don’t track their time against actual event cost,” says de Jesus. “[For example,] a lot of organizations want to get things donated, and a lot of groups like to get [food] donations piecemeal. Coordinating that becomes a huge logistical nightmare.”

“Investigate the best way to manage your costs, and see time as part of your costs,” says Fincke, who was also the former development director at Mission Housing in San Francisco. “At Mission Housing, we hired an event planner, which was great because it allowed me to do the fundraising. I still had to coordinate sponsorship asks, but event coordinators know all the best deals, how to deal with plates, etc. It may seem like a lot of money to spend but do you really want staff ordering plates [for your event]?”

“When you do your assessment, don’t be shy about spending

money to save time,” says Fincke. Taking the example of house party fundraisers, she says, “You may want to hire a young person who can coordinate the hosts, and then you as the fundraising staff person can focus on other things, and not so much on the logistics. In that case, you’re actually doing some fundraising leadership development too.”

A couple of examples of criteria for ensuring adequate people power for your event include:

- *The event must have a team of at least three people who are willing to plan and carry it out successfully.*
- *We should have a clear list of roles for staff, board and volunteers/members that is in line with the size and work needed to put on a successful fundraising event.*

Creating Event Criteria for Your Organization

So how do you go about creating criteria for your event? The first thing to keep in mind is that this should be a collective process. Involve as many people in your organization as possible so that you have buy-in from the very beginning. This means that the process may not happen within a two-hour meeting. It’s more important that everyone feels comfortable with the criteria and agrees that they reflect your organization’s needs and values.

A good time to start talking about event criteria might be right after you’ve done a fundraising event for your organization, because the evaluation that you do will naturally set your team up for thinking about how they could improve for next time. As your team looks over the list of improvables, highlight those that could easily be addressed by having a set criteria for all fundraising events.

How long can you expect the process of creating these event guidelines to take? Event planner Jessica de Jesus usually starts her work with groups by going through a similar process to decide on the parameters and goals of an event.

“It takes about four weeks to have this conversation,” she says. “It depends on how many people are the decision-makers.” But she emphasizes that this conversation needs to happen before any hard, can’t-go-back decisions are made—such as putting a deposit down on a venue or recruiting a host committee.

In the end, the criteria you come up with should be very specific to your organization. There is no one-size-fits-all list, but to get your wheels turning in beginning to develop your own events criteria, see the sample on the previous page. And remember, if the event you are considering doesn’t meet your criteria—no matter how fun or flashy or cool it might sound—it’s probably not worth doing. ■

Rona Fernandez is a senior consultant with Klein & Roth Consulting and a frequent contributor to the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*.

Are You Ready to Make the Leap?



Two Steps to Your Planned Giving Program

Read Dan Shephard’s article in the July–August issue of the *Journal* to learn how we can help you create a gift planning program that will attract new donors, both outright and deferred.



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The How, Why (and Why Not) of Working With Celebrities

By Priscilla Hung

IN 2014, MILEY CYRUS, on her own, reached out to My Friend's Place, a center for homeless youth in Hollywood. She embraced their work and subsequently did several things to increase visibility for the cause and to raise much-needed funds for the organization, including reaching almost 14 million viewers by bringing one of the young people from the center to accept her award at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2014. Also in 2014, John Legend and Chrissy Teigen worked with Operation Help or Hush to pay for food trucks to feed hundreds of New Yorkers protesting the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, generating a lot of media attention. This is on top of John Legend's op-ed in *Billboard Magazine* in support of the protests and the ways that he and Common have used the platform provided by the movie *Selma* and their hit song "Glory." Celebrity attention elevated the awareness of the general public and boosted the mass appeal of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Celebrities are a special category of people. I'm not talking about wealthy donors or those who are famous within nonprofit and activist circles. I'm talking about TV and movie stars, musicians that have sold 20 million albums worldwide, people with over one million Twitter followers, and those who grace the pages of popular magazines and TMZ.com. Celebrity culture is a huge part of our lives, affecting our media and news, our opinions and

impressions, and how we spend our time and money.

