Fundraising as Activism as a Means for Survival

The codirectors of Queerocracy, a grassroots social justice group, on the need for finding nontraditional support.

April 1, 2013 By Megan Kate Mulholland and Cassidy Gardner

Over the past few years, small nonprofits and grassroots organizations that are struggling to find enough funding to keep their doors open are increasingly coming across this or similarly discouraging messages from private foundations: “Due to the financial crisis we are no longer accepting new grantees.”

The reality is that traditional fundraising through private, grant-giving foundations just isn’t cutting it for some of the newer, smaller and more radical organizations around. Larger foundations that haven’t taken as big of a hit from the state of the economy tend to prioritize funding for larger organizations with mainstream agendas and/or deeper roots. Many smaller foundations that are willing to take on the “risk” of funding grantees that are still laying a groundwork, developing their trajectory and possibly carrying out their work through more radical means have slashed their grant-giving budgets.

A recent study published by The Foundation Center finds that small foundations (with less than $50 million in assets) have and will continue to struggle the most to recover from the economic crisis of 2008, having to spend less in grant-making to avoid depleting their assets.

Of course, a successful nonprofit fundraising model is one that includes a variety of tactics for generating income—from developing and cultivating private donors, to implementing membership dues, to holding special events. Meanwhile, it is often one or a few large grants (“large” being relative) that give new and small groups the ability to get the structures in place to diversify their fundraising model while also building out a staff and developing programs.

For groups like Queerocracy—a New York City–based queer social justice organization that facilitates its work through direct action, community engagement, education and art—the radical nature of our work and the complex, sometimes controversial issues we work on have made it very difficult for us to fit into the traditional fundraising model of grant-giving that is put forth by

most foundations. We are fortunate to have found some small, local foundations that are passionate about our work to combat HIV criminalization, but we are increasingly finding that paving a new path for fundraising is necessary in order to sustain our work.

As we sadly know, due to the sequestration, we are facing across-the-board cuts to spending for health care and social services for those who need it most. At a time when cuts to programs like the Ryan White CARE Act and the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) are looming—and knowing that cuts to these domestic programs will inevitably make their way down to the budgets for local and statewide HIV/AIDS programs and services—it is essential that small, community-based queer and AIDS service organizations find creative ways to fundraise to sustain the important work they are doing.

It is no secret that programs that serve our most vulnerable populations are often the first to go in the wake of cuts to local, state and nationwide budgets. This reality makes the work being done to find new funding streams for AIDS (like the "Robin Hood" tax) to confront HIV criminalization and practices like "Condoms as Evidence"—both of which fuel stigma and disproportionately put queer and trans people of color and HIV-positive people behind bars—particularly important right now. The growth and sustainability of these small, grassroots organizations is essential, and thus the need for new and creative means for fundraising is urgent.

Often unlike more traditional modes of fundraising, creative opportunities allow for much more than extra earnings. They can push the boundaries on the ways people consider community building, activism and organizing and open the doors for people to get involved in ways that include the things they already enjoy doing. A well thought out creative fundraising plan can achieve all of that.

An important step towards finding a unique fundraising model that works for your particular group or organization is to identify where conversations around the issue are occurring. Take Queerocracy for example. Our work heavily focuses on HIV stigma and discrimination within the queer community. For us, an obvious space for these conversations to occur was in nightlife. Nightlife spaces are places where queer folks often meet each other under sexual pretenses and they are the site of where decisions are made about going home together or not. These spaces can have direct impact on whether people feel comfortable disclosing their status and therefore we have pinpointed it as a crucial environment to engage folks in AIDS activism—and that activism can be done through fundraising.

Queerocracy seeks to achieve a successful creative activist fundraising model through our current Community Fundraising Challenge. The challenge participants consist of queer bars and parties throughout NYC to raise money for Queerocracy whilst engaging their communities in the issues that directly affect them in those spaces, in particular HIV/AIDS-related stigma. Additionally, they are competing to win the Building Community through Nightlife Award that will be presented at our first ever QROC Awards Benefit this summer. It is the attendees of the challenge fundraising events who will vote on which party and bar they thought was the best in terms of its efforts, creativity and community engagement.

Ultimately, Queerocracy is issuing this challenge to the queer nightlife community in an attempt to pave a new path for small organizations to work within their communities to fundraise in fun, sexy, nontraditional ways, not only to raise money, but also to raise HIV/AIDS awareness and rid stigma where its often needed most to do so. In order for small grassroots groups like Queerocracy to be successful in our fundraising, it is crucial to lift up and work together with the spaces that contribute to community building in alternative ways, showcasing the support system that can exist and in this case from the streets to the bar or club.

The Community Fundraising Challenge is happening from March 15 through May 31 and it is not too late to sign up.

Megan Kate Mulholland & Cassidy Gardner are codirectors of Queerocracy.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/queerocracy-challenge-23738-5590