
Membership Pays:

The Role of Members in Grassroots Fundraising

By SARA MERSHA

Grassroots organizations know the importance of having and developing membership to build leadership and power. We also know, at least theoretically, the importance of doing grassroots fundraising so that we can be directed not by foundation trends, but by our goals to fundamentally transform social systems of oppression and exploitation. The experience of DARE — Direct Action for Rights and Equality — shows the benefits of linking these two activities by involving members in grassroots fundraising. DARE is a multiracial, multilingual grassroots community organization in Providence, Rhode Island, whose mission is to organize low-income families in communities of color for social, economic, and political justice.

Membership involvement in fundraising not only brings in more money for our crucial work, it also builds the organization by deepening members' commitment, developing leadership skills beyond a core group, building connections and teamwork among members, and expanding members' ability to drive the organization's work.

DEEPENING COMMITMENT: MEMBERSHIP DUES

Since DARE was founded in 1986 — by five people around a kitchen table, as the story goes — dues have been a key component in defining membership. Dues contribute only a small percentage of the organization's budget; in recent years, DARE has raised \$2,500 to \$3,000 in membership dues. In an overall organizational budget of about \$300,000, this may seem like a drop in the bucket. Why then, with a membership of low-income families in communities of color would DARE consider a person's decision to contribute money a determining factor? Simply put, requiring dues money to the organization raises the stakes,

forcing people to take their commitment to the organization more seriously. The noticeable trend is that those who pay dues are more likely to show up and take more of a role in building both campaigns and committees. Furthermore, members are willing to make this commitment because of the benefits of being a part of the organization.

Mary Kay Harris has been a DARE member since her son was assaulted by the police more than three years ago. She joined because she saw that DARE was working in a larger way on police relations and could help her address her son's case. After being a member for a year or two, she became co-chair of the Committee for Police Accountability. Today she is on staff as the Membership Coordinator. "When I was asked to join and pay membership dues," recalls Mary Kay, "I had to think about it. Once I made that commitment, I was happy to pay the dues, because it gave me a sense of belonging to something, a sense of ownership. By paying the dues, I knew my voice was just as important as the voice of anyone else in the organization. Honestly, if dues weren't a requirement and I hadn't paid, I wouldn't be here now. I follow my money — wherever it goes, I go."

Melvin Carter joined DARE almost two years ago, when he heard that DARE had won a policy to turn over city-owned vacant lots to neighbors for \$1. "I saw direct benefits to paying dues to DARE," reports Mel. "Before I walked through that door, I was by myself, no one was helping me and I had no power. DARE helped me fight to get one of those lots for my community to use." Mel is now active in two DARE initiatives: Project GREEN and Behind the Walls, a new campaign against the criminal injustice system. When asked why he is still a dues-paying member, he responds, "I have a son in prison. In 1995, I

came close to being in prison myself. I know that at any moment, someone could look at me and accuse me of a crime and because of my skin color, that might be enough to put me away. But since I'm a part of DARE, I feel that I'm not alone. I always believe that if people unite together, we have a voice and power."

Two years ago, DARE's membership voted to increase dues from \$24 to \$30 a year — the first dues increase in 12 years. A year later, what used to be DARE's Home Daycare Justice Committee became its own organization, the Daycare Justice Co-op. In an example of what they took with them from DARE membership, the co-op's membership of more than 75 family child care providers voted to set their dues at \$100 per year. Nurys Medina, the current co-op chairperson, recalls, "We were all at a meeting and everyone there agreed to pay the \$100, because we wanted to have enough money to do what we need in the co-op." The providers are low income — after expenses, they make just over \$3 an hour from the state. However, Nurys says, "It's fair to give this much money, because it is to something that we benefit from; because of the co-op, we've been able to fight to get health insurance and one week of vacation. It's something that we care a lot about, so we're willing to pay the dues."

Dues collection systems can be a challenge — many members pay portions at a time, and it takes work to get everyone's payments up-to-date. DARE sends reminders in the mail quarterly, asks people for dues at each membership meeting, and has a Membership Outreach Committee to do one-on-one asks with members. Though the rates of payment are not 100%, Mary Kay Harris reports, "Since I became Membership Coordinator, members chase me down to pay dues. They want to do it because they see the work DARE does, see that together we are getting the job done and taking a stand."

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AND TEAMWORK: THE ADBOOK

One of DARE's most successful grassroots fundraisers, both in total money raised and in levels of membership participation, is the annual adbook. DARE members and staff ask neighborhood businesses, ally organizations, elected officials, and other DARE supporters to purchase an advertisement to go into a book. The book is then distributed throughout DARE's circles. Those who purchase ads get recognition from DARE members and supporters, and DARE brings in significant contributions.

Gladys Gould, a DARE community organizer, is this year's staff coordinator of the adbook, working closely with the members on the Adbook Committee to make

sure that all the work gets done. She explains that a crucial component in making the adbook a successful fundraiser is setting goals, both individually and as a group: "Last year, I was a member of the Adbook Committee, and we each had our own goals for how much money we would sell in ads. It was hard to reach my goal, but I remember that we got most excited about reaching our overall goal for the organization together, and we did!" The process of having a group goal — and a group reward of a trip to Six Flags Amusement Park when the goal was reached — brought people together in an exciting way. Last year, DARE members and staff brought in more than \$26,000 from ad sales, and this year's Adbook Committee set the goal even higher, at \$30,000.

