Nonprofit Finance Fund

"The People are the Message"

A MUSEUM WHERE CONTRIBUTORS ARE PART OF THE COLLECTION

by Tony Proscio and Susan R. Shapiro

When the Japanese American National Museum's first building opened in 1992, its cultural and historical message — the Museum's reason for being, in a sense — was visible in three ways at once. The first of these was the building itself: a former Buddhist temple built in 1925 that had played several crucial roles in the life of Southern California's Japanese immigrants in the early 20th Century.

The historic structure had been the place where many of the *Issei* generation — the first to cross the Pacific from Japan — had gathered for religious and social activities, and in darker times, stored their belongings as they and their children were massively deported and incarcerated during World War II. The Museum's restoration of the building as its first exhibit space meant that visitors would not merely be observing but actually inhabiting an important cultural artifact of their community's past.

Second, the message was embodied in the Museum's first exhibit, *Issei Pioneers: Hawaii and the Mainland, 1885-1924*. The presentation set the tone for what would become the Museum's signature approach to telling the Japanese-American story: a combination of documentary records and photographs, graphic arts, personal artifacts and recollections, and detailed narratives of particular families' experience — the individual hardships, endurance, and achievement that underlie the unfolding Japanese-American experience.

But the third platform for the Museum's message was, in a sense, the most striking and personal of all: the building's "donor wall" — the first of what eventually became several opportunities for contributors to the Museum to record their names or those of their children, or to honor older relatives of the *Issei* generation, as a permanent record of the achievements of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in the United States. The wall, in short, is not just a means of thanking contributors, it is itself part of the permanent exhibit: an icon of individual and collective memory, honoring the people whose stories fill the rest of the Museum. It became the centerpiece of the Museum's first phase of fundraising, and a model for the second-phase effort that followed a few years later.

Names on the wall each represented $3,000 or more in contributions. As the pledges from the first campaign started to mount, in numbers that surprised many on the Museum's staff and Board, it became clear that the wall and what it represented had real significance for members of the community. The wall's importance as part of the historical record led the Museum Board to look for ways of keeping up the momentum after the historic building was finished — to find more

ways to recognize the role of thousands of Japanese-American families in building this community treasure.

Therefore, on the Museum's next construction project, which triggered Phase II of its fundraising drive, staff worked with the architect to integrate more opportunities for donor recognition there. Along the way, they consulted with Stephen A. Briganti, president and CEO of New York's Ellis Island Foundation, for ideas on how to feature individual contributors, their memories, and the identities of their forbears among the permanent features of the expanding Museum. Ellis Island's "American Immigrant Wall of Honor"® became one prototype of the Museum's various displays of names.

The second building, an 85,000-square-foot Pavilion, opened in 1999 at the conclusion of the Campaign's $45 million Phase II. With it came even more dramatic presentations of contributors' names: names etched in a wall of glass, displayed in windows, engraved on metal panels, and dotting the pavement of a "children's courtyard." Each corresponds to a separate, broad-based fundraising effort. And each "donor recognition" site combines a gesture of thanks for those efforts with a tribute of honor for the lives that made history. As one observer put it, "exhibits are a medium; but the people are the message."

Each phase of the capital campaign behind these displays is remarkable not just for the panorama of names they produced, but for the way the names were gathered: Both phases were carried out largely by teams of volunteers and Museum staff, including employees with no formal responsibility for fundraising. Most of these volunteers solicited contributions from their own relatives and from other families, typically to honor a parent or grandparent or to connect a child with the Museum. To make up the $3,000 minimum for a listing on the Phase I donor wall, volunteers suggested that a family member could raise as little as $20 or $50 from some relatives, hundreds from others, and bundle the donations into a single family gift. For those who could raise more, there were higher levels of recognition, rising into the millions of dollars.

The volunteers and the family fundraisers, says Senior Development Officer Florence Ochi, were driven by the same spirit that motivates the Museum. "We suggest some phrases for them to use," Ochi says, "to help them explain the value of a contribution. We suggest things like, 'we should honor our parents, who sweat in the fields and didn't understand a word of English, yet raised us and established a community in this country.' It's a way of focusing the message not just on giving money, but on why you'd want to give, and what your donation will mean."

