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JEWELRY FOR JUSTICE:

A School Fundraiser that Helps to Build a Diverse Community

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JEWELRY FOR JUSTICE:**A School Fundraiser that Helps to Build a Diverse Community**

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Building community in ways that are responsive to multi-income and multicultural school environments is a perennial challenge for those of us involved in urban public schools in the U.S. Within that challenge, finding fundraisers that are in sync with a school's culture and values, that involve more than a minority of the children and families, and that actually generate money can feel particularly daunting. And yet, the King Open School in Cambridge, Massachusetts has founded a fundraising tradition that has worked in all these ways for a very diverse K-8 school community – with the added bonuses that it emphasizes issues of social justice and that it is fun for both the organizers and the “shoppers.” We call this annual event “*Jewelry for Justice*.”

THE IMPETUS

The Martin Luther King Junior Open School is a public school of about 500 students, about half of whom are children of color (African American, Asian, and Latino/a). A little over 40% qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school also incorporates the only Portuguese bilingual program in the city. A core aspect of the school's mission, along side fostering academic skills, curiosity about the world, and critical thinking, is to “instill in students an enduring sense of social justice.” Issues of justice, fairness, and equity are woven throughout the formal curriculum and also addressed in how the teachers and staff approach the social dynamics in the classroom and other school-based activities (<http://www.kingopenschool.org>).

It is also a school with unusually strong family involvement, with many of us invested in developing community activities that reinforce the school's guiding values and principles. So a big part of the impetus for the *Jewelry for Justice (J for J)* event was a desire to find a fundraiser that would work across race, culture, and class differences to support the school's special social justice curriculum.

HOW IT WORKS

The *Jewelry for Justice* fundraiser is based on the simple notion that many people have jewelry that gathers dust - bobbles that are no longer worn but too special to toss. I remember looking at my own

overloaded jewelry drawer and thinking: there is a lot here that I never wear, but I would not feel right throwing it away nor would I would want it to fall to the bottom of my bags of donations to Big Brother/Big Sister. But still I wouldn't mind giving it away – IF there was some cause that could make good use of it. I figured if I had a drawer full of donations, so might others.

The idea behind this probably sounds much like the tired “tag sale” (or garage sale or yard sale if you actually own a garage or yard) -- except that the emphasis is *totally* jewelry. While this singular focus on jewels may seem a “slight” variation, it represents a world of difference. Tag sales can be thankless endeavors that generate mounds of junk along side the revenues. Personally, I have never felt that such sales have been worth the effort and exhaustion. Jewelry is more manageable; jewelry is more portable; jewelry is more repairable ... and, to let out a deep secret, jewelry triggers an inexplicable sense of delight. It makes me smile to handle it, admire it, repair it, redesign it, and even sell it ... and I am not alone.

So for the *Jewelry for Justice* event, we simply ask community members to donate their unwanted jewels and then turn around and sell them to others. If it is so simple, why do we think this is such a brilliant fundraiser? Because it works in so many ways that are consistent with our school's philosophy.

WHY IT WORKS

It is inclusive

It builds community

It celebrates diversity

... and it raises money

Inclusive & Accessible to All

People can participate in many ways – through making donations, volunteering to help with preparations, serving as sales people on the night of the event, and actually buying the jewels. We have been very self conscious in how we have designed each aspect of the event so that there is room for as many people as possible to participate – while, at the

same time, taking care to ensure that no single individual is over taxed.

Donations. We put out the call for donations early and often – and in multiple languages. While we use the school listserve, it has been important to remember that only a small subset of families uses the list. Since King Open includes a Portuguese bilingual program, flyers in both English and Portuguese go home through what the school calls “backpack express” and are posted throughout the halls.

We accept everything, which also enhances the inclusivity of the event. Our personal tastes play no role in what gets prepared for sale. Some people will donate the most marvelous gems; some will pass along outrageously ugly items; others will give you their broken junk. We accept it all, and only a few items are deemed hopeless and tossed. It is amazing what a little jewelry cleaner, a pair of small pliers, and a packet of earring backs can do to rejuvenate the donations. To get a sense of the extent of donations, imagine a large school foyer ringed by eight 12-ft long tables entirely covered with jewels for sale. It takes a lot of donors to generate this volume, but without much effort, it has gotten larger and larger each year.

