

Fundraising for your center: An opportunity to build community

by Vicky Tsakoyias-Mendes

People say, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In orchestrating a fundraiser for my center, I realized it takes a village to run a successful fundraising event!

Throughout my teaching and directing career, I have enjoyed the planning and implementation of various fundraising events (e.g., t-shirt sales, flower pots, clay ornaments decorated by our children, and bake sales). These types of fundraising events were based on products that were fun, safe, and easy to make, market, and sell. The overhead was low, but so were the returns; the funds generated by these events were just enough to cover a few teachers’ training registration fees or to celebrate staff birthdays.

Recently, however, something unexpected happened that pushed my ‘creative



Vicky Tsakoyias-Mendes previously worked as a teacher and administrator at Bing Nursery School at Stanford University. She has been the Assistant Director of the Evening Program at

Chabot College Children’s Center for over seven years. Vicky holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Child Development and Business from educational institutions in Athens, Greece and in California. Her main research interests relate to directors’ roles as leaders and advocates. She is a PITC graduate, and has served as a Director Mentor and as a member of Chabot College’s Early Childhood adjunct faculty.

fundraising’ button. Last summer while I was out on maternity leave, the Children’s Center Evening Program came close to being shut down due to lack of funding. Following many discussions with the college’s president, parents and staff advocated and the evening program, which operates from 5:00 pm-10:00 pm remained open. Meanwhile, a father in our evening program, who is a dance choreographer, offered to dance in order to raise money for the center.

Planning a fundraiser

On Wednesday, March 25, 2009, the Chabot College Children’s Center, located in Hayward, California, hosted their first fundraising venture called “International Arts Performance Recital” at the Chabot College’s Theater. This event was a ‘cultural journey’ traveling virtually around the world in two hours through dance and music. The event’s logo was designed to include a world globe signifying our attempt to reach beyond human boundaries and geographical borders.

In planning the fundraiser, we followed these steps:

- well as cost, availability of the theater for the date we had in mind, and resources for marketing and recruiting performers.
- E-mails were sent to college staff and faculty, local churches, and dance studios recruiting volunteer performers for our multicultural dance event.
- Flyers were distributed to center parents, staff, Early Childhood Development faculty, and students recruiting volunteer performers and committee members (e.g., marketing, selling tickets, and backstage support).
- One of our teachers, who is an artist, designed the event’s logo and then worked with the college’s art designer to create a computer image that was used for event flyers, posters, tickets, VIP invitations, certificates, and thank-you notes.
- A father-mother team volunteered to emcee the event, the script was written, and a rehearsal took place.
- E-mails were sent to local colleges, center parents, and local business owners about placing a tax-deductible business advertisement of their product or service in our event program.
- The college’s art department created the event program including advertisements.
- Arranged a meeting with the Chabot Theater manager and theater coordinator to discuss our fundraising idea, as

- The marketing committee conducted targeted outreach to local ECE agencies (e.g., Head Start, 4 C's, Every Child Counts, Bananas, Alameda County Planning Council, and local elementary schools) in advertising the event. In addition, the event was advertised through the college's electronic signboard, web site, local newspaper, and radio stations.
- The theater coordinator conducted a tour, reviewing the different acts, multiple stages, curtains, lights, sound, screen availability, balloon-drop equipment, availability of theater crew, VIP seating, and backstage environment.
- Performers kept in touch with one another through e-mails and phone calls, keeping everyone up-to-date on details regarding the rehearsal and event schedule.
- A meeting with the college's security staff clarified parking availability and required parking permits for all performers and volunteers.
- The dress rehearsal was critical to the event's success, including theater logistics.

Recruiting volunteer performers

When the dance choreographer and father first offered to dance to raise money for the center, I was thinking that I would also need to 'refresh' my Greek dancing steps and dust off my ballet shoes for a ballet solo. Instead, I reached out to our college community, our local church, children's center staff, and parents for performers. The response from volunteers was amazing; more than 75 individuals offered to help the center by performing for the two-hour fundraising event. Most of the volunteer performers were center parents and staff, college faculty, and the community — representing cultures as diverse as Greek, Latino, Hawaiian, English, Afghan, Indian, Korean, Chinese, Native American, Japanese, and American. In addition, one class of our day program preschoolers and teachers

performed a song on stage — for the first time — holding their own handmade decorated microphones.

Cultivating in-kind donations

While I was reading the performers' request forms (filled out with useful information including type of performance, duration, solo or group, costumes, lighting, etc.), I contacted the college's theater manager to ask about the cost and availability of the Big Theater which can accommodate up to 1,200 people. Following a long and productive discussion, the manager offered the use of the Theater and his crew for free for the Children's Center fundraising performance. Having the Big Theater, the theater crew, and the 75 volunteer performers free of charge, was initially, the biggest factor in our success. Wonderful attendance accounted for the rest.

