

“Involvement Philanthropy” Is the Key to This Nonprofit’s Fundraising Success

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Gabrielle Kurlander is an actor, singer, and theater director who has studied all kinds of performance. She moved to New York City to be at the center of live theater in the United States. In 1990 she took a job at the All Stars Project, where she is now president and CEO. The mission of the organization is to “transform the lives of youth and poor communities using the developmental power of performance, in partnership with caring adults.”

During her 25 years with ASP, Kurlander has transformed the nonprofit from a grassroots all-volunteer effort into a powerhouse that tackles poverty through afterschool development. ASP is now headquartered in New York City at a 31,000 square foot, \$20 million performing center on fabled 42nd Street and has expanded to California’s Bay Area, Chicago, Dallas, Bridgeport, Connecticut and Newark, New Jersey.

Impressive, right? So how has Kurlander found the money to build an operation on this scale? Recently, she discussed her funding strategies with *Inside Philanthropy*.

“We raise all of our money privately; we don’t get any government money. We wanted to create a very direct connection between wealthy Americans and the poorest Americans among us,” Kurlander said. “Our money primarily, about 70 percent of it, comes from individual donations. Then about 25 to 30 percent, depending on the city, comes from foundations and corporate support. In a very grassroots way our donors introduce us to their corporations so we do have the backing of 180 companies and hundreds of corporate volunteers.”

The key to her approach is building bridges between beneficiaries and donors in what Kurlander describes as an involvement philanthropy model. “The personal connection is critical for fundraising success. I think there has been a lack of emphasis in the nonprofit field on people actually experiencing the impact of programs,” she said. “We wanted to create a philanthropy in which the giving of money itself was done in a different kind of way. Donors are not simply just writing a check. They get to know young people. They connect with them. They may lead a workshop where we bring a group of young people over to their offices. They host interns at their corporations for our Development School for Youth. Last year we placed 400 interns in corporate settings around the country. What we do is create this community in which everyone is in it together.” Business leaders routinely tell Kurlander that they feel as if “their lives are transformed because they are connected in a very personal way.”

This model has some similarities to how Habitat Humanity cultivates donors, building engagement through voluntary service, as I discussed in this space a while back. But it’s even more involved.

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Once donors give even a small amount, Kurlander invites them to meet her All Stars. “People give money because they see the difference the program makes. There are number of things that make the All Stars unique and one of them is that we intervene in the lives of young people who are growing up in very tough circumstances. [Donors] experience it firsthand and then they want to make an impact. They want to help transform more young people’s lives so we have tremendous longevity among our donors, a tremendously high pledge fulfillment rate. We have enormous amount of enthusiasm and great spirit around the project.”

Fundraising runs the gamut; it often begins on city sidewalks. “In different cities we set up tables in the street. People give you small donations in the street, literally a dollar to five dollars, but we have donors who have given us multimillion dollar gifts whom we met on a street corner when they gave us \$10.”

ASP also hosts galas. “We’ve a lot of donors and tons of fundraising events. Our biggest event of the year is at Lincoln Center. We’ll do a big gala fundraiser on April 18, 2016 with lots of performances. Then we have at least one event sometimes two in every city in which we are in across the country,” she said.

Finally, “We have a planned giving society called the Society for Racial Harmony. We’ve gotten some very generous including some seven-figure bequests from board members and supporters of the All Stars. I find that people who care deeply about their families and what they have done in their careers want to leave a legacy. I find a lot of people once they see the impact that all-stars has they really want to be very generous with a bequest.”

Not every nonprofit is engaged in work that allows it to connect with donors in an emotional, rewarding way that builds enthusiasm and loyalty. But many have more opportunities to do this than they realize. What’s more, quite apart from helping bring in money, an involvement philanthropy model can help foster awareness of a nonprofit’s issues among influential audiences and build broader support for social change.