Timing. The jewelry sale as a solo event might draw, but the range of participants has been greatly enhanced by pairing it with other activities. Most years we have linked the *J for J* sale to the all-school “Arts Festival” that showcases all types of arts generated by the children from performance art to painting and sculpture. This festival tends to bring out a particularly wide range of families; many, who may not participate in other school activities, come to see the performances of their own children. The jewelry is set up outside the auditorium, and sales go on both before and after the performances.

Pricing. We decided very early on to keep the pricing simple and cheap. This decision came out of our desire to keep the goals of accessibility and community building on par with the fundraising goals. Our pricing structure has been \$4 per item or 3 for \$10. This is true even for the items that we know are made from jade, pearls, and turquoise. There are many exceptional deals within reach for almost every family. However, it is also nice to have the extra special bargains of 25 cents to \$1 for the yougens so that everyone can afford something. The affordability is a critical factor in making the fundraiser accessible to all families in this mixed income school.

There are clearly fundraisers that can raise more money, which without a doubt is sorely needed by this urban school. A King Open silent auction typically raises over \$10,000 dollars. Some fundraisers need to focus on this bottom line, even though only those with disposable cash can participate (in this particular school community that leaves most families out). *Jewelry for Justice* is a complement to these other fundraising efforts (not a replacement) and has additional goals which become evident if you do the math. *J for J* tends to yield between \$1,500-1,800. At no more than \$4 per item (and often less), that means that we sell over 400 items! Clearly a lot of people are brought into the school community through this event.

Builds Community

A sense of community is fostered by the inclusivity and also by the sheer fun of it all. Many people love jewelry – children, women and, yes, men. To be sure, this fundraiser is not for women and children only. That old chain that a grandmother donated is appreciated for its bling value among the seventh and eighth grade boys. Many a dragon pendant has been snapped up by the male set – and all the little ones seem to cherish the colorful buttons and plastic necklaces. When we have been able to time this event close to Mother’s Day, we have seen an increase our adult male customer base.

People often think about community as something built through shared tasks, goals, and struggles, but it can also be built around shared delight. Even the preparations for *J for J* can be fun. My children were involved from day one; and others have always been more than willing to help and handling the jewelry is part of the draw. We gather around the kitchen table to appreciate the beautiful as well as the comic donations. We clean, repair and even “mount” the earrings; we talk with wonder about what each stone might be, where various pieces originally came from; we see pieces from our youth and reminisce: “Can you believe that *I* used to wear stuff like that!”

We also laugh our way through the actual sales event – wearing the necklace of gaudy flowers or bright orange earrings that hang to the shoulders. Donning something unique is part of the sales person role. The scramble and hard work around the set up and sales are also off-set by the joy of seeing other people delight in finding and purchasing new jewels.

The most profound contributions to building community, however, are probably the new personal connections that are spawned after the event. In halls at drop off time, you can hear complements of someone’s jewelry followed by the reply, “I got this

at the *Jewelry for Justice* sale.” Seeing people you barely know wearing “your” jewelry creates a new bond – donors feel a special connection to the person who is now wearing and cherishing those earrings that were previously sitting in a drawer. On the playground after school, people approach folks they don’t know well, “Those used to be mine – they look great on you” or “I donated those! I am so glad you like them.”

I have also been struck by the generosity of people beyond the immediate school community. Some staff and families have spread the word to colleagues and friends who have generously put together bundles of donations. Others have tapped family and even estates of loved one. In many ways, these are very personal donations, and the willingness to entrust the school with these items is inspiring. The extended network of people who contribute becomes, in a sense, an expanded community for the school.

Celebrates Diversity

By simply looking at the varied donations, one would be able to tell that King Open is a diverse community. Donated jewels include finely crafted silver and semi-precious stones as well as items made from seeds and carved wood. Some donations have clearly been in someone’s stash since the 1970’s, while some come directly from the discount store at the local mall. Some look as though they are from Africa, some from Latin America, some from India, some from the Middle East ... and some of Native American, Scandinavian, and local New England design. The donations have come in all sizes and colors as well – some have been large, bright, and flashy, while others have been tiny, delicate, and subtle in design. The sales display in and of itself is a celebration of diversity.

There is a familiar maxim that “one person’s junk is another’s treasure,” and this seems to be particularly true when it comes to jewelry where tastes are very personal but also shaped by age, culture, gender, complexion, body size, and even class. Sharing the search for the right trinket can be an opportunity to reach across some differences; it is not uncommon for people to scan for earrings that would look nice on someone else. People aren’t bound by their own preferences; they are stepping outside of themselves to consider others’ points of view. At the same time, the shared appreciation for adornment is a bridge across widely divergent definitions of beauty.

