

GHOST in the GRAVEYARD

KRISTIN O'MALLEY, PRESIDENT AND CEO



I grew up playing Ghost in the Graveyard. Think of it as a giant game of tag with dozens of neighborhood kids. Keep in mind, this wasn't a Halloween thing. It was a daily-never-get-tired-of thing. And, because the boundaries for the game crossed multiple blocks (Remember the good old days when kids could roam?), the moms had trouble keeping track of us.

So, they developed a calling tree. When my mom was looking for me, she'd push-button her way down the phone list until she found a mom who knew where we had all drifted to tag me to come home. But there was a side benefit to kid-spotting. Because the moms got a chance to chit chat regularly, they became close friends.

Thanks to my unlimited mobile plan and a multitude of middlemen (teachers, coaches, and grandparents), I've never needed a land line and a mom-tree to track my kids down, but I know the days are coming when we're going to need a better communication system. And, I'm hopeful the recent technology upgrade at the Foundation has prepared me.

Truth be told, I've been resisting this for a while. I'll tell you why. Part of the upgrade will allow our donors to have 24/7 access to their funds so they can review their balances, process grant requests, follow-up on grants awards, and handle other transactions easily. Another part will automate many of our communications to them—and our other partners. Great, right? Everyone will be more efficient and self-sufficient. Yet, I really worried about the loss of human interaction. When someone calls for a fund balance or to ask a quick question (the Foundation's version of mom-chat), our connection deepens.

Then I realized, we need to practice what we preach. For years, we've been preaching about the importance of nonprofit capacity building, strengthening one's infrastructure to get to the next level of operational, financial, and organizational maturity. Because of the Foundation's incredible growth over the past five years, we had reached another tipping point in our 30-year history. To sustain and augment the important work related to our mission, we needed to streamline and automate as many

transactional duties as possible. By doing so, *everyone* on our team can become front line warriors. *Everyone* can have more time for meaningful conversations and projects that will make our community better: meeting with donors to understand their philanthropic goals and helping them achieve them; visiting nonprofit organizations to understand current needs and how programs are responding to those needs; creating educational opportunities to empower donors and strengthen nonprofit teams; and developing funder collaboratives to increase the impact of current initiatives.

As we all know, technology upgrades are expensive. *How* we accomplished the upgrade is as important as *why* we did it. Because we support the nonprofit community, it's easy to forget that the Foundation is a nonprofit organization, too. However, when faced with challenges of organizational growth, we do exactly what we advise our local nonprofits before undertaking a capacity-building project: build reserves to have "skin in the game", look for outside funding to help with one-time costs, and have a solid financial plan to ensure self-sufficiency moving forward.

We are very fortunate that three donors, who understand the correlation between capacity-building and increased impact, stepped up quickly to help cover our one-time start-up costs. With a generous lead gift from Mike and Kris Anne Gitlin, gifts from the Lawrence-Lynch Corp. Foundation for Charitable Giving Fund and an anonymous Massachusetts-based private foundation, and our own financial commitment to the increase in annual costs, we were able to move forward strategically and purposefully.

The entire process—determining the software provider, locking in the funding, reviewing and overhauling our internal standard operating procedures, and preparing and training for the conversion—took countless hours and spanned 18 months. But, with a little help from our friends, we'll be more tech savvy when we boot up the new system in December. We'll also have more time to focus on things that matter: our mission, our donors, our partners (and maybe even a game of Ghost in the Graveyard).