

# COMMONWEALTH INSIGHTS



A publication of the  
Massachusetts Nonprofit  
Network  
2017 Third Edition

## From the Experts: Advice to Inform Your Organization's Fundraising

Fundraising is a perennial need in the nonprofit sector. To grow and accomplish their missions, organizations are constantly on the lookout for resources. In an age when nonprofits are frequently asked to do more with less, and in a regional landscape where there is fierce competition for philanthropic and donor funds, Massachusetts nonprofits know the stakes are high.

This edition of Commonwealth Insights brings readers direct and actionable advice from four successful fundraising professionals. We hope that this will guide readers' efforts to both grow support for their organizations and increase their capacity to affect positive change.

### Mercy Bell

Director of Partnerships  
Beacon Academy



At 27, Mercy brings a millennial and entrepreneurial perspective to philanthropy. She is a leadership coach and development professional passionate about empowering young professionals.

*Q: There's been a lot of talk about millennial donors. Do you have any insights or tips*

*on how to engage them in a particular way?*

While millennials are growing their power in their numbers and income, what I have seen above all else is the growing importance of events. People are hungry for in-person experiences. Technology has actually created a level of disconnection, isolation, and even alienation that has led to in-person contact and community building being at the forefront

### Key Points:

- Consistently engaging donors and providing new, creative ways for them to be involved with the organization's work is becoming increasingly important.
- Donors are looking for more ways to make a difference and need to be shown the specific ways they can do so by donating to a nonprofit.
- Donors of all ages are looking for new and innovative ways to give outside traditional models of giving.

of what millennials value. My thesis is that what millennials actually want when they're engaging with an organization is a chance to be with other people.

Here at Beacon Academy, what we have seen be successful are events that by nature have some level of discomfort or newness. The traditional event that we often associate with fundraising is the cocktail party for people of the same social group. We're actually using the opposite strategy. We've created events where people who would never get together do so and engage in dialogues. People value it a lot

"We have an eclectic fundraising event called **Motown Night**—over 350 guests come together to eat Caribbean food, dance to Motown classics, and meet each other inside of this beautiful synagogue in the middle of Boston. We sold out in our first year. People often ask, 'How did you come up with that idea?' We knew there was a universality to food, music, and connection. Who says Caribbean food, a temple, and the golden era of Motown don't go together? Effective events require something new, bold, and different. When many communities and traditions come together, powerful events are created. We call them 'disruptive' in the best way possible!"

more because they can't get it anywhere else. We find that people are actually looking for the chance to get outside of their closest contacts and networks to have conversations different than the ones they're having.

*Q: Do you have any advice for fundraisers new to the field?*

We talk about burnout all the time, but especially in this political climate, with the amount of work that many of us are doing in this field, there's an incredible level of fatigue and anxiety. It's really hard to fundraise well and be a champion of your organization, and to live out our missions of helping people, when we don't even help ourselves. My greatest advice is to always take care of yourself. I'm just learning how to do it myself, but it's translating into a change in my performance as a fundraiser.

## Margaret Keller

Executive Director  
Community Access to the Arts



Serving as CATA's Executive Director since 2015, Margaret spearheads her organization's mission to provide more than 1,000 visual and performing arts workshops for over 600 people with disabilities throughout Berkshire County every year.

*Q: Have you noticed any trends and shifts in the philanthropic landscape, and do you have thoughts on what's to come?*

There's much more focus on how to connect with donors. I see much more attention paid to effective storytelling and how to use storytelling to connect to donors, as well as monthly giving and planned giving. Also, the way in which donors give is certainly changing. I think giving via mobile devices is really important for everyone to be acknowledging and looking at in their own fundraising efforts.

*Q: In your previous positions, you worked as a professional grant writer and secured a great deal of support from philanthropic foundations. What would you suggest to an organization looking for more foundation contacts and support?*

The initial research one does on foundations can

"More people are looking for ways to make a difference. Show them how they can change the world through your organization."

be a little deceptive. It can seem like there's a lot of money out there. I think you have to do a little deeper research and really make sure that your mission matches a foundation's priorities as you craft an approach to it. Even then, getting in the door can be hard. Reach out to program officers—they can be your best resources and are tremendously knowledgeable and helpful—and say something like, "I see that your foundation has a very strong interest in this problem or this issue. Would you be available for a short conversation where I can share how we're making a difference in addressing this problem?" If you can get a personal introduction through a board member or mutual colleague, that never hurts. Also, recognize that there is a different timeline involved with foundations and that this is not work that's going to result in an immediate payoff.

*Q: Have current events (i.e., things happening in the news that captures donors' attention) influenced your strategies, and have you experienced "donor fatigue"?*

It's impossible not to be concerned about that.



Community Access to the Arts offers performing arts workshops to adults with disabilities from across western Massachusetts.

