

## The Future of Fundraising Is Here



FUNDRAISING

By *Rasheeda Childress*

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Back when Carlos Prieto was attending college part-time and trying to figure out what to do with his life, the answer walked right up to him — in the form of a canvasser from Greenpeace. Prieto talked to the canvasser, who spoke passionately about the organization’s mission to protect the environment.

## The new crop of fundraisers is questioning everything. Can they reconnect with the donors nonprofits have lost?

“I fell in love with the idea of combining your passions and spreading that to the masses,” Prieto says.

He became a canvasser for the Greenpeace Fund. Realizing how much he loved sharing the mission, he worked his way up in the fundraising office, briefly leaving for a position at a different nonprofit. Now a major-gifts officer, Prieto uses texts, emails, and other technology to keep in touch with donors — but he nurtures and cements those relationships in person, often in nature.

“Whether it’s a hike with a donor or just sitting on a bench in a park with them and overlooking their favorite viewpoint, it gets them out of their traditional box and way of thinking,” Prieto says. “Rather than just sitting at a table face-to-face with them and it being more transactional, free-flowing conversation can happen at that point.”

### The Top Line

- Early-career fundraisers come to the field with a lot of passion for mission, and they have new ideas about how to raise money.
- Despite their energy, they struggle to find mentors, set unrealistic expectations for themselves, and wrestle with work-life balance.

- Experts say young fundraisers will be important in engaging the next generation of donors and that holding on to them will be critical for the field.

Prieto is part of a new crop of fundraisers, primarily in their 20s and 30s, storming into the profession. They are bringing their full selves to their work, and with that comes a passion for the mission that draws them to nonprofits. They constantly question what's being done and offer new ideas about how to do things better. These up-and-comers have a chameleon-like nature that allows them to easily transition between young new donors and longtime supporters who remind them of their grandparents.

“They’re unbelievably creative people coming in with really unique and exciting ideas, ways to utilize technology effectively, ways to be hyperresponsive to donors in a way that I don’t know was the standard when I started,” says Caitie Deranek Stewart, senior director of development for the University of Florida [McKnight Brain Institute](#).

Despite the energy and conviction next-generation fundraisers bring to the work, they face challenges. They struggle to find mentors, get discouraged because they set unrealistic expectations for themselves, and wrestle with finding the right work-life balance. Veteran fundraisers say nonprofits need to find ways to support these fundraisers and encourage them to stick with it because new blood and new ideas will be crucial to turn around a trend that plagues the nonprofit world: fewer donors. It will be up to new fundraisers to court the newest donors, says Angela White, executive vice president of the [Eskenazi Health Foundation](#).

“We need their voices,” says White, who has more than three decades of experience as a fundraiser. “They’re going to help us figure out who are the next gen of our donor pool and how do we start communicating with them and grow those relationships. That’s our hope for the next generation of professionals.”

## Mission Driven

Birgit Smith Burton has been a fundraiser for 37 years, last year completing her term as chair of the [Association of Fundraising Professionals](#) global board. When Smith Burton started, there were no relationship-management systems to keep track of donor information. When fundraisers talked to donors, they wrote the information on a note card, which they added to the donor’s paper file. Today things are very different, and Smith Burton, who is still heavily involved in the AFP and the [African American Development Officers Network](#), which she founded, talks to a lot of young fundraisers. When asked what’s different about the new generation of fundraisers, her response is concise: “They themselves are different.”

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Because of their life experience and the world they grew up in, they have a fresh perspective on fundraising, Smith Burton says. These digital natives are fluid in social media and new technologies; they might be happier setting up QR codes than doing direct mailings.

How young fundraisers are coming into the field is different, too. If you ask a dozen fundraisers who've been at it 15 years or more, almost all will say they stumbled into fundraising after seeing an open job opportunity. This new crop of fundraisers still includes people who got into the profession by chance. But it also encompasses people who pursued degrees in fundraising and nonprofit management.

