

TOOLKIT CREATING AN ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

By Stephanie Golden

Community arts education (CAE) organizations looking for creative development strategies should not overlook a major resource they already possess: their alumni. Alumni associations have long provided educational institutions (universities, private schools, even summer camps) with valuable support, ranging from donations to mentoring of students to advocating publicly and privately for the institution and its mission. Many institutions strategize to develop long-term relationships not simply with students, but with entire families over generations. Development staff works to deepen these connections and pass them on within the institution.

Guild members can realize tremendous benefits from cultivating alumni. While some have had alumni programs for years, others are just beginning to develop them. In the process, each institution customizes the standard alumni association model to suit its own character and needs.

INITIAL QUESTIONS

CAE providers confront certain challenges. First is defining who is an alumnus. "Is it someone who took one class, or who stayed for a long time?" asks **Michael Ibrahim**, Director of Development at **All Newton Music School** in West Newton, MA. "It's not like a university graduating class. You don't want to cut people off."

Another challenge, notes **Robert Capanna**, Executive Director of **Settlement Music School** in Philadelphia (SMS), is that CAE organizations serve primarily school-age children, and "people don't put their elementary school in their bio." They need to be encouraged to identify as former students. And, since they recollect the school in very personal terms—a piano teacher they saw once a week—it's important to connect this individual experience with a broader picture, so they see the school as a large institution that needs their help.

In addition, many people's association with the organization is not abruptly terminated by graduation. CAE providers may still be serving people in their 80s who started taking lessons when they were nine. Since the school remains part of the fabric of life, it tends to be invisible. "The challenge," says Capanna, "is to highlight that experience so they can identify it as valuable."

Claudia Haydon, Director of Development and Marketing at **Community Music Center of Boston** (CMCB), raises the question of how to adapt an alumni organization to her school's mission of serving underserved populations: "I'm more likely to write a grant to pay for alumni activities than ask them for a penny." Though some alumni do donate, in general Haydon sees alumni more as advocates than as a source of funds.

CONCEPTUALIZING STRUCTURE, ALLOCATING RESOURCES

Determining the structure of the alumni association depends on specific goals, on institutional culture, and on resources available. Some CAE organizations plan formal alumni associations on the university model; others invent new

models. Over its 115-year history, **Third Street Music School Settlement** in New York City has sometimes had a strong alumni association, with elected officers and events throughout the year, says Executive Director **Lee Koonce**. The formal association no longer exists (although many alumni remain connected to the school and its faculty), but Third Street is working to reactivate it.

As part of the buildup to centennials in 2011 and 2010, respectively, All Newton and CMCB are also creating formal associations, although the final structures are still undetermined. All Newton intends to develop a planned alumni giving program separate from the regular annual giving fund. CMCB plans to let the structure develop organically. "We need to see who we recruit, what genres they're in, and what ages are represented," Haydon explains, before deciding whether to organize the association by decade or by instrument, for example. Ideally alumni volunteers would act as captains of these groups.

Instead of a formal organization, SMS developed an "alumni effort" as part of celebrating its centennial in 2008. Since a significant percentage of both board members and regular donors were either former students, parents of current students, or children of students, "forming a separate organization seemed redundant," says Capanna. Instead SMS focused on encouraging people to identify themselves as former students and contribute their stories. There is also a "booster group" of people under 40 called Young Friends of Settlement, whose function is fundraising and getting people engaged with school activities.

Ifetayo Cultural Arts, an organization in Brooklyn, NY, that supports youth and families of African descent, is based on an African model in which alumni are expected to remain engaged with the organization and the community after completing the program. "Although it's not perceived as formal, it's extremely formal, because they carry this expectation, and their voice is extremely valuable," says President and CEO **Kwayera Archer-Cunningham**.

An earlier attempt at a formal association failed because it was not an organic extension of Ifetayo's community. So Ifetayo took on the challenge to "dare to create strategy around your own organizational culture," as Archer-Cunningham puts it. The alumni maintain a strong community among themselves, which feeds their connectedness to the organization and the larger community. This level of commitment is built through Ifetayo's arts programming, which moves children through rites of passage from adolescence into adulthood as they learn specific dances, songs, and rhythms that reinforce core values about the meaning of community.