Jewelry preferences hardly represent a dimension of diversity associated with oppression, and I would never suggest that a fundraiser like this one could replace more concerted efforts to recognize and

bridge important differences associated with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. In fact, I would venture to guess that there is greater tolerance for (less oppression based on) differences in tastes for jewelry than there is for divergence around any other issues. However, it is also the case that jewelry is one of many expressions of cultures – ancient and contemporary – and some jewelry choices are symbolic of identification with a particular cultural heritage, class, and gender politics. As such, this event has been an opportunity to establish connection and a reservoir of appreciation for differences.

ADVICE

The most important advice for anyone who would like to pick up on this idea is “keep it simple.” But also a few more lessons learned include:

- Keep the pricing structure simple and the prices affordable.

Although many donated items could generate significant cash on eBay, it would take considerable time and expertise to price each item by its worth on the open market. For me at least, that endeavor would become a burden -- besides what’s the harm in letting a very valuable item go for cheap? The worst that happens is that you make some people extremely happy, and they make sure next year’s event is on their calendars. One school volunteer told me she had a museum store merchant admire her \$4 necklace and inform her that it was a rare Israeli glass probably worth \$1,000. It’s like giving someone a winning a lottery ticket.

- Identify organizers who will enjoy the work.

The organizers need to be people who love jewelry – not in the sense that they covet the treasures, but in the sense that they enjoy handling it and appreciate the aesthetic. It helps to have children who share this delight – to laugh about the outlandish, to admire the well crafted, and to brainstorm about how to turn the broken pieces into some thing beautiful. Both of my children joined me in working on this event, and my son took particular interest in wielding the pliers to repair (and revise) many of the donations. It probably also helped that while I enjoy working with my hands, I don’t do it for a living. I teach and spend an abundance of time on the computer. So evenings spent cleaning, fixing, and mounting earrings are enjoyable – a shift of gears for me, a meditative way to relax.

- Don’t take the set up too seriously.

If this event got too polished, it could take away some of the spontaneity, the welcoming atmosphere, and the participative opportunities. Simple displays can help prevent *J for J* from becoming “precious.” One year, we began with cardboard packing from a recent purchase. Push pins turned the thick boxing into a necklace stand; the soft cardboard was rolled up and used to hang bracelets. The styrofoam packing spray painted black worked for displaying anything from necklaces to earrings. My son came up with the idea of using sterile gloves filled with sand to display the rings. A nurse practitioner friend supplied us with marvelous purple gloves which turned out to not only display the rings quite nicely, but to also hold the ends of wooden rods with bracelets and watches. One year, a volunteer arrived with tree branches to display the necklaces – another with the idea of taping hangers to the wall. We turned the broken screen from a window into an earring rack. This all contributed to the spirit of the event.

- Resist the pull to expand into other items.

This fundraiser generates a lot of energy, and it can be tempting to expand to clothing and other items. People will certainly approach you with requests and suggestions along these lines. But resist! You don't want to turn this into yet another tag sale that people can find on most sunny weekends in their neighbors' yards. Those don't bring quite the same interpersonal connection and playfulness that jewelry does.

A PERSONAL POSTSCRIPT

My children have moved on through high school and off to college, and we are no longer directly involved in the King Open community. So after chairing the *Jewelry for Justice* event for five years, we turned the leadership over to another veteran *J for J* volunteer. While involved, this fundraiser was a family affair. It took over our kitchen for over a month every spring. It was wonderful to have a shared family project; it was great to engage the children in giving something creative back to the community that gave them so much each day. It holds many good memories.

It also spun off something even more personally enduring. While working with the donations, we taught ourselves about not only jewelry repair but also jewelry making. We have now dubbed ourselves “Madsen-Bond Creations” and make our own jewelry. My son specializes in working with silver wire and gem stones, making wonderfully unique earrings; my daughter strings the most striking beaded necklaces; and I have taken my mother's old button collection and turned them into pendants (my partner's role is to admire and advise). We have

joined a neighborhood group of artists, and we hold open studios each spring. But with our roots in *Jewelry for Justice*, our primary goal will never be to turn a financial profit but rather to look for new ways to use our craft to promote justice. While my son was in high school, he and I participated in an annual holiday crafts sale that benefited the Art Department at the public Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, and we are now part of “Women's Works,” an annual arts-based fundraiser for the UMass Lowell Center for Women and Work. My guess is that we will never fully cover the cost of our new bead addiction, but we are still committed to having fun while trying to do good.