It's no wonder that many nonprofits are looking to capitalize on big-name endorsements. Groups hope that the seal of approval from a celebrity will result in large-dollar donations, hundreds of new supporters, and positive media coverage. But how do you get a share of the limited attention? Add the fact that you may be a small nonprofit without national name recognition, possibly working on controversial issues in communities that are invisible to or negatively portrayed by mainstream media. You have your work cut out for you.

Rather than waiting around hoping for a celebrity to take up your cause, there are ways to proactively cultivate celebrity involvement. However, it isn't easy, and not all organizations are well-positioned to take on the special circumstances celebrities bring with them. Before you even pursue this as a fundraising strategy, here are some key questions to ask your organization:

- What do we plan to get out of it? How will it help us?
- Do we have the right contacts, staff capacity, and communications savvy to take advantage of what we hope the celebrity will bring?
- Given all the time and issues that come hand-in-hand with celebrity endorsements, is it worth it? Is there a better way to get what we're looking for?

Top Tips for Working With Celebrities

Carol Ramsey, retired vice president of philanthropic services for the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), offers some tips and caveats for engaging celebrities. What might appear to be a savvy shortcut to greater visibility and funding isn't always right for our organizations.

1. Make sure you can handle it. If you don't already have a robust donor program and communications strategy, it's hard to fully capitalize on a celebrity's involvement in your cause. Before you invest time and money in celebrities, first invest in strengthening your organization's fundraising and communications programs.

2. There is no magic list. Nonprofit leaders regularly ask EIF for a ready-made list of celebrities interested in working with nonprofits. It doesn't exist. You can, however, use the same tools EIF uses: IMDbPro, WhoRepresents.com, and looktothestars.org.

3. Think like a talent manager. It's the manager's job to find the most lucrative opportunities for their clients, so don't be surprised to find the celebrity you booked months in advance for your event backs out at the last minute. What interests the manager, second to money, is visibility. So, if you can guarantee hundreds of thousands of eyes on them, that could be appealing, especially for someone who is trying to get back into the limelight.

4. They could end up costing, rather than earning, you money. While the celebrity might agree to make an appearance at your event or record your PSA for free, you might end up paying for their transportation, their stylist, or other needs. And don't always expect them to make a gift of their own funds. Many give very little of their own money and instead appeal to their fans to support a select cause.

5. Be creative. Seek easy ways for celebrities to support your cause: They can show up at an event, accept an award, walk through the room of a VIP reception, or donate signed items to an auction. They can provide a photo and quote for use in a fundraising appeal. If you want them to support your work on social media, be sure to provide their staff with exact language to be used for tweets and posts. But, remember: Do your homework! Be sure to get all the approval and clearances required by contract or arrangement with the celebrity's publicist or management.

Most of all, keep your expectations low. When you finally do attract the interest of a celebrity, it can feel like doors will open magically. But even though many of them are compassionate and would like to do more, the reality is they are not in control of their time. So, try your best, be nice to their publicist, and don't neglect your other donors!

To help make sure your expectations are realistic, see the sidebar of top tips from a former executive of the Entertainment Industry Foundation.

Real-life Scenarios

I spoke with leaders from two organizations in Los Angeles, where celebrity culture is as ubiquitous as sunshine and palm trees. Both groups serve largely neglected low-income communities of color and have lessons to share on how they have been able to successfully engage celebrities. To maintain their anonymity, I will call one Keep Kids in School (KKS) and the other Healing Through Sports (HTS).

After 20 years of hosting its annual gala, KKS decided a few years ago that it needed to take it to the next level by creating a more dynamic and appealing event with greater money-making potential. While the annual gala always honored civic and business leaders, it decided to add a new category of honorees focused on entertainment industry professionals and celebrities. This decision was based on some important investments that KKS had already made—namely, building a 20-year reputation of doing good work and successfully recruiting board members from the broader entertainment industry.