Shannah Kurland, Executive Director of DARE, reflects that part of the success of involving members in adbook sales comes from the fact that everyone can participate. "Everybody has some kind of contact they can ask," she comments, "because everybody has connections with some kind of institution in the community, whether it's the gas company, the local grocery store, an elected official from their neighborhood, a union or other organization of which they are a part."

Another important factor in the adbook's success is the tradition of it. People know how to do it because they have been doing it for years, and they teach new generations of DARE members through example and a structured buddy system. Thus, the adbook project provides an excellent opportunity to bring members together who do not know each other well. Black and Latino members are often enthusiastic about being paired up together, so that they can have the advantage of working with someone who speaks another language and therefore have access to more prospects.

Furthermore, the buddy system is a great structure for leadership development. Two years ago, Maxine Anderson was new to adselling and insisted that she could not sell ads. Shakira Abdullah, a longtime DARE leader, became her buddy. Shakira helped Maxine identify prospects and went out with her when she went to sell ads, giving her feedback on what she did well and what she could do better. The next year, Maxine was DARE's top member adseller, raising more than \$1,000 in ads!

DRIVING THE WORK: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MEMBER FUNDRAISING AND ORGANIZING

Fundraising alone can do a lot for an organization, but it is even more meaningful when it reflects and connects to the organization's actual work. This connection can be

inherent in the type of fundraising activity or it may come out of individual members' high levels of commitment.

DARE special events have never brought in large amounts of money, but because they reflect and build on the community and culture of the organization, members wish to invest time in them. One special event that developed out of the organization's strategic planning process was a Millennium Vision Party. This party brought together members, allies, and other DARE supporters in a celebration where they reconnected with the organization and its purposes. Though not as successful a fundraising event as we had hoped, it nevertheless brought out a lot of volunteers and boosted organizational spirit. Pattie Horton, DARE's Administrative Coordinator, organized the event. "The Vision Party brought in more volunteers than I've ever seen work on an event! People wanted to be a part of it, to be a part of creating this vision, and they gave their time and other in-kind donations to make this happen," she said. From fixing up the building and donating and preparing food to sharing their vision for the organization at the event itself, members played a key role in putting the event together.

The Multicultural Extravaganza is a fundraiser DARE has run for the past four years, bringing a variety of talent and food together in a festive atmosphere. The first two years, DARE staff coordinated the event. For the past two years, however, Rayna Lopez, a DARE member who helped with the event during its first years, has coordinated everything. She handles many of the tasks personally, from recruiting talent to doing outreach that boosts ticket sales. Additionally, she recruits members to help her with specific tasks, such as soliciting food donations, cooking, helping with auditions, and of course, selling tickets. This year was the most successful Multicultural Extravaganza ever, with more than 500 people attending and more than \$2,000 net brought into the organization. And all this occurred through an event that now requires minimal levels of staff time! Shakira Abdullah, now DARE Treasurer, explains that DARE members put so much into this event "because this is our gift to ourselves and to the community — we're celebrating ourselves, what we love and enjoy in life!"

Though fundraising events may be seen as isolated activities, DARE has found that members' involvement in

fundraising is highly connected to their commitment to the work of the organization. Juan Gallardo joined DARE a year ago and connected immediately to the Jobs with Dignity campaign, a project to win passage of a city ordinance mandating good jobs that are accessible to the community and pay a living wage. As a school bus driver, Juan currently receives no benefits; he is deeply connected to the campaign both through self-interest and because he believes what it proposes is right. Two weeks before the Multicultural Extravaganza event, he turned in \$140 in cash from ticket sales, and added even more money at the event, bringing his ticket sales alone near \$200. Juan has since joined the Adbook Committee, continuing his dedication to making DARE's fundraising a success.

Monique Williams is another prime example of the way that commitment to the organizing work can drive members' fundraising involvement. Monique is chair of DARE's Police Accountability Committee and worked with other members to run it without much staff support for two years. A recent victory reinvigorated the committee, and Monique started talking with other committee members about how to build the campaign further. They decided that having a part-time organizer would be key. Monique knew that the organization would need to raise a significant amount of money to be able to hire another staff person, but she did not let that stop her. She met with DARE's executive director to brainstorm possible funding sources, then worked closely with staff and other committee members to raise \$25,000 for the campaign through a successful grant proposal! Monique had a vision for what she wanted the committee to be able to do, and then found a way to fundraise to accomplish her goals.

DARE is now working to expand its members' involvement in fundraising by focusing on increasing their participation in developing the organization's overall fundraising plan. The first step is to build a fundraising committee of members that will work closely with the organization's finance committee. Shannah Kurland explains, "This new focus will build members' power in the organization. It is an opportunity for members to make decisions on what they want to spend money on and then figure out how to use fundraising to make this happen."

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