Culture on the Range

Attracting audiences – and dollars – to one of America's most remote places

Hours away from any major city, the Western Folklife Center has nonetheless built a passionate following, and the support of many high-net-worth donors, for its programs enshrining the history, arts, and culture of the American West. Now in its 25th year, the Center's next challenge is to enlarge that following, and the donations it brings, to complete a $7 million fundraising campaign and reach a national audience — including people who may never make the trek to rural Nevada.

Like many a song and story from the American frontier, this one has to begin with a place, a setting, a dot on the great windswept rolling hinterland of the still-unspoiled but fast-shrinking West. The place is Elko, Nevada, population 35,000, nearly 300 miles from any place you would have heard of, unless you spend serious time in northeastern Nevada. A 2001 article in National Geographic Adventure put Elko near the heart of what the magazine called "Empty America."

Founded as a mining railhead, and still a busy mining and ranching center with its own exit off Interstate 80, modern Elko is not at all empty. In fact, it's the kind of upbeat town where the Nevada Travel Network boasts the "youthful urbanity" of Railroad Street — along which "you can get a latte at Cowboy Joe's and eat nouvelle cuisine at the Stray Dog Café on Yuppie Row."

The latte and yuppies notwithstanding, Elko is not especially well endowed with paneled board rooms, racquet clubs, four-star restaurants (apologies to the Stray Dog), or other gathering spots where philanthropists and corporate executives might be expected to wait around with checkbooks in hand. The nearest cities with such assets would be Reno (290 miles to the southwest), Boise (240 miles to the north), Las Vegas (430 miles to the south) and Salt Lake City (230 miles to the east). In between, it's mostly land and livestock, a few roadside towns, a ripple of mountain ranges, their peaks and valleys regular as sawteeth, and great gusts of clean air.

So you might think it would be close to impossible to raise $2 million from individual donors from an office in tiny Elko — as the Western Folklife Center had to do to meet the terms of a $1 million challenge grant from the Ford Foundation between 2000 and 2003. But that's just one of many misconceptions about the

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West and its culture. The Ford challenge was satisfied with exactly three gifts, two of them from Folklife Center board members, and all three from philanthropists with homes and close ties in the area. A few of the people who call Elko's ranch-lands home, it turns out, also hang their ten-gallon hats in New York, San Francisco, London, and Paris. It's that kind of place.

Even so, the three major matching gifts were a giant step forward for the Folklife Center board, which had not been a prime source of giant contributions in the past. The Ford challenge proved to be a galvanizing force in the nearly 25-year-old organization's approach to fundraising — stimulating not only the three unprecedented donations, but a more ambitious, long-term approach to fundraising among board and staff members alike. The consequences were far more momentous than the small number of initial matching contributions might suggest. Those gifts led, in fairly short order, to a far broader and more difficult goal of solidifying the Center's balance sheet, improving its facilities, and expanding its operations.

The demographics of Elko, and the untapped potential on the board, made it relatively easier for the Center to start by raising large amounts from a few wealthy friends, rather than to reach out to thousands of less-affluent people. By contrast, many other community-based recipients of the Ford challenge grants found it easier to raise small donations from a wide circle of audience members. For many smaller arts groups, especially in more densely populated areas, it can feel natural to start with large numbers of people with roots in the community, people who value the institutions as part of their regular cultural activity and who drop in regularly. These supporters are comparatively easy to locate and solicit, even though most of them may not be able to consider five-figure contributions, much less six- or seven-figure ones. Other Ford grantees also have found it easier to raise larger donations from corporations than from individuals — largely because most arts institutions have at least a few corporate neighbors who visit their space, know their work firsthand, and are proud to be associated with it. The daunting challenge, for more typical Ford grantees, has been to find the small circle of exceptional individuals whose support could set a capital campaign in motion, establish a high threshold of contributions, expand outreach into wider circles of wealth and build toward assets — buildings, endowments, permanent collections — of dramatically larger scale.

"We kind of stood the [usual] Ford Foundation model on its head," says Executive Director Charles Seemann.