"I'm seeing much more of that intentionality nowadays, where people are going to school and taking classes about fundraising and then intentionally pursuing a career in fundraising," says Alice Ferris, a 30-year fundraising veteran who serves as adjunct faculty for the Nonprofit Leadership program at the [University of Denver](#).

**"Just because we've always done it this way is not a good enough reason to continue to do it that way."**

Annyce Brackins is one of those intentional people; she spent her childhood raising money. Whenever her school was selling popcorn, candy, or holiday presents to bring in funds, she was gunning for the top spot.

"The people that raised the most funds would get a little gift card," she says. "For me, it was like, 'I want the gift card.'"

Brackins carried that fundraising spirit into college. Her work-study job was in the development office, calling parents of current students and alumni to share the school's latest happenings and ask for donations. By her senior year, Brackins was

managing other students, sharing tips about how to connect and have meaningful conversations with the people they called. With fundraising in mind, she got a master's degree in nonprofit management and now works as institutional giving manager at [Youth Represent](#), a nonprofit focused on youths of color affected by the criminal-justice system.

Mission drives this new generation of fundraisers more than previous ones, says Michael Buckley, managing partner at the fundraising consultancy the [Killoe Group](#).

"When I started, it was a job," he says. "But now we're seeing with this up-and-coming generation a lot more passion and excitement for the mission of the organizations that they want to work at."

That was definitely the case for Michelle Flores Vryn. She was pursuing a Ph.D. in conservation research but realized she wanted to make a difference right now rather than on the slow-moving research path. After discovering that nonprofits were creating "on-the-ground impact," Flores Vryn pivoted. Many of her fundraising peers had similar experiences, she says.

"A lot of younger people are finding that same thing," Flores Vryn says. "You find an area of interest and then you see where that leads you and who's making moves."

Young fundraisers coming into the field are also more racially diverse, according to several people the *Chronicle* interviewed. Available statistics point to more diversity, though more of a trickle than a groundswell. Thirteen percent of the 2,955 fundraisers who responded to the [2024 AFP Compensation and Benefits Study](#) said they were 34 years old or younger. When the AFP broke down the racial data by age group for the *Chronicle*, 82 percent of fundraisers 35 and older identified as white only (not biracial), while that number fell to 77 percent for those 34 and younger. Colton Strawser, the consultant who conducted the survey for the AFP, noted that the racial

data isn't a complete picture because it's not a required question. In the 2024 survey, 16 percent of respondents didn't answer the racial-background question.

## Shaking Things Up

These new fundraisers with passion and a more intentional fundraising path are doing things differently. They question everything.

Newer fundraisers often ask why something is done a certain way and if the organization could try something different, says Stewart, at the University of Florida McKnight Brain Institute. She's in the next-gen age range but has a dozen years of fundraising experience and regularly works with younger fundraisers at the university.



LATINO EQUITY ALLIANCE

The Latino Equity Alliance's 15th anniversary gala was quinceañera-themed and scaled down from previous galas to create a more intimate setting. Director of development Yesenia Mendoza (below) suggested the changes because past events "felt very transactional."





COURTESY YESENIA MENDOZA

“It’s the idea of questioning everything,” she says. “Just because we’ve always done it this way is not a good-enough reason to continue to do it that way.” They ask questions like, “Can we have a gathering that’s much more mission aligned? Can we have a bag-stuffing party where everybody puts together disaster kits? Can we avoid the gala and instead have a benefit concert if it’s for an orchestra?”

Yesenia Mendoza is a young fundraiser who loves to ask why. She started at the [Latino Equality Alliance](#) as her first job out of college five years ago and has worked her way up to be director of development and operations.

“I ask a lot of questions. Why do we do this?” she says. “What works and then how can we alter our strategies to make sure that we’re not just doing things because that’s how we’ve been doing it for 15 years.”