Beginnings of a volunteer 'snowball'

Early in the first phase of the fundraising campaign — two years before there was any physical

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Museum at all — Florence Ochi was herself a volunteer with the fledgling nonprofit group trying to create the new institution. The initial volunteer corps, of which she was a member, was the brain child of Museum Board member Fred Hoshiyama, whose prior experience as a YMCA executive had taught him the power of community participation in building momentum for a fundraising campaign. Knowing that they would need more than $13 million to restore and open the historic temple, Hoshiyama and Ochi teamed together to enlist a small group of volunteers with wide contacts in the local Japanese-American community. This group eventually found roughly 25 people who were willing to try their hands at fundraising, though almost none of them had any experience at it.

Most were middle-age and older members of the *Nisei* generation — children of the original immigrants, the first to be born in the United States. To most of them, the idea of approaching their neighbors with a request for thousands of dollars was both new and unsettling. To reassure and prepare them, Hoshiyama held an early training meeting where participants learned some practical rudiments of fundraising, what one participant summarized as a session on "how to ask." As Ochi remembers the meeting:

> People were sharing stories, and their feelings about their heritage, and the approach grew out of what people themselves were saying. Remember, these weren't people who were brought up going to museums — their lives didn't allow for that. Their parents were farmers or manual laborers working long hours. They didn't have the leisure time or the spare money to be going to cultural institutions.
>
> But here, we weren't talking about an "institution," we were talking about families and their memories and their heritage, what they lived through and what it led to. And when they started talking about that, the fundraising message just came naturally out of what they were saying. We told them we were 'going after a dream.' And it caught on.

The original organizers had expected the group to adopt an ambitious but realistic fundraising target, somewhere around $100,000. But the volunteers, with no experience of their own and no prior Museum campaigns on which to base expectations, were shocked at a number so large. After some deliberation, they agreed on $25,000 — a figure they still considered challenging, given that they were starting their work in mid-November 1990, with a string of expensive holidays just ahead.

Ochi and her colleagues organized the 25-person "committee" into five teams, each with a name and a team leader. After the initial organizational and training sessions, the full committee agreed to hold "report meetings" roughly once a week, at which the leaders would report on how each of their teams had performed. Each team started with a "prospect sheet," where members listed the names of people they planned to solicit. At the top of each sheet, organizers encouraged the members to put their own

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names. The message, which became a mainstay of future campaigns, was: "It's easier to solicit a gift from someone else when you've given one first."

A week later, at their next meeting, they had $33,000 in pledges. And the campaign had five more weeks to go. "So we went on," says Ochi, "to see how much we could do."

> People were elated — the first week, I can't tell you how exciting it was. Of course, the pressure was there, too — I was one of the members, and I felt it. We had three to four "report meetings" between mid-November and mid-December, where team captains reported to the full committee what they'd done — reporting out what each member had raised, by name. A chart was hung in front of the room with masking tape. Each team was listed with its team name, its leader, and its members running down the left, and the dates of reporting running across the top. Well, you could feel the momentum building from meeting to meeting. If you make it a little bit competitive, you don't want to lose. I want to do the best I can for my team, and for myself.

Training continued throughout the "report meetings." As members recounted their individual experiences and shared stories on how they got a person to commit to a gift, the meetings served not only to inspire the group to continue, but also to answer difficult questions about solicitation techniques and ways to respond to people's uncertainties, doubts, or hesitation. In the end, the group easily reached — and even slightly exceeded — the $100,000 goal that the organizers had hoped for all along. The final victory celebration was in early January 1991. The whole campaign had been waged in the middle of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's.

Stunned by the early success, and the potential it seemed to represent, the Board took steps to enlarge and extend the volunteer effort as it moved toward the larger second phase of fundraising. Ochi joined the Museum staff, working to replicate the initial phase's momentum. The Museum's leadership and staff recruited members from community and civic organizations, veterans' associations, religious groups, anyplace where Japanese Americans gathered, formed organizations, or pursued common interests. In each case, the initial goal was to find three or four well-connected people who, as in the first group, would then gather a wider circle of some 25 people.

As Phase II progressed, groups began working in overlapping clusters, with three or four "committees" pursuing campaigns at the same time. "Once we got started," Ochi says, "the idea just seemed to snowball." By the end of Phase II, culminating in the grand opening of the new Pavilion building in 1999, more than 20 groups had convened, involving a total of as many as 700 volunteers. Without exception, every group met its $100,000-plus goal, with some exceeding that amount substantially. Because the Museum is a national institution, groups formed as far away as Hawaii, though most were in California and farther up the Pacific Coast.