Instead of starting out by seeking completely new individual supporters or corporate donors, the Folklife Center started with people of very high net worth who were already intimately familiar with the organization, but who had not yet been asked for an extraordinary, signature gift. With those few patrons, Seemann quickly met the Ford matching requirement and, using that success as a springboard, immediately turned to a bigger goal: $7 million for a capital campaign to build its endowment, finish renovations on its headquarters, and build a stable working capital reserve fund. During this period, though, the Center made only modest progress on another front: building an annual-fund program with an increased base of regular members, whose yearly contributions would sustain a bigger part of the Center's $2.5 million annual budget.

"By combining the [Ford Foundation challenge] with a bigger $7 million campaign," Seemann says, "and building on some initial lead gifts, we saw the goal of bringing in more new donors as coming further down the road. First, we would start with our own board and our own community, and then strategize to move beyond that and make the rest of the $7 million."

The center has raised close to 50 percent of that goal, counting both gifts and pledges, in what it still describes as a "quiet phase" of the campaign. Following time-tested traditions of fundraising strategy, Seemann and the board plan to wait until that figure is closer to 60 percent before launching a more public drive that includes lower-net-worth members and contributors.

One reason for that strategy is Elko itself. The Center's location makes it hard to build and promote a national cultural institution — including a major heritage of oral literature and performing arts that thrive on live audiences — in a place that most would-be supporters can't get to. Because of its natural beauty and the constellation of big ranches nearby, the location doesn't pose much of an obstacle for reaching at least some wealthy people with a love of Western culture. But it does pose some mighty obstacles for reaching corporate contributors with faraway headquarters or, harder still, tens of thousands of regular fans, few of whom can easily drop in for an exhibit or a concert or to hear the cowboy poets and storytellers who embody the oral literature of the West.

THE GATHERING

The one time many thousands of people can drop in to Elko — and do, in ever-increasing numbers — is for the annual National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. In 2004, its 20th anniversary year, the literary, musical, and graphic-arts

extravaganza drew as many as 10,000 people and filled hotels and bed-and-breakfast accommodations as far away as Reno and Salt Lake. This immensely popular event, which by itself injects $7 million a year into the Elko economy, is the one aspect of the Center's program that now has a solid national (even international) following. It is covered every year on National Public Radio in the kind of awestruck tones normally reserved for the tech industry's annual Comdex convention or the Detroit Auto Show.

"We had people," says Seemann, "from the East Coast, from the Midwest, all over the West and South. We got press from Sweden and Germany."

The appeal of the Gathering may be hard to grasp for anyone familiar only with more urban arts festivals. As a means of building an audience for Western folk culture — and for bonding an audience to an institutional and living center for that culture — the power of the Gathering is close to uncanny. It is qualitatively different from the kind of soirée or gala that many arts organizations have in mind when they plan "special events." It is more like a cross between a national convention and a pilgrimage. Poet Wally McRae, a veteran performer at the Gathering, calls it a "cowpoke Woodstock," which begins to capture the nearly spiritual, or at least tribal, allure of the occasion. The big difference from Woodstock is: It comes back, bigger and stronger, every year.

What started as a poetry festival now also features its own Cowboy Symphony and vocal ensembles, folk and swing bands, rodeo shows, historical and arts exhibits, and culinary demonstrations. Visitors to the Gathering are almost as likely to meet Mongolian herdsmen or Basque shepherds as American cowboys. In 2004, alongside the cowboy poetry and music that remain the heart of the Gathering, participants could attend exhibits or workshops on environmental issues in ranching, barns and rural architecture, and the right way to prepare Basque appetizers.

"There's a core of authenticity" in the Gathering, as Seemann puts it, "that appeals to people who are reached and touched by the performers and speakers, by the audience, and just by the experience here. I don't know how many people have said, 'It changed my life, and I know I'll come every year.' That can happen to people from any kind of background. There's no profile of who is going to have that kind of experience, and no way to put a dollar sign on what that can mean to somebody."

