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Ratcheting up the 'Fun' in Fundraisers

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Silent auctions are so ... quiet. Worthy causes are getting wacky.



Photo: Leah Millis, Star Tribune

Carol Bergquist played the flute as she jogged on a treadmill while her fiancé Larry McDonough accompanied her during a 40-hour “treadmill-a-thon.”

Nearly 120 people participated in a "Treadmill-a-Thon" this week -- an offbeat fundraiser featuring folks treading while walking dogs, playing the violin and wearing costumes -- to drum up cash for a tenants rights group called HOME Line.

[Larry's Note: HOME Line, which provides free legal, organizing, educational and advocacy services so tenants throughout Minnesota can solve their own rental housing problems. HOME Line works to improve public and private policies relating to rental housing by involving affected tenants in the process. You can contribute to HOME Line at <http://givemn.razoo.com/story/larryandcarol> or <http://www.homelinemn.org/treadmill.>]

Two weeks ago, a Rosemount woman dribbled a basketball nonstop while running a half-marathon to raise money to combat child sex trafficking.

High school seniors parked a bright purple toilet in the yard of an unsuspecting neighbor in Mapleton, Minn., whose payment to move it went to the American Cancer Society.

The arrival of summer brings out a burst of creative fundraising in Minnesota. It's the season when some folks say goodbye to galas and golf tournaments and crank up their imaginations for a cause.

Offbeat fundraisers are "absolutely" on the rise, said Heidi Droege-mueller, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American Association of Fundraising Professionals. Concocting new ways to capture public attention is increasingly important as nonprofits' funding from all quarters shrinks, she said.

"The philanthropic market is increasingly competitive," said Droegemueller. "This is tapping into communities that they might not have reached before, say younger supporters, or people who the status quo doesn't satisfy."

Treadmill for a cause

Minnesota's only "Treadmill-a-Thon" was inspired by someone "far out there." HOME Line staffers were in a conference room brainstorming about fundraising when a guy wearing a gas mask peered in from a street window.

"We thought it was weird, but then thought: What could we do to make people stare at us?" said Michael Dahl, public policy director at the Minneapolis nonprofit.

Dragging a treadmill into the conference room and having people run for 40 hours seemed to qualify -- especially if the people wore wacky costumes and did weird things, live on a webcam. On Monday, for example, one woman wore a wedding dress while playing the violin and a doctor wore scrubs and fielded medical questions via the webcast.

"This is a chance to get people inside our office to see what we do," said Dahl. "Plus, we can run information under the videos that highlights our work and accomplishments."

Tom Haeg, a former Hennepin County housing court referee, was among those stepping onto the treadmill this week. He said he joined in because he likes the creative fundraiser.

"This is more high-tech, with the Internet, and it's personal," said Haeg. "I like exercising, too. There's only so many silent auctions you can go to."

The first Treadmill-a-Thon pulled in \$20,000 last year, said Dahl, who hopes to raise \$60,000 this year, thanks to a \$20,000 matching grant.

Dribbling for donations

Nicole Smith also is running for a cause, but while dribbling a basketball. The marketing director from Rosemount ran a half-marathon June 5 and plans to do three more this summer.

Smith can be seen training on the streets of Rosemount, wearing a T-shirt saying "Race for Her"

and accompanied by the rhythmic beat of a basketball hitting pavement.

"I definitely get some weird looks, but it provides an opportunity to get a conversation going and create buzz," Smith said.

Smith got the idea from a friend who runs a nonprofit called Dribble the World in New York. About the same time, she learned about the horrific conditions facing children who are sold for sex.

"There are more than 1.8 million children worldwide involved in sex trafficking, including 300,000 in the United States," she said. Smith is raising money for Breaking Free, a St. Paul nonprofit helping women who have escaped prostitution, as well as for a safe house in Moldova.

She doesn't have clue how much money will come in. "I've never done anything so unique," she said.

Groups big and small

"Being creative can generate a buzz," added Michael Ferber, a Twin Cities fundraising consultant. "There's only so many golf tournaments and walks and runs you can go to."

The beauty of offbeat fundraisers is that one person or a small group can make a splash, nonprofit leaders say.

The "Toilet Seat Heroes Team" from Maple River High School in Mapleton raised nearly \$5,000 this year. Neighbors paid \$30 to get the toilet removed from their yard and \$40 to make sure it didn't come back, said Mary Cassem, a director at the American Cancer Society in Rochester.

Likewise, about 30 people have signed up for the first "Skydive for Hunger" on July 30 in Baldwin, Wis. It's expected to raise \$20,000 for Neighbors Inc., in South St. Paul.

The event is the brainchild of Neighbors employee Gail Wildenauer. She always wanted to skydive, but wanted to do it for a "good cause."

The skydive builds on another offbeat fundraiser that Neighbors Inc. is known for -- massive plastic duck races. For four years, the numbered ducks have raced down a 30-foot slide into the Mississippi River, winning prizes for the participants and grossing up to \$34,000 for Neighbors Inc.

"We wanted an event that would stand out," said Zhu. "And it attracts like minded sponsors. A lot of businesses we work with are open to new ideas."

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