In 2024, Mendoza proposed a change to the organization’s gala. It had been growing from 150 attendees to 200, then to nearly 400, and some at the organization hoped to see attendance reach 500. But Mendoza saw things differently. To her, the gala “felt very transactional.” She’d seen donors responding better to smaller gatherings that felt more intimate. Mendoza suggested capping the gala at 250 people, including staff. She encountered pushback but reached out to a mentor who encouraged her to reframe her proposal and persist. She did, asking the board and executive director to try it her way just once.

They agreed. Because it was the LGBTQ+ organization’s 15th anniversary, the group themed the event as a quinceañera, which is the traditional Latino celebration of a

girl's 15th birthday. Attendees loved it.

"There was a lot of nostalgia," Mendoza says. "A lot of people didn't have a quinceañera, and it felt like it was theirs. We even did the [Baile Sorpresa](#) [or surprise dance], the cake, everything that comes from that special moment. People were really impressed by the experience."

Despite early concerns — "board members felt unease because you're now selling less tickets, so upfront you're actually losing money" — with bigger donations, the event raised \$49,000, more than twice what it raised from the previous one, Mendoza says.

When it comes to doing galas differently, Christen Blackledge has thoughts. She is currently the special-events manager at [Kids Meals Inc.](#), a nonprofit devoted to ending childhood hunger. At her previous job at an animal shelter, younger donors weren't as excited about traditional galas. So she helped spearhead an after-party.

**"I tell my staff, I'm always willing to try something new. But the one question I always have is, does it move our mission forward?"**

"You could buy a separate ticket for the after-party, and that's just to dance and drink; you're here for a good time, and you're a supporter of this cause," Blackledge says. Having both a gala and an after-party, she says, allowed the organization to cater to mature and corporate donors who wanted a black-tie event and the opportunity to reward employees with spots at their tables, while also appealing to young professionals who wanted a more active event at a lower cost.

### **'Kind of a Chameleon'**

Another way that young fundraisers come at the field differently: They are comfortable showing up in the ways donors of different ages are most receptive.

"You can be kind of a chameleon in conversations," says Max Harper, a next-gen fundraiser who is director of development and planned giving at [Butler University Advancement](#). "If I need to be young and hip — for lack of better words — I can do that. If I need to be a little bit more buttoned up and go to a meeting with a suit and tie on, I can do that. It's really about meeting people where they are and making sure that they're comfortable building a relationship with you."

For this generation, building relationships requires both in-person and digital savvy. Blackledge has taken steps to make the website for Kids Meals Inc. more inclusive, adding a toggle on the donation page to translate it from English to Spanish, and translating newsletters as well. "We can reach more people," she says.

Old-school fundraisers wonder if technology will make it harder to build strong relationships. But these new fundraisers feel they've found a good balance.

"In this fast-paced world that we're living in, donors really appreciate it when they can receive the communications they want and the love from us," says Prieto, the major-gifts officer at the Greenpeace Fund. "Establishing personal relationships with donors is important, be it going on a hike or texting them on their birthday."

Building deep relationships is an important part of major-gift work, but early-career fundraisers are also committed to creating meaningful relationships with donors like themselves — people who can afford only to give small gifts. Madeleine Durante, associate director for donor acquisition at the ACLU, has spent her developing career helping nonprofits cultivate everyday donors.

"If you're a major-gift officer, you can know who your donors are at a very intimate level," Durante says. "If you're someone like me who's doing behind-the-scenes mass donor contact work, that can be a lot harder."

Until December, Durante worked as a fundraiser for MoveOn.org. She says one of her strengths as a fundraiser is “being creative about how can we marry what we’re really good at” as an organization with fundraising goals.

Durante realized that MoveOn.org was really good at mobilizing grassroots supporters to text their peers to come out and vote. She thought the group could translate that strength to fundraising. “We could use that peer-to-peer texting model to reach out to our donors and not always with a solicitation but with gratitude.”