Because HTS focuses on providing low-income children access to high-end sports, HTS already had a history of brushing shoulders with wealthy families they would meet in their programs. But HTS largely operated as a grassroots organization on a shoestring budget that relied on volunteer time and mostly in-kind donations. The wealthy families they knew enjoyed being able to provide in-kind equipment and other opportunities for the children, but had not given much in terms of direct dollars. When HTS made the decision to establish itself as a full-fledged nonprofit with full-time staffing, they also decided to deepen their engagement with celebrities. They have two celebrities who are actively involved in their annual gala and who also help broker partnerships.

Lesson #1: Know someone who knows someone.

KKS and HTS shared that their celebrity contacts were introduced to their respective organizations by someone who both knew the celebrity personally and had a direct connection to the organization—mainly current board members, committee members or donors. It is difficult to bridge more than two degrees of separation. “No celebrity comes on their own free will. They come because board

members put in the energy to leverage their existing personal connections,” commented KKS staff. These people who serve as valuable connectors often work in high-profile industries or companies, but are not celebrities themselves. Build relationships with people who travel in the circles you are interested in, and inspire them to take on a formal role in the organization. Engage them first, and then give them a reason to tell their famous friends.

Be aware that even if your board member is a personal friend of a desired celebrity, securing their participation takes time. If you’re seeking a celebrity for a specific event, KKS recommends starting early. Celebrity schedules fill up fast, and they (or their manager or publicist) may be too busy to respond in a timely way to last-minute requests for approval of promotional materials for an event, including providing pre-approved photographs. KKS begins reaching out to their honorees nine months before the event and tries to take care of all the details well in advance of the event.

Lesson #2: Give them a chance to see your work in action.

KKS and HTS benefit from running the kinds of programs that someone can visit and see the impact on the organization’s constituents firsthand. Both groups cited this as being critical to engaging celebrities. They don’t want to read reports or proposals about your work, passively browse websites, or visit an office building. Having the opportunity to see the program in action is much more compelling. While this is often easier for direct services programs, especially those involving children and young people, it doesn’t mean that policy and organizing groups can’t do this as well. Advocacy workshops, forums or listening sessions, neighborhood tours, and community-building activities can be used to help bring your work to life.

Even better, create a one-time volunteer project for the celebrity to engage directly with constituents—and don’t forget the photo op! This is a great way to motivate them to share something authentic and personal about your work over social media. Remember that the celebrity has to feel like they are getting something out of this partnership to make it worth their limited time, and having a great photo to share with their fans is one thing a nonprofit can provide. If you are securing the celebrity for an event, have them do the project in advance. This will make any speech much more heartfelt and may reduce the chance of last-minute no-shows.

Lesson #3: Different celebrities bring different things.

The first thing most fundraisers are interested in is the dollars. KKS and HTS shared that while the amount a celebrity can bring in greatly varies, they have found the low end to be \$20,000 a year and the high end \$100,000 and up. This includes direct gifts from the celebrity, event tickets or sponsorships bought by friends and colleagues of the celebrity, and donated auction items that raise additional dollars. HTS shared that one of their celebrity

supporters gives very little of his own money but the “dinner for eight at his house” auction item is a popular prize for which others are willing to shell out big bucks. KKS commented that raising less than \$10,000 via a celebrity at their gala would make them question whether the time and effort to secure and engage the celebrity was worth it.

Second to dollars is in-kind support. Each organization’s top celebrity supporters have brokered partnerships with businesses and other organizations for volunteers, facility upgrades, equipment donations, free entry to events, and free marketing such as exhibitor tables at events and placements in publications. Lastly, celebrities also bring greater visibility, especially through social media. KKS said they experienced a 15 percent jump in Facebook “likes” after a social media push by a celebrity, although the jury is still out on what kind of impact that will have on fundraising. When they secure a celebrity honoree for their annual gala, they ask the honoree to tweet (KKS provides sample language), to email an event invitation to their contacts (KKS provides a well-designed invitation they can simply forward), to stay at the event for at least one hour to network and mingle, and to make an acceptance speech at the event.