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On one team, Ochi recalls,

> a volunteer reported that he had told someone, '$3,000 seems like a lot of money, but think of it this way: More people will see your name at the museum than ever will at your grave-site.' Well, he got his $3,000! When you stop laughing and think about it, well — it was a true statement! Your great-grandchildren might not even know where you're buried, much less how much you did to make a life for your children, their grandparents, in this country.

Blending sophisticated planning with volunteer energy

In the campaign's first phase, which ran from 1989 to 1994, the Museum raised $13.5 million, largely from individual Japanese Americans and their families from all over the country. A successful campaign by any standard, this one was all the more remarkable in that it was designed to engage the largest possible number of people, a goal that grew naturally from the Museum's mission and philosophy. A more traditional approach — and surely a much easier one — would have been simply to target a select few families or institutions who could cover big chunks of the project budget, and set a high standard for other contributors, with six- and seven-figure checks. Instead, the Museum targeted people as well as dollars, recognizing that, in a single campaign, they were building not only a budget, but an audience and a legacy.

That meant not only soliciting many hundreds of relatively small donations at once, but also approaching a great many people who had never been asked for contributions of this kind before. Many of the families on the Museum's prospect list had little familiarity with the American tradition of philanthropy, particularly with gifts in the thousands of dollars.

Yet by the time the Museum opened for business in 1992, even before Phase I was completed, there were 10,000 charter members who had given between $35 and $1,000 each, through a series of direct mail efforts. The campaign itself and its successful "community committees" had enlisted more than 1,000 additional donors who made gifts between $3,000 and $1 million.

The huge base of support, including the prevalence of relatively small gifts, proved something that was fundamental to the Museum's message: Creating a historic and cultural institution was profoundly important to a broad spectrum of Japanese Americans, and they were prepared to go to great lengths to support it. The outpouring of support from less-wealthy families in turn inspired the more than two dozen contributors who gave upwards of $100,000 each, and established the new institution's bona fides with potential corporate and foundation donors. As Executive Director Irene Hirano points out, gifts large and small were mutually reinforcing: the larger gifts invigorated and

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raised the sights of those soliciting money at the community level.

By the end of 1991, having worked with fundraising counsel to design the strategy for Phase I, the Museum staff and corps of volunteers now had some experience, a lengthening list of prospective donors, and a more realistic sense of their own potential. All of this provided a far stronger platform on which to mount the second phase, a five-year campaign with a $45 million goal. Phase II would not only fund the construction of the new Pavilion, but create a permanent endowment and expand the Museum's educational programs. The cycle of "community committees" continued almost without pause from the first phase directly into the second, with eight new committees forming in Phase II.

But this time, Board members played an expanded role as contributors and fundraisers, ultimately bringing in some 20 percent of the total amount raised. They were responsible for more than 30 percent of the amounts raised from individual and family contributors. The campaign was now extending to a broader audience as well — to Japan and Hawaii, to many more corporations and foundations, and to the public sector, all the while continuing to reach more families and children capable of making gifts large and small. To reinforce the appeal to less-wealthy contributors, the Museum created even more modest levels of public recognition, honoring donations all the way from $100 to $1 million and more.

As the second phase got under way, it quickly became clear that the Museum's influence was being felt in all corners of the community. People who were already part of the Museum but not yet a part of the fundraising campaign began to sign up in greater numbers. To channel these accumulating energies, a President's Volunteer Council and a Museum Staff Campaign took shape at about the same time. The Volunteer Council, a leadership group for the docents and other volunteers in Museum-related projects, got caught up in the momentum of the campaign much as the earlier community fundraisers had done. Likewise, Museum staff who had no formal responsibilities for fundraising nonetheless organized themselves to solicit their families and friends, borrowing tactics honed by the teams of volunteers. And just as the early committee members had experienced in Phase I, the result was a mounting competition to succeed. Together, the Volunteer Council and the Staff Campaign generated more than $2 million toward the growth of the museum.

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Compared to the first campaign, Phase II took on more of the aspects of a textbook high-profile fundraising drive typical of eminent national institutions: It drew in the efforts of prominent Board members, paid staff, and active volunteers; attracted much larger investments from institutional contributors; made more strategic use of fundraising counsel (particularly in the end stage), and provided striking visual recognition for major contributions. Yet the Museum was determined, first and foremost, to be a home for all the community's families and children, not a monument to remote wealth. As a result, some of the Museum's most memorable donor-recognition displays were built mainly with modest gifts collected by volunteers or through the mail.