So the organization began asking volunteers to send thank-you texts to donors, many of whom were giving small amounts like \$10 or \$25. The response rate was about 5 percent, which Durante called impressive. Most of the messages were of appreciation. “It was people saying, ‘Wow, I can’t believe a real person is thanking me,’ especially because these people are giving at the grassroots level,” Durante says.

She says it’s really important to counteract the narrative that small donations don’t make a dent in the problem. “It’s easy to see the compounding disasters that happen in the world and say, ‘I’m just one person. What can I do?’” Durante says. “The strategic challenge of the grassroots fundraiser is to be an antidote to despair and to translate those very real feelings of pain into action.”

## Lack of Mentors

Being new to fundraising is exciting, but there are also challenges. Too few mentors are available to provide guidance. Sometimes young fundraisers’ ideas are shot down, and no one is there to help them set realistic expectations for their work. And, like older folks in the field, finding the right work-life balance can feel impossible.

Next-gen fundraiser Destiney Patton is involved in a lot of organizations, including the AFP, where she talks to peers regularly. One of the hottest topics of conversation when young fundraisers get together: “Not having the mentorship,” says Patton, donor-relationships manager at [Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee](#). “If we

don’t have the people in place to help train us, then we’re just figuring it out on our own.”

Fundraising is a second career for Blackledge, at Kids Meals Inc. Her first career in finance wasn’t fulfilling, but she saw “magic” in the nonprofit world. So she actively sought mentoring. Some of the responses she received: flat-out nos, people saying they were too busy, and one person who said he didn’t mentor women. “That was a little heartbreaking for me,” she says.

Ferris, the professor at the University of Denver, says this isn’t uncommon. Former students have reported similar difficulty finding support.

“Very often they’re going into jobs where they don’t have someone internal to mentor them,” she says. “They say, ‘We hired you to do this, so we’re not going to spend any time trying to figure out how to make it better or work with you to make you better at it.’”

Everyone the *Chronicle* spoke to for this article said mentoring is crucial for developing strong fundraising talent. Mentors provide a wealth of resources and can be the difference between succeeding and struggling in your career, says Flores Vryn, the fundraiser who pivoted from environmental research.

“I found that early on in my career, people who knew where to get resources definitely had a leg up,” she says.





MICHELLE WATSON, MICHELLE WATSON

**Christen Blackledge (below), a fundraiser at Kids Meals Inc., looks for ways to make events engaging for both young and seasoned donors. The group's Harvest Luncheon in November started with holiday shopping at the Market and Mimosas pre-party.**







JERREN WILLIS PHOTOGRAPHY

Blackledge, who serves as co-chair of [Rising Professionals of Color in Fundraising](#), says she's been a sounding board for young professionals who feel as if their ideas aren't given serious consideration or who feel they've been left out of discussions.

Sean McCarthy has spent much of his career writing grants. Early on, he was discouraged by what he saw as a low success rate.

"It was really hard when I would be denied to not assume that it was because I made a mistake as a grant writer," says McCarthy, associate director of institutional giving at the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank. With mentoring and experience, he learned his grant success rate was actually pretty good, but during that time, he saw peers get discouraged and leave the field.

New fundraisers face a challenge their more veteran colleagues would recognize: finding work-life balance. Today's technology exacerbates the possibility of burnout, says Buckley, the consultant.

"Our society has changed into this expectation that we are on our phones all the time," he says. "It has definitely become a more constant relationship job. You don't want to be connected to your job 24/7."

Some next-gen fundraisers report they've gotten good advice on how to manage their workload. Brackins loves that a former boss advised her not to give in to the "urgency culture." She used to feel like any request required her immediate response. "Now I ask, 'When do you need it by?'" Brackins says.

But others, like Harper at Butler University, are still trying to figure out how to find that balance. "It's something that I continually need to work on," he says. Harper admits he'll happily respond to a donor's question at 9:30 at night if it's an easy answer, because the donor "feels supported" and it gets it "off of my plate."