Lesson #4: Not everyone will stick around.

Both KKS and HTS have received support from multiple celebrities, and many of them have motivated their friends and fans to give as well. But only a small handful remain consistent supporters year after year. Just as fame is notoriously short-lived, so are people’s attention spans. “Some people just bounce around from cause to cause, maybe they have another friend they want to help out. We have to let them go—but it still feels disappointing,” shared HTS staff. Rather than stress yourself out trying to retain all these one-time supporters, focus on a smaller number who have indicated a possible deeper interest in your organization’s mission and work. Do your best to stay in touch with the celebrity—and their manager and publicist—by sharing updates, pictures and short videos.

One possible way to keep them involved is by inviting them to join your board of directors or an advisory board. Both KKS and HTS were able to recruit one of their top celebrity supporters to join their respective boards. Before offering them a seat, make sure that the celebrity feels truly committed to the organization’s mission and has valuable ideas for how they might contribute. Keep in mind that a celebrity board member will not likely participate in the same way as the rest of your board members, so make sure the board is okay with that. Both organizations reported that the celebrities on their boards have much less time to give and may be unavailable for long stretches of time. They also rarely come to meetings, and they often don’t provide the required level of stewardship and governance. But they make time to meet one-on-one to stay engaged, they participate in raising money, and they help open doors to other donors and partnerships.

Other Considerations

As community-based organizations working for social justice, some of us may have concerns that going the celebrity route does not align with our values. While plenty of organizations with integrity have worked with celebrities, it is not the right strategy for everyone—so trust your instincts. But make sure you have thought it through before counting out your organization. Below are some common reasons grassroots organizations give for not wanting to engage celebrities, followed by my response to each.

We don't work in a "feel good" community or on "feel good" issues. Every issue and community has a "feel good" side, and most people, celebrities or not, want to be associated with the positive. Highlighting the positivity in your work doesn't have to be about treating a serious issue flippantly or exploiting the community you serve. It's about honoring the humanity of the people you work with, engendering hope in all who are involved, and showing the impact of supporting your work.

We don't want to change what we do to accommodate the celebrity. Some celebrities want to maintain a low profile and interact with your organization like any other donor or supporter, which doesn't require you to make any changes. But if you are serious about engaging them more deeply, you will likely need to make accommodations, such as the different expectations for celebrity board members mentioned earlier. Given that they leverage their celebrity supporters at their annual galas, KKS and

HTS admitted that they have modified their events to better accommodate a wealthier and higher-profile clientele. This may include finding a nicer venue, offering a "red carpet" experience, and making sure that event spaces are equipped with Wi-Fi for easier social media activity. But neither of them expressed regret at investing time in creating a more high-end experience—and sometimes the added costs have been minimal.

We aren't sure we want to be aligned with them. Celebrities are people and, while they may be supportive of your cause, it doesn't mean that everything they say or do will be aligned with your organization. And when there is a misstep, the downside to high visibility becomes obvious. KKS shared that one of their early celebrity honorees brought in a lot of fundraising dollars, but didn't make for a great spokesperson when he showed up for his acceptance speech intoxicated. If you're concerned about total alignment between the celebrity and everything your organization stands for, this strategy might not be right for you. ■

Priscilla Hung is a program director at Community Partners in Los Angeles and former executive director of GIFT. Her closest brush with a celebrity was sitting near Elijah Wood at a restaurant.



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Sisterhood Mobilizing for AIDS/HIV Research and Treatment (SMART) celebrates HIV+ women at their first major donor event.