At SMS, alumni relations is a major focus of the communications department. CMCB Program Associate Harlo Holmes allocates 10 hours a week to finding alumni and creating a database, but Haydon foresees this evolving into a two-thirds or full-time position. Ibrahim is the only development staff member at All Newton, but he believes that, given some staff oversight and board involvement,

alumni relations can lend itself to volunteer work. Haydon, by contrast, feels that volunteers can be challenging: "We get a lot of requests from would-be volunteers, but we don't have the resources to manage them at present."

REACHING OUT TO ALUMNI

Finding and contacting "lost" alumni means going through old registration records, contacting everyone on email or print newsletter lists, and talking to staff, faculty, and board members. Long-time staff and faculty are invaluable, since they generally remain in touch with many students over the years. Board members too may maintain extensive alumni connections.

Contacting older alumni may require a postcard to the last known address or a phone call. Younger alumni tend to be connected online and may be found through social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. Holmes created a badge for CMCB alumni to put on their profile that signals their school connection and enables them to find other alumni. A special alumni section of CMCB's website connects alumni with faculty and fellow ensemble members and tells them how to volunteer and support the school.

Major initiatives offer excellent opportunities to find and cultivate alumni. Building up for a capital campaign, All Newton planned a dinner recognizing top-tier donors at a country club, followed by a performance at the school. To create some buzz around the school's history, local alumni (discovered through faculty who were still in contact with them) were also invited. "We invited faculty, so the alumni would know someone else there. And teachers introduced their students to each other. They told stories about the teacher, and had some laughs," Ibrahim recalls.

In connection with its centennial, SMS created a "Settlement 100" campaign, asking alumni to identify themselves as former SMS students and tell their stories. Many people wrote in about themselves or people they knew at the school. From these SMS created a list of 100 interesting, unexpected people, mostly alumni but also former faculty and board members. Publicizing the list, which included well-known names like Kevin Bacon and Chubby Checker, brought considerable press coverage. The result: more donors identified themselves as alumni and gifts increased dramatically. Everyone who responded to the campaign went into the database and mailing list.

Third Street borrowed the Settlement 100 idea and through its newsletter invited alumni to reconnect with the school and share their stories about it. This fall, Third Street will team up with StoryCorps, the national oral history project, to interview alumni and record their stories—a project offering great opportunities for publicity and engaging still more alumni.

MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

Print and email newsletters, websites, and social networking offer ways to stay in touch. Ifetayo has a password-protected social community on its website for alumni. CMCB developed website and email surveys asking alumni what level of involvement they preferred, ranging from "keep me updated" to attending alumni concerts and organizing parties. Sifting through the responses allows the school to identify a core group of active alumni. Current students are future alumni, and Facebook, MySpace, and blogs are tools to cultivate relationships with them that continue into the future.

Alumni serve on boards and advisory committees; they are volunteers, donors, supporters, faculty, and performers. Haydon of CMCB plans a phone-a-thon with alumni calling other alumni, saying, "Let's support the school's capital campaign during this anniversary." She foresees bringing alumni to lunch or to the State House to talk to donors and funders. Ifetayo alumni self-select into set roles: teachers, assistant teachers, board members, and "core members," long-term members "tasked with keeping our mission as a living energy throughout the organization," explains Archer-Cunningham. SMS hosts a distinguished alumni recital series, open to the public, with an associated master class, and a lecture series that includes alumni lecturers.

SUSTAINING THE PROGRAM

Finally, organizations must provide what Haydon calls "spiritual sustenance" to keep alumni engaged after the excitement of the big initiative fades. What's essential, says Capanna, is to give everyone who has benefited from the school the chance to express this. "It's logical to focus on famous people, but it can put off regular people. You want a way for most students to say, 'I went there too.'" Adds Koonce, "Their lives were changed by their experiences at a community arts school, and many are extremely willing to participate in the life of the school—if we just ask them." ■

About the Author

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