The drawing power of the Gathering has made it the Center's first and best means of connecting with potential contributors and members. Beyond the relatively small

list of Elko-area residents and longtime supporters, much of the Center's membership base grew out of regular visitors to the Gathering and the people those visitors brought with them in later years.

"People come to their first Gathering or two," Seemann explains, "and maybe find they don't have quite as good a seat as they'd like. So a lot of them say 'I'm going to buy a membership so I can do better next year.'"

To be sure, other arts organizations use this same appeal, including offering a chance for members to get preferred seating at performances, privileged admission to exhibits or special events, and chances to meet artists and celebrities. But most arts organizations have big-draw exhibits or performances all year long, providing a steady stream of reminders and appeals to potential members. And they supplement these with direct mail, program inserts, advertising and other outreach tactics that create a steady stream of messages and incentives to lure new members. For the Folklife Center, the Gathering might arguably be a more powerful emotional draw than a whole season of activity at another institution — but it occurs only once, it demands exceptional effort for many people to attend, and if a participant doesn't become a member after that event, the next comparable marketing opportunity could be twelve long months away.

STRATEGIC PHASES: DESCENDING THE WEALTH PYRAMID

Given that the marketing power of the Gathering is such a precious, infrequent resource, the Center board has concentrated most of its attention at Gathering time on attracting high-end and well-connected contributors, to get the biggest possible return on its efforts. Board members make it a point to introduce guests to the annual festival and even compete, Seemann says, for whose guests will in turn bring the greatest number of their own guests the following year. For months before the 2004 Gathering, board members met to plot strategy for attracting high-net-worth individuals to the event, making sure they had a good time, following up with them afterward, and even in several cases giving them complimentary memberships to keep them coming back.

Surrounding the 2004 Gathering, board members and supporters hosted a series of regional "friend-raising" events for the Center, usually in cities far from Elko. The events are meant not as fundraisers per se, but as opportunities for staff, board members, and fans of the Center to meet people who are interested in Western culture but not yet familiar with Elko or the Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Still, even though the main purpose of these evenings isn't to raise money on-the-spot, they can sometimes be lucrative: One get-together in the San Francisco

Bay Area netted $30,000 for the center by asking guests for what was considered a small donation of $300 apiece. And in the longer run, they constitute what classic fundraising strategists call "cultivation events," from which organizers hope to find at least one or two enthusiasts who can be turned into prime supporters or patrons.

The Gathering, in short, is not merely a powerful opportunity to attract and retain loyal patrons, it is increasingly becoming the core around which many other such opportunities can now be organized. Thus far, however, the strategy of raising money from devotees of the Gathering and their friends has excelled primarily with people of above-average net worth — not just people with ranches in the West, but also others with a taste for the frontier and its traditions who, with relative ease, can jet to Elko once a year and in the meantime attend $300-a-head events with people who share their interests.

As a rule, major gifts from wealthier donors tend to come with restrictions — they may be earmarked to buy new art for a permanent collection, or underwrite a performance series, or support construction of a facility. For that reason, high-level contributors to the Folklife Center generally get what Seemann refers to as a "double ask," not only a request for contributions toward the capital drive (whether for a programming endowment, renovations on the historic headquarters building, or a permanent working capital reserve fund) but also a separate request for general operating support. The latter portion of the "ask" is naturally expected to recur year after year, making it in effect the start of an annual gift.

The former portion, the capital contributions, can take many forms. The Center's building, for example, includes several features that could be named for especially large donors: the main-floor exhibit gallery, an archive and resource center on the second floor, even a private meeting room in the Center's historic saloon, called "The Fireplace." A wall of leather name-plaques and furniture with nameplates are available for gifts between $10,000 and $100,000. For most arts institutions, named spaces are usually prime magnets for big donations, because they provide the donor's family with a more or less permanent memorial. Corporate contributors likewise appreciate naming opportunities for the long-term goodwill and advertising they can bring. In small, remote Elko, however, the appeal of named space is apparently somewhat weaker than it might be in a more populous city. For example, in 25 years, the Folklife Center has yet to receive a six-figure corporate contribution. For this year's Cowboy Poetry Gathering, the Center got a record-setting corporate contribution of $50,000, but that was

well under the amount requested. "If we were in Salt Lake City," Seemann says, "what we could do with corporate sponsorships would be vastly greater than it is now."