"Windows to the Future," for example, displays names on striking glass panes for as little as $250. The Children's Courtyard is paved with names of children and young adults under 21 for amounts of just $100 or more. Despite the low thresholds, these unusual architectural features represent more than $2.4 million in contributions, corresponding to nearly 10,000 names. The effect on family audiences is obvious every summer, when the Children's Courtyard comes alive with children and their families visiting the Museum, exploring their history, and recognizing their own part in both.

The methods of both fundraising phases thus reflect a careful balance: on one hand, an exhaustive volunteer mobilization from all across the community; on the other, a carefully planned, professional campaign with high-level leadership. The small-donor campaigns behind "Windows to the Future" and "Children's Courtyard," for example, were chaired by Board member and actor George Takei, famous as Mr. Sulu of *Star Trek*. Board members were personally involved in nearly every aspect of the fundraising, responsible both as donors and solicitors for nearly $8.5 million in Phase II.

Museum publications carefully reinforced the campaigns' strategy, carrying regular news on the progress of both phases. Special newsletters and brochures kept donors and friends up to date on amounts raised, ways to give, donor recognition opportunities, Museum news on exhibits and installations, and other activity associated with the campaign. Yet to keep the emphasis on families and individuals, the Museum made sure that annual reports listed not only all the donors, but also the hundreds of volunteers who served on committees and advisory councils or sponsored events.

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Where mission and fundraising come together

Executive Director Irene Hirano compares the Museum's broad-based fundraising strategy to the way it develops and relates to audiences. In both cases, she points out, the intergenerational dynamics create a link between the exhibits and the lives of the people who support and visit them. "Families come in, in two or three generations, and you can see parents and grandparents looking at a display and saying, 'when we were there…' It creates a connection not just between the exhibits and the visitors, but *between* visitors who find they're sharing something personal."

Integral to the immigrant experience — and to the Museum's collection — is the collection of artifacts and first-person accounts of the past. Collecting the physical evidence of history is essential to any historical museum, but it also plays a central role in building the audience's sense of participation and ownership. So when families donate photographs, clothing, memorabilia from trans-Pacific voyages or World War II incarceration, their lives have become part of the collection. Fundraising, in that context, is simply a way of asking members to help preserve the record of their own past, and the contributions of their families and neighbors. At the Japanese American National Museum, contributions have come from farm laborers and national politicians (Transportation Secretary and former Congressman Norman Mineta, for example, recently donated a collection of artifacts). Seen this way, the definition of "contribution" becomes both more fluid and more engaging.

The Museum's appeal to families and contributors is obviously built around cultural and historic themes that are specific to the Japanese-American community. But Florence Ochi points out that many of these themes, with only small adjustments, apply equally well to other immigrant groups. "This isn't so different," she says, "for people who came over across the Atlantic, or up through Latin America and had hard lives but raised their families. It's the same message: Remember those who made life possible for you, who planted the seeds of the community we have now, and honor them. This group just happened to come across the Pacific, but their stories are probably very similar to those of other groups."

LESSONS, PART I: THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

An organization considering a fundraising campaign like that of the Japanese American National Museum — a broad-based volunteer drive that emphasizes families and individuals from all parts of the economic spectrum — should be alert to some of the difficulties and risks of that approach. Here are a few to consider:

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1. Demands on the organization

A campaign that depends on recognizing the support of hundreds of people (in the Museum's case, it was more than 1,000) requires significant coordination and staffing — not to mention a database that can handle the volume of gifts received and constantly be able to report on progress to donors, managers, and the Board. Starting the campaign with the largest numbers of donors first (rather than the traditional approach of starting with a wealthy few, and then broadening the base later) demands a software system that can tally, analyze, and report on a large number of gifts. And it means having staff constantly on hand to process these gifts, send out acknowledgements, and enter all the relevant information on each donor. The staffing needs were crucial in the Museum's case: At the same time that they were operating the capital campaign, they also had an annual giving program that produced more than 10,000 charter members using direct mail.

2. The need for prominent places to recognize donors

An important incentive for donors is the opportunity for their names to become a part of the institution. That was a huge plus in the Museum's case, but it meant working closely with an architect to create large, appropriate spaces for contributors' names. This would have been difficult or impossible in just the small space of the Museum's historic first building. So as the first phase of fundraising grew, and the Museum was running out of room to list people's names in the first building, it deliberately designed the second phase around additional donor walls and tributes. In some cases, though, that can trigger a second risk: that you don't end up with as many contributors in the long run as you expected. The Museum didn't have to face that problem, but it nonetheless designed architectural features (the children's courtyard, for example) that would look good with many names or few.

