NONPROFITS: DONATIONS

Rage Giving: The RAICES Example

01.31.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD

In *Rage Giving: What's the Formula For Success?*, we described an example of this phenomenon following the tumultuous 2016 presidential election that resulted in windfalls to certain nonprofit organizations. "Americans turned in droves to well-known groups including the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Environmental Defense Fund."

We asked: "So what happens when the skies open up and rain down money? What's the formula for success for receiving and putting to good use these rage donations?"

In that post we selected the American Civil Liberties Union: "Now, eighteen months in, it appears that the [ACLU] has set a good example that other organizations may want to learn from and follow."

Some of the keys to the success of the ACLU in scaling up, suddenly and dramatically, include: a 100-year-tradition of making strategic adaptations to changing issues and conditions, and planning wisely even for low-probability contingencies that – if they happen – will have a major impact on the organization.

Refugee Agency, RAICES

Money falling out of the sky does not always come free of charge; there are predictable pitfalls and complications.

If an organization can't scale up quickly and smartly to deal with the emergency event as well as the sudden flow of resources, there will be bad press and criticism which will not only slow down or stop the rage donations but also create negative publicity from which the organization may never

recover.

In the post-2016 election period, there have been many examples of the fortunes of nonprofits changing dramatically – either better or for the worse.

Recently, "a formerly obscure Texas legal charity struck the jackpot. Millions of Americans, horrified by families being torn apart at the border, started sharing and donating to a campaign to raise money for RAICES, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services in Texas. The main Facebook fundraiser ended up bringing in almost $21 million" – although the original stated goal was just $1500 to help out a single family.

So far – and it's still early on – the RAICES story is an example of an organization that has adapted well to its new-found fame and success. This organization did not suddenly spring up out of nowhere, though, when the family separation/border crisis erupted. For the past 30 years or so, RAICES was the "leading expert" on "reuniting families." The head of communications, Jennifer Falcon, explains: It's just something that nobody really talked about, but it's actually very common that families get separated and get lost and shuffled around the immigration system." The system has been broken for a while; "the tension really start[ed] about four years ago" and "things really got crazy" with the recent zero-tolerance policy was implemented.

RAICES has been "ramping up a lot over the past four or five years" to meet this need, but funding had been problematic. Before the windfall coming from an online fundraiser, RAICES had relied heavily on government money, but that was likely to dry up under the current administration's policy of slashing funds for immigration services. In the last fiscal year, the organization's total assets were less than $4 million.

RAICES Windfall

The money windfall began when a family named Willner set up a Facebook page for the purpose of "bonding out" one specific refugee family. The goal was $1,500, but the publicity – partly due to the national news organizations focus on the crisis – created a deluge of interest. This fund spiked to $21 quickly. And the money is flowing in from "people just sending $50 checks" and proceeds from "probably thousands of little fundraisers." Quickly, the total grew to $30 million or so.

That success created some initial glitches. The organization's website crashed briefly, and they "haven't even been able to keep up with all the donations – [they've] had to hire more staff." They "literally have been given so much money [they] don't even know how much money it is."

The money has primarily come in for the purpose of bonding out refugee families. RAICES took a bold step, making "headlines more deliberately. The group called a press conference in Washington to ask the Trump administration to accept a $20 million bond check to free thousands of immigrant mothers, rather than requiring individuals to be bailed out one at a time." The nature of the expenditures – that is, on bonds – means that much of the money will come back eventually and can be used again.

RAICES also used some of the donations to create a database of separated children and a hotline to help in the child-parent reunification process.

The group also wants to "help resettlement. Even after reunification, these families have been through extremely traumatic events. They're going to need grief counseling … for a long time, especially young children…. And they'll need flights and travel expenses to be paid for…. They need attorneys to be able to help them navigate through [the immigration process].

Donation Declined

The group is also deliberately pivoting to an advocacy function.

The Willner Facebook campaign raised RAICES's "national profile." They've been "embracing that," going to Washington to ask the government to accept the single $20-million bond check, and in other actions. They also "went to Washington" to "bring up that this is a larger conversation about reform and how complicated the bond process is." "We need our elected officials to step up," says Ms. Falcon. "There needs to be reform for this process. We don't believe detention is the way. There are no benefits in detention. All we see are abuses of human rights, trauma, heartache."

While keeping to their main function of providing low-cost and pro bono legal services to asylum seekers, they are now "creating an arm for advocacy," too. "Advocacy is something that we've always done, and right now we're adding a little bit more to that arm of things."

All of this new funding made another decision easier: The firm Salesforce donated $250,000 to RAICES as part of a $1 million pledge to "help families separated at the US border but the organization rejected it. In an open letter to Salesforce, the group explained the money was not accepted because Salesforce refused to cancel its contracts with Customs and Border Protection.

With so much need, many groups would be hesitant to turn down any financial support "that could possibly expand its direct programming." But by "standing firm and rejecting the donation, RAICES is further reinforcing its principles."

Conclusion

It's still early days for RAICES's new financial cushion and increased national visibility, but – so far – the group seems to be handling the "rage giving" windfall well. Several factors have contributed to this early success including the important fact that the group was well-established and had a clear expertise in this field as well as a strong connection with the population to be served.

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