How to Overcome Eventphobia

By Christa Orth

WHEN I SUGGESTED HOLDING A SMALL CULTIVATION event for major donors, a reluctant executive director said, “I hate events, and I refuse to do them.” She recounted a real-life nightmare scenario where she was forced to single-handedly take on the tasks of producing a walk-a-thon at the last minute, including visiting police precincts the day before the event to procure permits. Though the event was ultimately successful, she had avoided all events for a decade.

I could not blame her. It is experiences like these that can understandably make us chronically eventphobic. Events are difficult and often all-consuming. When we are producing an event, time and money seemingly fly out the door. Blood, sweat and tears litter our desks. Tempers flare and blood pressures surge, particularly as the event day draws closer and closer. Even after our big annual gala is all said and done, it often takes weeks, sometimes months, to follow up and recover. We have to create our own support groups over pizza and beer. And then, in no time, you must do it all over again.

Like it or not, you cannot fully avoid doing fundraising events in grassroots nonprofit organizations. They are necessary for a variety of reasons. Events are crucial spaces where we create community, cultivate existing donors, and introduce our critical mission to new supporters. Furthermore, some donors are only event-responsive, so if you avoid events, you are missing out on the support of that significant population of givers.

First-time events are particularly scary because there is no precedent for success or failure. On top of that, you have probably heard your nonprofit friends caution you with all of their event horror stories. But first-time events are a major opportunity to introduce your community to your fabulous grassroots mission, and draw in supporters for years to come.

Ultimately, you must overcome your fears, whatever they may be. Here are some of the big fears I have heard over the years:

- “I am scared no one will come to the party.”
- “I am afraid the event will not make enough money.”
- “I am worried that the event will suck too much time away from the critical development work I need to do every day.”
- “I am afraid we will alienate our base if we only invite major donors who can give big money.”

Although these are all valid fears, they can be addressed through careful planning and strategy. As a fundraising consultant who has worked with dozens of grassroots organizations and produced at least 100 events, I am here to convince you that if you build it, they will come. The following three affirmations will help you overcome your eventphobia. Always remember:

1. Events are extraordinarily useful for more than just financial rewards.
2. Your event is an investment in the rest of your donor relations plan.
3. You can integrate donors of all sizes into your event.

MAJOR DONOR CULTIVATION EVENT TIMELINE

MONTH 1	MONTH 2	MONTH 3	AFTER THE EVENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify venue/host. • Confirm host involvement. • Finalize date with all parties. • Finalize event format and programming. • Identify and recruit a small host committee for the event (10 to 20). • Work with host committee to compile a mailing list of 200 to 300. • Identify caterer and/or in-kind food and beverage donors. • Identify photographer. • Determine A/V needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write and design event invitation (print and electronic). • Send event invitation (snail mail and email). • Begin taking RSVPs. • Begin distributing RSVP list to host committee. • Determine handouts needed, and write and design new case materials as necessary. • Walk through the space with caterer and host (rentals, coat rack, valet parking, building rules, etc.). • Create video or PowerPoint presentation, if needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Order host flowers to arrive on day of event. • Begin follow-up phone calls/emails to all or select invitees. • Work with host committee to ensure follow-up calls and emails happen. • Draft event follow-up solicitation letter. • Draft and distribute event agenda. • Draft and distribute speaker talking points. • Create and distribute annotated guest list. • Prepare name tags. • Prepare information packets for guests. • Create sign-in sheet for guests (don't include contact info). • Identify event greeters and other volunteers. • Assign board members to engage select guests in conversation about your organization and learn about their interests. • Draft a follow up e-blast to be sent out after the event. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft and mail thank you letters to event hosts and program participants. • Debrief with key participants and note improvements for next time. • Gather and record prospect information gained at the event. • Identify and implement strategies for continued donor outreach and stewardship.

To move you along the way, here are some tips and tools to help you create your very own successful—even first-time—fundraising event. Of course, not everything will go exactly as you have planned. But if you tackle tasks one by one, early on and consistently, and if you build an event planning team to assist you with the critical pieces, you will ultimately find yourself celebrating instead of cowering under your desk.