Whether for annual donations or capital contributions, starting with a wealthier constituency represents a sound, textbook formula for effective fundraising. It follows the pyramid structure of a classic fund drive: beginning with wealthier people to rack up major gifts and demonstrate momentum, then move lower down the wealth spectrum. The farther down you go, the more potential donors there are at each level. But the amounts available from each contributor are smaller, meaning more work has to be expended for every dollar raised. Admittedly, for a folklife institution, strong support from people of less wealth is important for reasons well beyond economics. Yet with a location so far from any big population center, building a broad audience and membership base that could occasionally be tapped for special contributions is even more labor-intensive than normal. Despite having set a goal of tripling the membership by 2003 — to a total of 3,579 — the Center had actually added just under ten percent to the member rolls by the time the 2004 Gathering opened. Enlarging the rank-and-file membership is, in essence, the next frontier for the Folklife Center's fundraising effort.

Broad-based memberships are important for many reasons — audience loyalty high among them — but they are also indispensable for one crucial area of arts management: raising general operating support.

"For the [arts and culture] work, it's a little easier to raise money," Seemann says. "But for the light bill and the office supplies and the financial management, that's much harder."

Regular annual memberships, including those in small amounts from people of more modest incomes, have the triple advantage of being recurring, unrestricted, and stable. Because membership dues and contributions come from many sources, they aren't prone to abrupt, catastrophic decreases. And because they repeat year after year, donations to an annual-fund program create a bedrock of unrestricted income that can be used wherever it is needed.

As this is written, the Folklife Center expects a significant increase in its annual memberships in the aftermath of the 2004 Gathering, where attendance set a record and audience enthusiasm ran exceptionally high. Capitalizing on the enthusiasm of that audience, extending it to more people, and maintaining people's interest and involvement between the annual Gatherings are not just fundraising challenges. They are essential to the mission of the Western Folklife

Center, which is "preserving, perpetuating, and presenting the varied traditions of the American West."

REACHING THE MASSES: BROADCASTS, RECORDINGS, AND VIRTUAL FOLKLIFE

From both an artistic and a financial point of view, the prime lesson of the Gathering is that people need not live anywhere near Elko to become loyal, enthusiastic followers and contributors to the Western Folklife Center. But they do need to feel somehow part of the tribe, so to speak — personal participants in a cultural experience whose essence is highly personal and spontaneous. The dilemma, then, is how to give people from other parts of the country a sustained feeling of first-hand involvement in the traditions of the West when (a) the Gathering covers only one of the year's fifty-two weeks, and (b) not everyone who loves Western culture can afford to journey to Elko once a year.

One obvious answer has been broadcasting and recordings, though both can be costly and building audiences for them demands steady, long-term effort. From a satellite office in Salt Lake City, the Center produces and contributes to radio programs and works with artists and residents of the West to produce films, published oral histories, and audio tapes and CDs. The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering sometimes provides the spark for subsequent publications and recordings. For example, a 16-minute music video called "Why the Cowboy Sings" premiered at the 2003 Gathering and an accompanying documentary has since been entered in regional film festivals and broadcast on the PBS network.

The next step, possibly less expensive and farther-reaching than other means of mass communication, is the Internet. Locally produced videos on Western life are now becoming available iMovies that will be downloadable from the Center's web site. For the last eight years, the Gathering has offered live cybercasts of its events and virtual tours of its exhibits, with the extent and quality of the online offerings improving each year. Events from the 2004 Gathering are available on the web site (http://cybercast.western-folklife.org/2004/index.html), where visitors can listen in on a single performance or spend something close to a virtual weekend. Opportunities to become a member, to buy memorabilia from the online store, and other fundraising devices are present on the site, but unobtrusive. It is, at this stage, primarily an educational and audience-building endeavor, not an aggressive fundraising mechanism.

