



Nonprofit Board President on How Fundraising Fills You Up with Ellen Archer
Season 1, Episode 7

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Transcript

Speaker 1:

Welcome to Asking for Good a podcast for people who want to make a difference, hear stories from seasoned nonprofit professionals and volunteers on how to begin or further a career in making the world a better place.

Katie Pooser:

Hello, I'm Katie. Pooser a career fundraiser committed to making the nonprofit sector better. Ellen Archer is a publishing industry maven as an executive at a number of top global publishing houses, Ellen has been behind bestselling authors, such as John Grisham, Mitch Albom, and Kwame Alexander. Ellen brings the same intensity that led her extraordinary success in the publishing industry to her nonprofit board service. She was named one of the responsible 100 by city and state for her civic engagement. Ellen is a volunteer fundraiser and the board president of a nonprofit. I invited her to join us because I want you to understand from the perspective of a board president, what a nonprofit board does and how its leadership impacts your experience as a staff member without further ado. Let me introduce Ellen Archer. Wow. Ellen, and welcome.

Ellen Archer:

Thank you so happy to be here.

Katie Pooser:

You have a successful career in the publishing industry, but today we're really gonna talk to you about your incredible work as the board chair of girls right now. Can you tell me a bit about girls right now and your role as the board chair of the organization?

Ellen Archer:

Absolutely. girls right now will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year in 2023. And it was founded by Maya Nusbaum, who remains lucky us, the executive director of girls right now. And under her leadership, Maya has grown the organization substantially and the number of young women's lives that she has touched and influenced and transformed is, is truly amazing and inspiring. And I feel so honored to be part of the organization as a board member.

Katie Pooser:

Excellent. I can hear your passion as you speak. Tell me about how you found girls right now. Obviously they didn't ask you to become the board chair the first day you met them. So how did that happen?

Ellen Archer:

You know, it's I guess it's often the way women find out about things through their friends, a very good friend of mine. And actually one of the first people I worked with in publishing called me and said, you know, there's an organization called girls right now and they're looking for board members and it wasn't quite the right fit for me should, but Ellen, I feel like your name is all over this. Like, you should definitely investigate this opportunity. And when I went to look on the website and I saw the board's mission, I'm a feminist. I, I really love empowering women. And of course I love the written word, reading and writing and communication skills are so important. And when I saw that there was this wonderful combination of things I'm so passionate about it, it did seem like it would be a wonderful opportunity

Katie Pooser:

For me. One time you told me, you think networking is one of your superpowers <laugh> and I think that's so true that, you know, if people know what you're looking for and the difference you wanna make in the world, the opportunities start to come up, but you've got to tell people how you wanna make a difference or what you care about.

Ellen Archer:

You're so, right. And I think one of the most important lessons for young women is that networking is really, really important. I think that we could do a better job of developing our networks through joining organizations, through meeting people outside of your work. You always, I think, should be connecting with people in all industries and because you just never know where those relationships might lead.

Katie Pooser:

Well, I know that you used some of your networking superpowers <laugh> to build the board. Once you became a part of the board, you astutely recognize that there was some real opportunity to grow the board and grow the organization leadership to serve more girls. So what did that look like?

Ellen Archer:

Well, well thank you. Yes. I mean, it was a wonderful opportunity when I stepped on, there were a number of board members who'd been on the board for, for several years, but who were more junior in their careers. And I think that there was a recognition that in order for Maya to build a stronger organization, that the board required sort of a recalibration and that bringing in more senior executives would help Mayan her goals for the organization. And so surprisingly, even though it is an organization that focuses on writing communication, I was the first publishing executive to join the board from a major publisher. And so I thought it was a really interesting opportunity for me to as you mentioned, tap into my network and see how I might recruit more senior members who also could bring in their broad networks to help support the organization.

Katie Pooser:

One thing I've noticed in the 20 years of nonprofit experience I have is that everybody is looking for something that works. If you've got a great program at your nonprofit people in executive positions, in

senior leadership, they wanna know about it. They, they wanna be a part of a winning team of something that's making a difference.

