

# EMBRACE YOUR INNER FUNDRAISER

*by Julie Whelan Capell*



*The author, far left, being sworn in as a Brownie Girl Scout*

In my many years as a fundraising consultant, one of the topics I am asked to present on the most frequently is how to make the “ask.” For board members in particular, it seems asking for money is the hardest part of their responsibilities. Never mind that actually asking for donations is something most board members will probably never have to do, it is what most people think of as the essence of fundraising. And so they automatically think “please ask me to do anything but fundraising.”

And this doesn’t just apply to board members. Most staff of nonprofits also feel that fundraising is the last thing they want to be involved in.

If this describes you, I would like to suggest that you take a different approach and try embracing your inner fundraiser.

## **Start Them Young: A Girl Scout Story**

Stay with me here, I’ve given this a lot of thought, beginning many years ago when I was asked to present at a career fair for middle school-aged Girl Scouts. The event would be attended by hundreds of girls circulating amongst tables set up by women representing dozens of careers. The organizers said they were inviting me because I was a female business owner and someone who could represent the nonprofit sector. I was excited and flattered to be asked, for who doesn’t love talking about how great their job is and indoctrinating young, impressionable minds as to the True Path in Life?

My excitement quickly turned to hesitation and then to actual dread as I thought about how I could set up a table about fundraising that would be interesting to 13-year-old girls.

I had no videos of fundraising; what would those look like, anyway? A film of two people in an office: one says, “*We were hoping you’d consider a gift of \$10,000 to our capital campaign, Ms. Big Philanthropist,*” to which the other person replies “*Why, yes, I was thinking the same thing,*” at which the first person jumps up and down shouting “*Yes!*” Hmm . . . maybe not.

I had no tri-fold presentation board to put on my table, besides, what would I post? The front page of a grant application? A turndown letter from a foundation? Even photos of people in programs that are funded by philanthropy didn’t really seem like they would be very informative for the girls at the career fair.

What about a computer set up and opened to a foundation search engine? “*Here, girls, this is what an IRS form 990 looks like.*” . . . Yeah, THAT would be popular.

### **You don’t have to be an expert in “Philanthropy”**

The problem, I theorized, was that the girls probably didn’t understand the basics. How could I talk about fundraising without first explaining the difference between a for-profit and a not-for-profit? Did they understand what a donor was? Were they familiar with the word “philanthropy”? All of which I thought were necessary prior to being able to talk about fundraising or grantwriting. So I ended up creating a couple of written handouts with a few vocabulary words, a list of nonprofit jobs sorted as entry-, mid- and upper-level, and a simplified sample grant proposal.

The Big Day arrived. I walked into the Career Fair room and saw other women busily setting up their tables. Most seemed to be representatives from corporations with professionally created tri-fold displays, video loops, colorful tablecloths with corporate logos, etc. Still, I didn’t think about turning around and leaving with my pathetic handouts until I saw that my table was right next to “*Mad Science.*” The women at this table had actual working science experiments that the girls could touch and play with, they were wearing white lab coats and their hair was bunched up in weird rubber bands that made them look truly mad but also super cool.

To this day I’m not sure how I survived that four-hour stint. While girls crowded around the “*Make Your Own Super Goo*” experiment next to me, I tried everything I could think of to get them to come to my table. In the end, I think I spoke with fewer than ten girls, and went home with an armful of unused handouts. I still think the handouts are pretty good, but the venue and presentation were all wrong.

What I didn’t realize at the time was even though those girls had absolutely no notion of fundraising—or even nonprofits—the truth is they were already fundraisers.

### **We are all fundraisers**

Think about it. At any moment in time, practically everyone is engaged in some kind of fundraising activity. Some fundraising activities are obvious, some less so:

- If your job description includes the word “fundraising” “advancement” or “development,” it’s a no-brainer . . . but anyone who works at a nonprofit is also a fundraiser; your efforts on behalf of clients and the results of those efforts are instrumental in the organization’s ability to garner support from donors.

- If you are on the fundraising committee of your church/temple/mosque, you know you are a fundraiser . . . but you are also a fundraiser if you have helped staff a booth at the annual summer festival, baked a cake for the spaghetti dinner, or greeted someone warmly as they arrived for a religious service; each activity contributes either directly to the institution's bottom line and/or to building a relationship with a potential donor.
- If you are training for a triathlon for breast cancer and soliciting sponsorships from your friends, you know you are a fundraiser (and so do your legs!) . . . but you are also a fundraiser if you encouraged your network (whether through emails or Facebook or Twitter or word-of-mouth) to support someone else's triathlon effort.

You're probably way ahead of me on this . . . every one of those Girl Scouts at the career fair was already a fundraiser. Selling Girl Scout cookies is the most obvious sign of induction into the adult world of philanthropy, but so are many other Girl Scout activities: a community service project, a visit to a nursing home, a donation of handmade blankets to the local children's hospital. As adults, they will be able to look back and realize these activities formed the foundation of a lifetime of fundraising activities--their inner fundraiser.

### **Questions to help you find your inner fundraiser:**

Think about a time when you have raised money for a cause you really believed in. Really give this some thought! Most of us don't have to go back to our childhoods, but that's not a bad place to start.

1. How were you raising the money? Were you selling a product (candy bars, pizzas)?
2. Why did you want to raise money for that particular cause?
3. How did you feel when someone said "yes"?
4. How did you feel when you made your goal?

Getting back to the basics of how good it feels to raise money for something we are really passionate about is the secret to finding your inner fundraiser and getting past the fear of asking for money.

Now when someone asks me to talk about what I do, whether formally in a workshop or informally at a party, I turn the question around and find out what personal fundraising experience they have had in their own lives and build on that. No scholarly definitions or jargon-filled treatises necessary, just chatting about the everyday fundraiser in all of us.

Still, if you have any good ideas for a cool costume or fundraising-related experiment (preferably involving beakers and lots of attention-drawing smoke) that I could use at the next Career Fair, I'd love to hear about it!