That may change somewhat when the capital campaign enters a more public phase. For

now, however, the web site is primarily being used, Seemann puts it, as...

"a great outreach and interactive effort, a participatory effort. This expands the creative base as well as the audience — sometimes the audience is the artists. That's the point of the folk arts."

CONCLUSION: THE LESSONS THUS FAR

More than many other kinds of nonprofit groups, arts organizations tend to derive a big percentage of their revenue from "earned" income: ticket sales, admission fees, gift shop or gallery sales, or special-event tickets for opening nights or meet-the-artist events. It isn't uncommon for organizations to regard these revenues as preferable to fundraising, or at least as a more meaningful expression of their value and public support. Some funders, it must be said, have reinforced that belief by encouraging higher and higher percentages of earned income on the income statements of their arts grantees.

For some organizations, that may be a reasonable preference.[2] But too often, arts managers tend to devote the bulk of their attention to earned revenue, leaving too little time and energy for the deliberate, active pursuit of a broad mix of contributed revenue. As a result, fundraising efforts, when they occur at all, tend to cast too small a net — approaching only the most obvious or natural constituents, for example, or presenting potential donors with too limited an appeal for support. Often, the more successful they are at the ticket office, the less urgently arts organizations press to widen and deepen their donor base, thus missing a potentially large source of revenue that could help stabilize income in turbulent years.

The Western Folklife Center was hardly complacent about donations, but like many successful arts organizations, it found itself relying on the ever-growing ticket sales from its successful Gathering, plus the small but steady base of memberships and local contributors. For years, income from the Gathering has represented a significant portion of its revenue stream, with results that kept getting more comfortable year after year. The "jolt" that the Center received from the Ford Foundation's challenge, says Charles Seemann, caused its board and management to look farther beyond that one, dependable source and to pay closer attention to missed or latent opportunities to boost donations. When they did, they noticed not only a universe of untapped donors, but a wide range of needs — for working capital reserves, facility development, a bigger endowment, and unrestricted operating expenses.

For all its unique features, the Center was in this respect not fundamentally different from other successful arts institutions: it needed to bring other parts of its operation — especially its fundraising — closer to the level of performance typical of its flagship revenue-generator, the Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Now that it has embarked on a more wide-ranging and ambitious fundraising drive, the emerging lessons from that experience are also ones that might apply, at least in broad strokes, to organizations in other places and in other branches of the arts and humanities. For example:

1. FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN SPECIAL AND ONGOING FUNDRAISING IS CRUCIAL, BUT IT'S RARELY EASY.

Seeking donations is a perennial effort, even when (perhaps *especially* when) there is a special one-time campaign under way. Many organizations find it difficult, as the Folklife Center has, to seek donations toward a big capital campaign while still promoting regular memberships and increasing annual giving. The very "specialness" of a capital campaign tends to distract leaders' attention and energy away from routine annual solicitation. Few organizations expect this trade-off when they embark on a special capital drive, but most of them end up listing it among the lessons they have learned a few months or years down the road.

At first, the Folklife Center had hoped not only to improve its outreach to individual donors of high net worth, but also to make dramatic increases in its annual memberships and corporate gifts. Both of the latter two goals have lagged, even as the first one has met with exceptional success. After a few years of experience, the Center now expects to catch up on regular memberships and corporate contributions in the next stages of the campaign, once a majority of the capital goal has been reached. The point is not that the three kinds of fundraising can't go on simultaneously. Indeed, they have to. But time and energy aren't infinitely expandable, and high-profile capital campaigns tend to demand much more of both than many organizations expect at first.

2. BIG SUCCESS FROM A SINGLE EVENT OR LINE OF BUSINESS CAN BE A MIXED BLESSING, IF IT CASTS A SHADOW OVER OTHER IMPORTANT ACTIVITY.

To be sure, it would be hard to find any downside to the tremendous success of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, both as a source of revenue and as a constituency-builder for the Folklife Center. Still, as a result of the extraordinary publicity surrounding that event, it becomes all the harder for the Center to draw attention to other aspects of its work.