3. The challenge of managing volunteers

When volunteers make up most of the workforce of a fundraising campaign, it becomes essential for the organization to offer extensive guidance and support throughout the process. In the Museum's first phase, it was lucky to have a board member and one or two volunteers who were genuinely gifted in this kind of work, and who could design and lead an effective volunteer effort. Yet even then, they had to find the right balance between setting high goals — challenging the volunteers to do more than they thought possible — and yet also keeping members' confidence and enthusiasm high. Volunteers are effective mainly in proportion to the depth of their belief in the project and in themselves. Too great a goal can discourage them; too small a goal can generate complacency and reduce the thrill of success. The Museum started small, but with bigger goals in mind. That sounds easy, but it can be very tricky in practice.

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If volunteers have little or no practical experience with organized fundraising (or with philanthropy in general), there will be three additional hurdles to cross: (1) making volunteers aware of why someone would want to make a significant contribution — so aware that the fundraisers become donors themselves; (2) helping them learn how to persuade others, balancing respectfulness and persistence, and offering convincing answers to questions and reservations; and (3) giving volunteers a real share in the whole campaign, a feeling of ownership that makes them genuine agents of the organization, not just messengers.

Most of all, a large, broad-based fundraising campaign needs some form of expert guidance and leadership. Volunteers, even very talented ones, can't do it all. Nor can generalists in the institution's overall management. The Japanese American National Museum relied on fundraising counsel in both phases of their campaign, and organizations without in-house fundraising expertise would probably do well to follow suit.

Another useful asset in a large volunteer fundraising drive would be a feasibility study. Conducting a multi-million dollar campaign without such a study, as the Museum did, makes managing and motivating the volunteer teams a bit harder. A definitive feasibility study, though costly, might have given confidence and direction to the campaign by showing volunteers that success is possible, and illustrating how it can be achieved.

4. Giving due consideration to other approaches

Starting out by casting a wide net for donations is an unconventional strategy, and it worked well for the Japanese American National Museum. Even so, the more traditional approach also has its merits, and they should be weighed carefully before deciding whether, how, and when to use volunteers and to pursue individual and family donations in the way the Museum did. The traditional method, put simply, is to solicit larger donations first, and smaller ones later. One reason for this is that a few large donations create momentum quickly. Another reason is that big gifts set a standard for other people to emulate. It is easier to ask someone for a very large donation if another contributor has already made a donation of comparable size. Starting with small amounts can diminish that opportunity. And it gives a kind of pre-eminence to small sums — which also have a way of setting a pattern, even among people who could afford to give more.

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LESSONS, PART II: THINGS TO STRIVE FOR

1. Fundraising works when everyone becomes a fundraiser

The Museum did an exemplary job of building excitement around the campaign and creating healthy competition among solicitation groups. As more and more people outside the development department witnessed a successful operation under way, they wanted to make their own contribution to what had obviously become a winning effort. Museum staff organized themselves and set a "stretch" goal — a target that deliberately went past what might have constituted a comfortable or average level of achievement. Other people associated with the Museum, serving on a "President's Volunteer Council," also began soliciting on behalf of the campaign. This multiplier effect of getting every part of an organization involved in the fundraising, and creating an atmosphere of friendly competition, can yield extraordinary dividends for the organization — besides making people feel great about their association with the campaign and its results.

2. People give to institutions they feel part of

Early on, the Japanese American National Museum asked families and individuals to contribute artifacts and stories to the Museum's collection. That experience made it more likely that those same individuals would become financial contributors later. As volunteers were being trained to solicit contributions, they were encouraged to share their family's stories and consider the trials of past generations — the very things the Museum was created to collect and preserve. When people heard this message in the solicitation, it gave them not only a reason to contribute money, but to visit the Museum and bring their children. The most distinctive achievement of the Museum's fundraising was that it built both audience and financial support in a single process.

3. Raising money from individuals and families to boost legitimacy

Focusing exclusively on individuals and families in the first phase of the campaign proved conclusively that the Museum was what it claimed to be. The huge number of donations small and large showed that the Museum had the support of the community, and that it offered something that a broad base of Japanese Americans considered important. Although it then had to introduce itself afresh to large corporate and foundation contributors in Phase II, its claim to being an important new cultural asset was already beyond doubt.

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