Below are guidelines for producing a major donor cultivation event, but they can be easily reimagined for a community grassroots fundraiser or a big blow-out anniversary gala (when you are ready for that kind of commitment).

Tips and Tools to Produce a Stellar First-Time Event

1. Give yourself enough time.

Do not delay! As soon as you have the inkling that you're going to throw a party, start planning. For a major donor cultivation

event, it takes at least three months between nailing down the date and venue to opening the doors to all your new friends and supporters. Good organization in the beginning will allow you to tackle any unexpected problems that may arise. See above for a sample monthly timeline that will get you well on your way.

2. Build a team of helpers.

The most successful events cannot be pulled off by one person alone. To ensure that you do not feel alone in your event-planning universe, put together a cadre of key individuals to take on small and large tasks. Your helpers must be people you trust and who have demonstrated follow through. Recruit your team from your pool of volunteers, staff, consultants, donors, and board members.

If you are the kind of person who has always done things yourself, please reconsider. Your team can give you unique ideas to make the event even more special (and then perform the tasks that make their ideas happen). When you feel stuck, or need to

make a snap decision, your team can weigh in and provide quick feedback so you can move on to the next task. If there is a disaster afoot, your team will back you up, take some of the pressure off, and help you solve any problems that may arise. A good team can respond to your requests and updates with enthusiasm, giving you energy to go on. Plus, once you assemble your team at the planning stage, you will have built-in helpers to perform those critical day-of-event tasks.

3. Find an exciting host and venue.

Recruiting a good host is essential to help kick off your event. A host is typically an individual or couple who already supports and/or donates to your organization. The host lends their name(s) to the event, welcomes people into their home, office, gallery, garden, etc., and will invite people to the event. Choose someone whose support you would like to cultivate or steward. Look through your supporter list and determine if there is someone with a large, interesting and/or beautiful space. Think about other groups you partner with in your work. Perhaps there is a new community center or a renovated theater that would donate space.

The host becomes a partner in your event planning. Keep in constant contact with them, providing updates and confirming details. Ask if they have materials you can use like coat racks, wine glasses, a sound system, or a piano. Also ask them to consider covering the cost of the food and beverage. Often this will be their gift for the event, but do not be afraid to ask them to give a financial contribution as well.

4. Recruit and inspire fundraising leadership.

If your event is truly going to raise funds for your mission, it is important that you pull together a host committee of 10 to 20 people. Host committee members typically lend their names for the invitation and commit to inviting 10 of their friends and colleagues that can give at a particular level at the event or in the future. Set a particular ask level (usually your major donor level, or more), and communicate to your host committee that an ask will be made the night of the event. The host committee members will also often give a gift at this level.

Attracting co-chairs to lend their names to the invitation can also be helpful. Co-chairs are typically people who have particularly recognizable names because of their leadership, philanthropy or activism in the community. Co-chairs can add that extra bit of excitement and buzz around your event. And it's a bonus if they can actually attend.

After you have recruited your fundraising leadership, your next task is to give them all the tools they need to send invitations. Offer to mail the invites on their behalf, or mail them the pieces to send themselves. Email them the e-blast or PDF invitation so they can easily forward it. Remind them to post on social media if it is a public event, and to call and even text their invitees. After all, people will respond more positively with a personal ask from their friends. A couple of weeks before the event, do a big invite push, and email the host committee, co-chairs and host the RSVP

list so they can see who has responded so far. Send your host committee, co-chairs and host frequent updates (about once a week) to keep them engaged.

5. Create a fundraising goal.

Often a major donor cultivation event is free to attend, with a direct fundraising ask as a part of the program, because that will draw the largest crowd of donors and potential supporters. As in all fundraising, a monetary goal should be central to your event planning. Think about a specific project or program that the funds will support. For example, your goal might be to raise \$10,000, which breaks down to 50 people responding at an average gift of \$200 each. If you expect 100 people to attend your event who can give at that capacity, the odds are good that you will meet your goal. Odds will be even greater if you can secure a matching gift (\$1,000 to \$5,000) to encourage people to give that night. Communicate the overall goal to the fundraising leadership so they know they are crucial to the monetary success of the event. Also, this will help them gauge who to invite.