"Our mission is developing the culture of the Western U.S. broadly writ," says Seemann. "The cowboy themes have taken off, but we also see ourselves doing work in a wider spectrum of activity. We work with Hispanic, Native American and Basque cultures, for example, and also with kids. …We're most closely identified with ranching culture because of the Cowboy Gathering. But we're trying to enhance our image to be more than just that."

Recent Gatherings have increasingly featured other aspects of the Center's mission beyond cowboy and ranching themes. But publicity has not consistently caught up with the diversity of these offerings.

This is, in a sense, a correlate to the previous lesson: Not only is it essential for an organization to have more than one avenue of fundraising, but it is equally useful to cultivate more than one claim to fame — if for no other reason than to appeal to as broad an audience as possible and to live up to the full breadth of the organization's mission. For fundraising purposes, more branches of successful activity naturally lead to more avenues of support from more kinds of donors.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION — IN MANY AREAS, NOT JUST FUNDRAISING — USUALLY STARTS WITH THE BOARD.

In its earliest years, the board of the Western Folklife Center originally consisted mostly of scholars, experts in Western culture, and practicing artists. Only later did the organization begin to shift the membership to include more and more people who could give and help raise money. Some time later, when the Ford Foundation presented an extraordinary fundraising challenge, that offer provided an impetus for the board to raise its sights significantly, beginning with their own contributions. The first few major donations from board members and their contacts served to give the group confidence and momentum for more active board giving and fundraising. The Ford challenge grant and the board's leadership gifts helped to create the seed fund from which the Center developed a larger, more integrated capital campaign. With each major leap in the Center's fundraising prowess, the first step was more attention from the board. That is a fairly typical pattern in any kind of organizational change, and it is usually essential when the goal is to improve fundraising.

4. CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS NORMALLY DEMAND SPECIAL CONDITIONS — STARTING WITH HIGH VISIBILITY.

With no major corporate headquarters and only a small population in its immediate vicinity, the Center has had to struggle to get attention and major financial support from businesses.

The exception has been the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, largely because it has a long and proven track record over two decades, it attracts a national and international audience of more than 8,000 visitors offering the donor a broad demographic profile, and it includes live internet broadcasts that can also serve to increase corporate sponsors' exposure. While the Center has had difficulty during its capital campaign in getting corporate sponsors for its headquarters building — something that other groups have used with great success in attracting business sponsorships — it seems to have had less trouble attracting corporate dollars for the Gathering. It's noteworthy that the largest corporate donation the Center has received was earmarked for the 2004 Gathering, not the Center as a whole. Based on the event's success, there is a good chance that the same donor might increase support in the future, particularly because its corporate presence in Elko is likely to expand.

The signal achievement of the Western Folklife Center has been to turn its location — the heart of "Empty America," by one account — into a living asset, an embodiment of the heritage it exists to preserve and promote. The almost spiritual appeal of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering is surely a testament to this successful marriage of culture and place, the use of open space and sprawling natural beauty as a means of conveying Western life and traditions to people from far different places and circumstances. Still, the remote location and the relative infrequency of the Gathering continues to pose obstacles for the Center, both in its audience development and its fundraising. Overcoming those obstacles, with a wider base of supporters and an expanded base of programming, will be a key objective for the organization's next quarter-century, as it solidifies the considerable accomplishments it has made thus far.

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[1] From David W. Toll, *The Complete Nevada Traveler: The Affectionate and Intimately Detailed Guidebook to the Most Interesting State in America*, Virginia City, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1998, as excerpted on the web site of the Nevada Travel Network: http://www.nevadaweb.com/cnt/cc/elko/

[2] Even organizations with unusually robust box-office revenues have found it beneficial to become better at pursuing donations. For one example, see the monograph "Close-Up and Personal," about Film Forum, a New York City recipient of a Ford Foundation challenge grant similar to the one that the Western Folklife Center received. The monograph is available through the Nonprofit Finance Fund Web site: http://www.nonprofitfinancefund.org/docs/Close-Up-WebVersion.pdf

