

in area hotels such as *Travel Host* magazine and Southwest Airline's *Spirit* magazine.

"Know who your partners are and leverage that knowledge to benefit both the event and those community partners," Cumnock said. "Don't go it alone or walk around with your hand out. Look for ways to give back and keep them coming back by being creative."

For more information

The Ronald McDonald House of Dallas exists to serve and sustain families when serious illness or injury strikes the most cherished part of their lives, their children. To learn more about RMHD's mission or The Trains at North-Park exhibit or to contact Jill Cumnock, chief executive officer, visit www.rmhdallas.org/. ■

Volunteerism

Customizing volunteers' experience grows loyalty, commitment to programs

Nonprofit leaders must make an investment in their volunteers if they expect those volunteers to do the same for their organizations, said Diane Renaud, executive director/CEO at The Education Experience at St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center in Detroit, Mich.

"When someone gives of their time, its personal and it speaks to a part of them," Renaud said. "When someone has an interest in volunteering, we find their strengths and tailor the opportunity for them because if you're interested in what you're doing, you're more committed to it."

The Education Experience at the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center is an education organization working to help children overcome deficiencies that exist in the Detroit public school system and to help adults get a GED and/or vocational training, so volunteer opportunities run the gamut, the CEO said. The organization has a vast amount of practice customizing volunteer positions for their audiences and recruits from a wide variety of sources, including faith-based organizations, the business community, and local high schools and universities.

"We work closely with all the different faiths in the area—people who are connected with churches or their temples. Many of them go to their faith institutions when they want to get involved in the community, and we tell them we work with kids right there in their neighborhoods," said Renaud. "We also work with neighborhood alliances and business groups, telling them that we work to improve the qual-

ity of life for adults in the area by helping them get a GED. This helps the tax base and business owners ultimately have a stake in that."

Renaud also visits local schools and colleges, offering students the chance to fulfill their community service requirements. "Students write papers after completing their projects based on their experiences," she said.

Recently, the CEO called on a class at a local university. One student was an engineering major, she said, someone who may not normally think there was a place for him at The Education Experience, but she told him that the nonprofit could use his expertise in space planning.

"You need to understand their skills while trying to meet your organization's needs. This student could work collaboratively with the staff to find out what they want, talk to vendors, do a cost assessment and create a timeline," Renaud said. "The project falls off the team's plate to a person with the specific expertise."

Other volunteer activities include working directly with the children and adults one-on-one as tutors and working in the children's urban garden, to sitting on the board of one of the center's development committees. "Have a clear understanding of the category of persons you are talking to and then speak directly to that audience," said Renaud.

Once a prospective volunteer makes their interest known, The Education Experience provides a detailed (See **VOLUNTEERISM** on page 8)

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orientation for new candidates. The CEO said everybody that walks in the door receives a clear understanding of the organization's purpose—changing the dynamic of the at-risk community in Detroit through education—and information on the nonprofit's history of services and the types of activities that take place at the center.

Renaud said the organization currently boasts 100 active volunteers. Other nonprofits hoping to start, grow or improve their own volunteer programs, she said, should focus on:

- **Providing a multilayered volunteer experience.** Just as nonprofits have become more sophisticated, so have volunteers. Today, interested persons do their research online and compare their options in hopes of helping in a professional capacity such as in accounting, public relations or other professional services that are welcomed by most organizations.

- **Communicating through a variety of mediums.** The Education Experience provides volunteers with all of its corporate communications, such as its newsletter and recurring solicitations, and also communicates through its blog and Facebook page. When a specific opportunity arises such as volunteering at an upcoming event, program managers post the information on these platforms. The center also celebrates its volunteers' achievements each April, which is volunteer appreciation month.

- **Investing in a stellar Director of Volunteers.** The director is the first person to meet any new volunteer and is responsible for forging a personal relationship with the individual. The director also acts as the go-to contact point when volunteers are sick or cannot make a shift.

- **Preparing ahead of time.** Make the process easy for volunteers, be responsive to their concerns and show respect for their time. If a volunteer takes the time out of his/her busy schedule to show up,

have the task ready for him/her to begin when he/she arrives.

- **Featuring volunteers whenever possible.** Volunteers are the very heart of every organization, so if an opportunity exists to spotlight a volunteer, make sure it happens. If a news outlet is going to run a story about your organization, focus on what an outstanding volunteer does to help the organization run smoothly. Everyone likes to be recognized, and this sort of attention is appreciated far more than any wall plaque or gift card. Find ways to celebrate their efforts in ways that won't mean withdrawing money from the budget for something that will eventually be a dust catcher.

- **Acknowledging volunteers' ideas.** Provide public credit when a volunteer makes a good suggestion. These individuals sit on the front lines of your program activities, so when a good suggestion comes your way, make sure the board, staff and other stakeholders know where it came from.

"In general, organizations are getting better at managing volunteers, but we aren't there yet and as an industry, we need to make sure they are celebrated, respected and appreciated," said Renaud. "Volunteerism has become such an important part of the way we live as a nation; we need to understand that volunteers can do more than the menial tasks the staff doesn't want to do. We have a responsibility to train the next generation of philanthropists."

For more information

Diane Renaud is the executive director/CEO at The Education Experience at St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center, which provides educational programs, basic skill building and academic enhancement for at-risk children and adults, designed to build self-sufficiency skills for academic and employment success, personal achievement and dignity. To contact Diane Renaud or to learn more, visit www.svsfcenter.org/ or phone (313) 535-9200. ■

In upcoming issues

Look for these features in future issues of *Nonprofit Business Advisor*:

- ✓ Best practices to achieve real diversity in the board room.
- ✓ Strategies to boost operating revenues.
- ✓ Tips to stay focused when planning a special event.