There are some donors who are shifting their priorities and want to be sure that they're able to support those organizations that are already losing in the current climate. However, at the same time, because people are more alert and engaged right now, I think that many people are looking for more ways to make a difference, and I think that is what we need right now and what we need always. You still have to let your supporters know that you matter and that you have the power to make a difference. Show them how they can change the world through your organization. I really do think that donors are more engaged and more committed than ever.

## Kenny Weill

Principal  
K. Weill Consulting Group



Kenny has more than 15 years of experience as a consultant in the nonprofit sector, working with dozens of nonprofits in various fields, from large universities to small community-based organizations.

*Q: Have you noticed any trends and shifts in the philanthropic landscape, or*

*do you have thoughts on what's to come?*

One thing I'm seeing is that funders are expecting more from a nonprofit than they have in the past: what are the outcomes, and how do you evaluate and determine that you're actually going to achieve those outcomes? Individual donors ask, "What will be the impact of my gift?"

*Q: What are some mistakes or common pitfalls that you've seen clients make in fundraising?*

Often nonprofits don't understand the importance of building a case for support, so they approach potential supporters or potential donors with, "Let me just tell them what we do, and how can they not love us, right?" In reality, however, that's usually not sufficient. The competition for philanthropic dollars is more fierce than ever, so it's really important that nonprofits spend time building a compelling case for support of their organization. I think that's the crux of fundraising.

*Q: What advice would you give an organization*

*that's new to fundraising or looking for ways to improve?*

Focus, number one, on who's already inside your nonprofit's tent. If you have current donors, the most important thing you should do is keep them giving—that's the donor retention piece. Keep them happy by showing them the impact that they're having on your clients. The second most important group are those who have just left your tent—those donors who have recently stopped giving. They should be your next priority in terms of capturing the "low-hanging fruit." The next group nearest your tent is also super important. These are folks who are already emotionally invested or involved in your nonprofit but just haven't been asked for a gift—your volunteers, parents and other family members of your clients, anyone who has some sort of emotional connection to your organization. They are ripe for an ask and should be a high priority for cultivation.

## Jodi Wolin

Vice President of Institutional Advancement  
Boston Harbor Now



When Jodi joined Boston Harbor Now in 2016, she brought over 20 years of fundraising experience from positions at a number of Boston area nonprofits with diverse missions, including Boston Children's Hospital, Casa Myrna, and the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy.

*Q: In your work with many nonprofits, have you noticed any trends or fundamental shifts in the field of fundraising? What do you think about trends or shifts to come?*

I think fundraising is going from being more transactional to really focusing on the long term, the holistic view, and seeing fundraising as building long term partnerships and less as transactions. In terms of all sources, individuals, corporations, and foundations, I don't think the prevailing dynamic is "once a year, let's write a check" anymore. Now, we have to look at what specific engagement opportunities come with a donation. It's really less about just writing a check now and more about overall engagement of the donor.





Boston Harbor Now leads programs for youth on the Boston Harbor Islands.

*Q: What makes your fundraising work unique at Boston Harbor Now?*

There is a culture of philanthropy that pervades throughout the organization. Everybody sees it as a responsibility. Our staff are all tremendous fundraisers, including our program staff and our policy staff. For example, our Director of Programs and I go on a number of site visits together with prospective and current funders. She has been running programs on the islands for many years and has an in-depth knowledge of the issues. The funders really appreciate hearing from her directly on these visits.

*Q: Nonprofits are increasingly being told to diversify their revenue streams. Can you give an example of how you're thinking about this at Boston Harbor Now?*

The bulk of our revenue at Boston Harbor Now comes from philanthropy, but we are looking at a variety of ways to diversify our revenue stream, from weddings and private events on the islands to concessions. There are some retail opportunities in terms of selling branded Boston Harbor Now t-shirts, hats, and towels. Next summer, we are looking into creating a café at the Boston Harbor Islands Welcome

Center on the Rose Kennedy Greenway (Boston Harbor Now is the nonprofit partner of the National Park Service). We realize that while it's important for us to diversify revenue, it's also important to ensure that we keep the islands as a public amenity. It's a really interesting balance.

## SPECIAL THANKS

MNN sincerely thanks Mercy, Margaret, Kenny, and Jodi for sharing their time and insights in this edition of Commonwealth Insights.

As an advocate for the entire Massachusetts nonprofit sector, MNN knows that the collective wisdom contained in the sector is one of the state's most powerful resources. MNN hopes that the wisdom of these four professionals will help bolster fundraising efforts for all types of nonprofits.

### About the Massachusetts Nonprofit Network

MNN is the only statewide organization that brings together nonprofits, funders, business leaders, and elected officials to strengthen nonprofits and raise the sector's voice on critical issues. The network has more than 700 nonprofit member organizations and more than 100 for-profit affiliate partners. To join, visit [massnonprofitnet.org/join](http://massnonprofitnet.org/join).

This publication series is made possible by support from the Barr Foundation.



89 South Street,  
Suite 603  
Boston, MA 02111  
617.330.1188