

Fundraising at the Grassroots

Ignore it at your peril!



Welcome to The Merrimac River Feline Rescue Society!

► **By Elizabeth Doyle**

When Enron went belly up, a lot of people got hurt. That's not news. But you probably didn't know that it hurt a lot of animals, too. That's because when the company was flying high, it was supporting one of the nation's top spay/neuter organizations: SNAP – the Spay/Neuter Assistance Program.

Based in Houston, Texas, where Enron had its headquarters, SNAP provides free spay/neuter for up to 50,000 animals a year. And the big corporation was their major sponsor.

"Enron provided us free office space, free parking, free copying, free printing, free postage, anything we could run through their in-house postage meters," says executive director Sean Hawkins. "On top of that, we received about \$200,000 a year in outright cash from them for various spay/neuter projects."

We all know what happened next. Enron went bust, millions of people suffered economically, and a worthy cause for animals was out on the street.

"Not only were we booted out of the building," says Hawkins, "we had to find new offices, and we had to start paying for printing and postage. On top of that, there were 6,000 people who were laid off from Enron here in Houston. They all knew about SNAP, too, and many of them were significant supporters."

SNAP was born with a donation from the Houston Rockets basketball team. But one gift, no matter how generous, is never enough to keep a campaign for animals running long. So the inventive Sean Hawkins had to work hard to fund his cause. In the early days, he did garage sales and bake sales, but soon moved from selling brownies to writing grants. Not as delicious, but ultimately more lucrative. Hawkins had a talent for grant writing and, before long, SNAP was being funded by generous grants, a few giant gifts, some grand events, and corporate sponsors – chief among them, Enron.

Now, with the economy heading south, SNAP was in peril. And Hawkins had to rethink his strategy a bit.

Going Back to Basics

"We'd started out backwards," Hawkins reflects. "We started out with a heavy reliance on grants and corporate support, and not a



One of the SNAP spay/neutermobiles

lot of individual donors. Now that we have seen the economy tank and foundation grant programs being eliminated and corporations going belly up, we've realized how important our individual donors are. That's how we are going to stay afloat."

Hawkins is nothing if not creative, and he's kept SNAP on its feet and even thriving. But the focus of his new fundraising projects is now on the individual donor. "It really is just about good manners and engaging your supporters on a very core emotional level," says Hawkins. "We organize what we call No Birthday Parties in each of the cities we operate in.

"No Birthday' means we're celebrating the prevention of birth. They are not fundraising events. We call our donors and our friends, and invite them in for a one-hour briefing on what SNAP is doing. The point is to engage them in the mission on a core level.



Sean Hawkins and pals

"We also have a thank-a-thon, where we divide our donor list up among our board members, and they call our donors to thank them. People are like, 'I've never had a board member of a nonprofit call me before!'

"We'd gotten so busy and caught up in direct mail and grants and galas that we kind of forgot about the people who send the \$20 checks every month. And they add up to be a lot."

Today, SNAP is running some major new spay/neuter programs, including a low-cost program that's funded by the city of Los Angeles. But for the day-to-day operations of the organization, Hawkins swears by his grassroots efforts.

Living Free – No Longer!

SNAP is not the only animal welfare organization moving away from total reliance on one or two big funders toward the basic one-donor-at-a-time approach to fundraising.

Living Free in California is a beautiful animal sanctuary that looked as though it would be living free forever. This care-for-life home for homeless animals was endowed by one woman – Emily Jo Beard, the founder.

"When she passed on," explains Danette Grady, Living Free's director, "she left a charitable trust. Over the years, we were able to operate from the interest on the principle of the trust. But sometimes you can rely too much on that gift."

When the stock market began to tumble and the economy began to falter, Living Free started dipping into the principle of the chari-

table trust. "And the whole economic climate changed after 9/11 in particular," Grady adds. "We were hit by that."

Avoiding the One-Big-Donor Trap

Besides the danger of having all your eggs in one basket, there are other drawbacks to relying on one big donor. A wealthy person takes a shine to a small organization, and starts giving them big donations. It seems like all their problems are over. Then the donor starts making "suggestions" – like that they should build a better facility. But the priorities of the big donor are not always the same as the organization. Eventually, there's a parting of the ways, and the group finds itself with a larger-sized operation and not remotely enough funds to cover it.

Whatever the specifics, the bottom line for any animal welfare organization is the same: Don't take on commitments that depend on a single source of funds.

Danette Grady is now working overtime to save Living Free.

Top Ten Tips for Successful Grassroots Fundraising

Go Tabling: Set up information tables at pet supply stores, supermarkets, and fairs. It's one of the most effective and inexpensive ways to meet new supporters. Be sure to display nice photos of animals you've helped.

Keep in Touch: A simple newsletter will let people know what you're doing to help the animals. Experts say your members need to hear from you at least five times a year.

Put Out Coin Cans . . . Most local businesses will be happy to have an attractive donation can at the checkout counter.