If it is a ticketed event, price the tickets to help meet your goal. Announce the goal during the ask, so if guests are inspired by what they hear, they will be motivated to contribute toward your goal. As your organization grows, it is a good idea to raise the price of tickets, or to raise the fundraising goal, every couple of years.

6. Determine your audience.

Grassroots organizations are rooted in communities, and many of the constituents or members we serve do not have access to wealth. We want to be inclusive in all that we do, but when it comes to events, we must determine who we are trying to attract and how we can accommodate cross-class audiences. Is this a major donor event? Is this a community grassroots supporter event? Is it both? There are several ways to mitigate this dilemma, but you should always be mindful not to alienate one population or the other.

One way to accommodate a cross-class donor base is to plan for two or more events to thoroughly target all your event donors. For example, you can hold a major donor cultivation event in the spring for wealthier donors, followed by an annual community gathering in the fall. A second way to be inclusive is to price a ticketed event at tiered dollar levels so people can participate at both the high and low levels. However, you will never make everyone happy. There will always be someone who feels the tickets are too expensive and someone who thinks you should raise the price of the event—and that is okay.

In any case, you can be inclusive of your grassroots community and the constituents your organization serves by including their voices at the event itself. Ask a client or someone who has been personally impacted by your programs to share their story at your event. Offer them talking points and/or help them write their remarks. And encourage them to practice their remarks with you in person or over the phone to ensure they are as impactful as possible.

7. Plan the program.

For a two-hour event, the program will usually come right in the middle, after everyone has arrived and had a chance to chat and get a drink. The program builds the case for support, and heightens the urgency for fundraising. To do this effectively, the program must last no longer than 20 minutes, including the ask. Below is sample rundown of a fruitful program:

1. Host welcomes everyone
2. Executive director thanks the host, sponsors and donors, and gives a brief overview of the organization
3. Program participant or community member tells a moving personal story about the impact of the mission
4. Enthusiastic board member gives the fundraising pitch

Everyone's remarks should somehow reference the fundraising pitch. For instance, if the ask is to support a new initiative to advocate for LGBTQ youth, the executive director should reference the success of the program in their remarks, the program participant should share how the program helped them, and the board member should recruit donors to support the initiative in the ask. Distribute the evening's agenda to the program participants as soon as you can to give them plenty of time to practice their remarks and to ask any questions they may have.

8. Make a day of event plan.

A couple of days before your event, make a schedule to help you tick off the tasks for the day of your event. Your schedule should list all of the elements you need—from flower delivery to chilling the wine—from when the guests arrive to when they leave. Be sure to make a list of all the materials you need to bring with you.

Assign tasks to staff, board, volunteers and host committee members. You will need them to greet guests, tend the bar, refill the food, and, most important, collect donations after the fundraising ask is made. Pair board members and staff with prospects you would like to engage with, and ask them to make a point to introduce themselves and have a conversation. Ask them to email you notes from these talks after the event, which will give you valuable insight about how to follow up later.

9. Celebrate and follow-up.

Even before the event, draft a thank you email in which you can drop some photos and blast to everyone the day after the event, if possible. Send versions to those who did and didn't attend, including those you invited but may not have responded. In the email, include an ask that is generic enough so as not to offend those who did give that night. For example, "If you haven't already, please make a donation..."

Now you can pat yourself on the back for making connections with donor prospects, cultivating existing donors, and collecting donations along the way. Be sure to send special thank yous to the host and the host committee, sharing how you did on your fundraising goal, and praising them for a job well done. Debrief with key players to determine if there were things that went particularly

well and if there are ways to improve for next time. Reach out to donors with immediate thank yous. Gather as much information as you can about attendees who did not give (yet), and schedule calls and meetings as appropriate.