Garnering broad-based involvement and support

"Can't dance? Join our volunteer committee teams." Many center staff, parents, and college faculty volunteered their time, energy, and expertise by marketing and selling tickets, being ushers, and helping backstage during the dress rehearsal and on the night of the event.

Various departments from the college offered their expertise free of charge:

- The college's graphic designer assisted in the creation of our logo, flyers, posters, tickets, programs, invitations for VIPs, thank-you notes, and certificates for the volunteer performers.
- Media Services assisted with the printing of all marketing materials.
- The college's media staff from the Art Department videotaped and photographed the event.
- A student interviewed us and wrote an article before and after the event in the college's newspaper, *The Spectator*.
- The college administration ran an

article on our event in the monthly "Board of Trustees Report & Hot-sheet."

- A member of the college's foundation assisted in the box office in selling tickets.
- Campus security provided us with complimentary parking permits for all volunteers.
- The theater's stage crew provided us with very useful information on theater technical support and resources.

As long as we could provide a clear vision of what, why, and when we needed their help, college faculty and staff were willing to collaborate with us and join as a team for this good cause.

Finding event sponsors

We recognized that many of those involved in this fundraising event might hold a second job selling a product or a service or know someone who owns a small business. An e-mail was sent to the college community, including center parents and staff promoting the opportunity to place a tax-deductible business advertisement in our event program. As a result of these efforts, our program was filled with many half- and full-page advertisements marketing our community and its resources. Realtors, a catering business, dentists, cosmetic sales representatives, restaurant owners, parents wishing "good luck," and college departments supported our center by purchasing an ad in the event program.

Extending the event

The event was a huge success! More than 500 people joined the audience and we surpassed our financial goal for the event. Planning an event that showcased diverse performers in a two-hour entertaining performance was a strategic marketing tool in and of itself. The event reached a wide audience coming from multi-cultural backgrounds, and each

performance group brought to the theater its own circle of friends and family!

Today, a “Wall of Fame” stands in the center’s lobby with the names of individuals who contributed to the success of this event, along with the article that appeared in the college newspaper. In addition, a documentation board displays quotes from the children on their favorite part of the performance, along with photographs of the event. A DVD of the event plays in the lobby, allowing everyone to revisit that magical evening, and the DVD has evolved into another item for fundraising. In addition, our local television channel airs the performance on a weekly basis, along with the center’s contact information, attracting the audience’s support and donations.

Using the fundraiser to build collegiality within an ECD program

Through this fundraising event, the relationship between the children’s center staff and ECD faculty was strengthened:

- The faculty advertised this event with their students.
- Many faculty members gave extra credit to their students for attending the performance and completing an assignment relative to their course.
- On the evening of the event, faculty members volunteered their time to sell and collect tickets and escort VIP attendees to their assigned seats.

Since the event, the center staff and ECD faculty have been brainstorming the possible use of funds towards the enhancement and beautification of the outdoor environment, a project that will directly benefit staff, children, lab students, and the ECD instructors.

Using a fundraiser to foster community partnerships

Besides raising funds for a worthwhile cause, this event helped to develop relationships between the Children’s Center and the rest of the campus. It also helped foster community collaboration. New partnerships with other departments at the college were developed and existing relationships were strengthened. This fundraiser allowed the Children’s Center to work for the first time as a part of a larger team. In addition, the fundraiser provided the opportunity for many volunteer performers and members of the audience to visit Chabot College for the first time, an excellent advertisement tool for increasing college students’ enrollment and acquainting the community with the college’s services and resources.

Building future fundraising events

The magical night ended with a balloon and serpentine drop from the ceiling, as the performers were taking their final bow.

While celebrating the success of this fundraising event is important, investing time in writing thank-you notes of appreciation is equally important. Heartfelt thank-you’s are a personal value of mine and a cultural responsibility. It is one way to cultivate partnerships, promote and keep the communication lines open for future events. Many certificates of appreciation and thank-you notes were given to our volunteers and donors for their support and contribution. Volunteer parents, staff, and ECD faculty had a chance to experience a baklava treat as a gesture of appreciation and as a sweet memory until our next Children’s Center fundraiser. When economic times are tough, receiving support from volunteers becomes even more valuable and meaningful.

Conclusion

In order to break the typical mold of annual fundraising ideas (e.g., t-shirts, flower pots, and cookie sales), it took an unexpected downturn in financial resources to pique the Center community’s passion and commitment to saving our evening program. Turning this situation into an opportunity for success depended in large part on the staff’s innovativeness and effort. I continue to enjoy walking our college campus and being stopped by people who ask, “When is your next fundraising dance recital?”