## Holding On to New Fundraisers

Nurturing new fundraisers is absolutely critical for the future of the field, says Vicky Pugh, a longtime fundraiser and co-CEO of the fundraising consultancy [Advancement Experts](#). She knows that won't be easy in a profession known for its high rate of both turnover and burnout.

"We can't expect to get more time out of someone if we are not very intentionally helping them move to the next level in their career," Pugh says. "It's ongoing coaching, ongoing mentoring. Turnover has always been very rampant in our field, but I do think if we're more intentional, we can retain our next-gen fundraisers longer."

Pugh says it's also important for organizations to include young fundraisers in creating their metrics and understanding success.

"They hire people to come into jobs, and they're given their metrics: You have to meet so many donors every week. Or you have to have so many proposals submitted every month," she says. "I don't think that works because that stresses people out. How can you come into a new job and all of a sudden have all these metrics that you had no say in? It's a group effort with their supervisors that meets the needs of the organization but gives them ways that they can succeed."

Travis Tester, a fundraiser who's been in the game nearly two decades, loves working with young fundraisers. He says it's important to bring them into the fold of the organization by listening to their ideas and valuing their contributions.

“I say, ‘I’m going to teach you things. I’m going to mentor you,’” he says. “‘But I’m also looking to you to teach me because what your generation knows is not what I grew up with.’ For those of us who really love this profession and live and breathe that, next-gen fundraisers are important, and they bring a lot to the table.”

Tester is chief development and communications officer at the nonprofit [Foster Success](#), which helps teens transition out of the foster-care system. His fundraising team has a wide age span, and he uses lunch-and-learns to show that everyone is valued. Any staff member can share a new technique and suggest applications during the sessions.

“I tell my staff, I’m always willing to try something new,” Tester says. “But the one question I always have is, does it move our mission forward? If it doesn’t move the mission forward, we have to reconsider it.”

White, at the Eskenazi Health Foundation, says she and her colleagues make an effort to talk to new fundraisers about their ideas, even if at first blush, they aren’t what’s traditionally done.

“You can work through any fundraising strategy or technique together if you have that environment that welcomes new ideas and that welcomes diverse thought,” White says.



JONATHAN SPRAGUE/REDUX FOR THE CHRONICLE

**Carlos Prieto, a major-gift fundraiser at the Greenpeace Fund (shown here with his wife, Jaynie Loeb), likes to meet with donors in nature. He sometimes takes them hiking.**

Tester adds that taking risks and letting new fundraisers try out their ideas can help them feel valued and grow in their career — as they raise more money for the organization or learn why a certain strategy didn’t succeed.

“Why not allow younger generations to try something more innovative or creative and see if it works?” Tester says. “It can be low risk. You could look at a set of mailings that go out to 1,000 people and say, ‘Let’s just mail it to 100 people and see what the response looks like.’”

Stewart, who works with younger fundraisers at the University of Florida, says it’s important to share the way you would do it as an experienced fundraiser but not to expect new fundraisers to do things your way.

“Do I necessarily press on my team to make phone calls?” she says. “Not if I know the donors don’t want that. What do I press them on? I press them on sharing the mission, being responsive, being thoughtful, being consistent.”

She’s had success shepherding the newest fundraisers by “talking about the importance of an engagement plan for your top donors over the next several weeks or several months or several years.” As they think that through, they often come up with innovate, creative plans.

White, who spent many years consulting before moving to her current position, says she’s worked with a lot of next-gen fundraisers and believes in their potential to do good things in the field.

“I feel really excited about the future of our profession when we’re working with the next-gen members of our team or when I see them working in our community or in other nonprofits,” she says. “I think the future is bright, and I think we need to embrace the diversity that they bring to the table of thought and of action.”

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FUNDRAISING FROM INDIVIDUALS

WORK AND CAREERS



**Rasheeda Childress**

Rasheeda Childress is the senior editor for fundraising at the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, where she helps guide coverage of the field.

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