Finally, do something nice for yourself to celebrate making it through your event with flying colors! Your steady, persistent organization of this event will pay tremendous dividends for your grassroots mission into the future.

Case Study: Grassroots Nonprofit Thrives With First-time Event

SMART (Sisterhood Mobilizing for AIDS/HIV Research and Treatment) is a grassroots nonprofit in New York City that provides the latest treatment prevention, nutrition, and health education information in a supportive peer community with the goal of women living with or affected by HIV/AIDS living longer, healthier, more productive lives. Earlier this year, I worked with SMART as a consultant and convinced them to hold their first major donor cultivation event, though it was not an easy decision. Founding Director Susan Rodriguez was experiencing eventphobia—she is, in fact, the resistant executive director I described above. I interviewed Susan about the process of overcoming her fears, and how together, we pulled off a highly successful and engaging major donor event.

Tell me about fundraising events SMART had in the past.

We tried, informally, to invite foundation leaders and donors to our annual graduation when HIV+ women receive certificates of completion for a 24-week health and wellness session. It created a lot of good feelings in donors, but at the end of the day, we did not receive as many donations as we needed from individuals.

We planned a walk-a-thon 10 years ago that really turned me off to fundraising events. Since then, I stayed away from them because I felt they just took too much time to be worth it. I also feared I would be the only one doing the work. It was too stressful.

Besides my urging, what made you jump into your first major donor event?

I always knew we needed to be doing fundraising events to reach more individual supporters. A couple of years ago, our beloved founding advisory board member John Falkenberg passed away, and a friend of his who is also a donor to SMART approached us about holding an event in his honor. We came up with the idea of naming a fund after him, the John Fund, and then having a party to launch the fund. We decided we would target major donors by inviting current and lapsed supporters, and John's friends and family members.

As you know, doing an event was not my cup of tea. All of the pieces that have to come together are difficult to navigate, and I did not want anything to fall through the cracks. So we put together a group of people (donors, staff and consultants) to help

us get the word out and to help with the tasks. Our event team put together a host committee, and they turned around and invited even more prospects. Having others committed to planning and inviting others to the event inspired me to work harder and make it the best it could be.

My biggest concern going into this event was that I wanted it to be respectful and true to John's vision for the support of SMART. He was a great fundraiser himself, so I sort of channeled him. He would have wanted us to use his name to get as many people as possible donate to SMART, so that is what we set out to do.

How did it go, and what did you learn?

The party was a huge success, both financially and in building a new donor base for SMART. In the end, we came together in a way that John would have been very proud of. The event connected us with new people and enriched our relationships with our supporters. I am happy to report the donors who gave at the party six months ago have continued to give to SMART.

I learned that you have to set aside time to call or email to thank people who came to the party, or who gave as a result of being invited. Donors are the people who believe in your organization, and it is important to keep that personal connection with them. I also learned that an event is a great opportunity to showcase our health and wellness programs, give information,

and encourage people to keep in contact with us to continue the relationship.

Did you apply what you learned to other events?

Hands down, yes. We laid the groundwork for future events. Planning this event helped me get to know the people involved with my organization that like to do this work. So for our next party, the SMART Youth Prom, we put together an event coordination and promotion team. They acted as a host committee, inviting people and getting in-kind donations.

What are the lasting effects of the event?

First, we are planning another major donor cultivation event in the fall to support the John Fund. Second, I feel a sense of accomplishment. I am deeply passionate about helping SMART thrive in John's honor, and it made me feel on top of the world that the party was so successful. I have overcome my eventphobia. Now I know it is not as stressful when you have a team backing you up. I find myself actually wanting to do another event! ■

Christa Orth is a consultant with Wingo NYC, a fundraising and design studio committed to serving nonprofits of all sizes for social change. Follow her on Twitter at @christamaeorth.



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