. . . and Pet Food Donation Bins: Local markets may let you put an attractive bin by the exit for people to donate pet food. They may donate broken bags or dented cans, too.

Talk It Up: Offer to talk at civic clubs and churches, on local radio stations, and on cable access TV. And call the editor of the local newspaper. The media love animal stories! Perhaps they'd like to do a regular adoptable "pet of the week" feature.

Create a Flyer: State your mission simply and clearly, list programs and activities, ask for donations and volunteers, and give examples of animals you've helped, with good photos. Don't forget your phone, e-mail, website, and mailing address!

Have a Yard Sale: Ask friends to contribute items, and publicize the sale in the papers. (Have a donation can, too, and a poster explaining that the proceeds will help homeless animals.)

Get Online: Keep your website up to date. (What? You don't have a website? Call your grandchildren or other experts for help!)

What About Special Events? Dog walks and other get-togethers can be great, but avoid elaborate special events that require too much time or expense. They often end up costing you more than you'll make.

Post a Wish List: Put a list of things and services you need in your newsletter, at your shelter, on the website, everywhere. Include anything from pet food to office furniture, printing to painting. And ask businesses if they can donate any of the items.

no more homeless pets

She began by coming to the fundraising workshop at a Best Friends No More Homeless Pets conference, and is now starting to build a grassroots membership.

"I came to realize," says Grady, "that there is nothing too humble to do to get your cause known." Setting up tables in front of stores, having catalog sales, speaking to the local newspapers, holding fundraising events, and working hard to engage and renew old members will all be part of her strategy. "Even though we have had our difficult times, we are now just so motivated and enthusiastic, because we have new tools to use that we learned at that workshop!"

“ Now that we have seen the economy tank, foundation grant programs eliminated, and corporations going belly up, we've realized how important our individual donors are. ”

Grady is learning fast – and with a sanctuary that's already full of animals depending on her! But she's optimistic about the future, and delighted to have lots of caring new supporters.

Building a Base of Support

Grassroots fundraising takes longer to get off the ground. But it builds real, sustainable support, rather than fly-by-night income. And that's a good place to grow.

The Merrimac River Feline Rescue Society began as nothing but a group of volunteers determined to care for the hungry alley cats who hung around the Massachusetts seashore, begging restaurant patrons for bites of their fish.

One day, at a meeting in Newburyport, someone pulled out an Alley Cat Allies publication that explained how to care for feral cats through trap/neuter/return – trapping the cats, getting them fixed, and then putting them back where they live and providing them with food and a watchful eye.

Everyone helping the cats was a volunteer. To cover spay/neuter expenses, the group set up tables at local fairs, and put donation cans at restaurants and liquor stores.

Soon, the Merrimac River Feline Rescue Society was gaining a reputation far beyond its Newburyport shores. People were calling from all over, asking for help with cats – alley cats, house cats, all kinds of cats. Soon, the group needed an adoption center.

"That's when expenses started growing," says Stacy Le Baron. "Rent and maintenance cost money. So we held our first Fur Ball. We continued with the donation cans, too, and we started a newsletter."

One thing snowballed into another. As their good reputation grew, so did the demand for their services. Financial needs grew, too, but so did the number of people willing to help.

"In the first year of operation, our costs were under \$25,000," says Le Baron. "Then, with the new adoption center, they jumped to about \$40,000 or \$50,000. Two years later, we were doing much more, and costs were close to \$90,000. We've been growing and growing. More and more cats! Today, our budget is about \$340,000."

But the group is still using the basic fundraising model they

built at the beginning. And it's serving them very well. They have events like wine tasting and silent auctions and a welcome wagon for new neighbors. They host cat shows and, yes, they even still go tabling!

How to Use Larger Grants and Donations

Of course, they occasionally get larger donations, too, and that's a real blessing. But they are very savvy about using them. For running their basic program, they rely only on their regular fundraising. When they get a large, special gift, according to Le Baron, their

policy is, "We're not going to use it to pay off the bills, even if life is tough. We're going to put it in a restricted fund and not touch it, because it's important that this money be used for our next step forward."

As a result, they have just opened a brand new center – a cage-free environment for the cats.

Meanwhile, SNAP is back on its feet, and Hawkins has attracted some large new grants for his spay/neuter campaigns. But more and more, like so many other animal welfare organizations, SNAP is focusing its basic fundraising on ordinary people who care about animals and want to make sure they have the best life possible. 🐾

For more information on grassroots fundraising, e-mail info@bestfriends.org and ask for our website resources.



Recycled Gardens

One thing that's working well for the Oregon Neutermobile is plant sales. "We have a whole nursery," says Celeste Crimi. "It's called Recycled Gardens. People donate plants and cuttings.

"Our slogan is *Adopt your plant, and prune your pets!* Our first year, it grossed \$25,000. And we offer plants as gifts to our volunteers. One of our best volunteers is our treasurer. He takes the special needs plants!"