Ellen Archer:

Yes, I think that's exactly true. And I think when you get people excited about the mission of the organization and when there is a very dynamic executive director in place, which is true of Mya NASBA I think the, the support for the organization's almost organic, you just, it's not manufactured because you are just so excited about the difference that an organization is making in young people's lives. And then it just fills you up and you wanna figure out all sorts of interesting ways that you can support it and support Maya's work. And her team's work. Cause it's always a team effort.

Katie Pooser:

The idea of support brings me to a topic that we don't shy away from on this podcast. And that's fundraising on the, on the same vein of the skills that it takes to be a fundraiser, which no matter whichever role you would take in a nonprofit organization, having fundraising skills will elevate your career opportunities. And if you'll indulge us, I think this will really help our audience. If you could share with us about girls right now, how do you tell your friends and family and network about girls right now? And I wanna give everybody a quick note to listen for. So for our listeners, you'll hear in Ellen's short response, how quickly, efficiently and passionately she talks about the need and the future orientation, how the world can change

Ellen Archer:

Girls right now is a remarkable program that works with high school girls in underserved communities and helps them with their writing skills and communication skills by partnering them with professional mentors, journalists, and editors, because we all know that when you have great communication skills, you can do anything that you wanna do.

Katie Pooser:

Thank you, Ellen, for sharing your cocktail party pitch about girls right now, the way you would introduce it to your family and friends, that was a remarkable way to share succinct and very inspiring. Just in the couple of sentences you shared, you are a volunteer, you serve on the board and you also recognized the need for some different types of fundraising for girls right now. And you recognize the need for some creative ways to bring on different types of support. Now would be a great time for you to share with us a memorable gift that you were able to secure.

Ellen Archer:

Sure. Well, I mean, I, I feel that every board member should be wearing a fundraising hat. And one of the things that I think Maya established for every board member is a give and get expectation. And at first I was a little nervous is I think most people are because I think most people in issue like, well, I don't know how to fundraise. I don't know how to ask for money, but I think requiring every board member to think like a fundraiser is a very, very good experience for everybody. And I've learned so much because of that requirement because I too initially was a little concerned about how I was going to personally fundraise for the organization. And I think I underestimated as many people do the networks that I have in place. And that I've really, I've actually amazingly, I love asking people for money now. Like I have no problem asking people for money, but I think that was an evolution for me because I began to see that I was able to do it successfully in different ways. And they're always friends and family, you can tap, but

again, that's a limited pool and actually you're much better off, I think when you expand your network far beyond your personal connections, because there's only so many times you can go back to your friends and family and ask them for gifts.

Katie Pooser:

Right, right. But your power as a volunteer board member to tell the story of an organization, to anyone, not just your friends and family, it's heard so much better, so much thoroughly, so much louder when it's coming from a volunteer fundraising board member. Who's, who's saying I'm here voluntarily because I believe in this and I see it making a difference.

Ellen Archer:

Absolutely. And I think everyone who is a board member also needs to be a creative problem solver around how to build the budget and how to help the organization raise its profile. And so I always sort of approach problems creatively. I sort of look to see, okay, so what are the conditions here and how do we solve this problem? So it's a win-win for everybody because when everyone feels that they are getting something, that's the best possible outcome. One of the things I saw that would be helpful to the organization is there's always, there's always a need for strong board members, and there's always a need to create a strong pipeline of board members, but, you know, it's very hard to be doing both at the same time. And so I, I did tap some of my networks to bring on some senior board members, but we were also very focused as most nonprofits are on diversity equity and inclusion and how we could create a more diverse group of board members.

Ellen Archer:

So I began putting out feelers to my networks to identify younger professional women in their thirties and forties who might be interested in learning about the work of board members so that they could eventually assume a board seat and feel fully confident in their ability to meet the expectations of a give get board, which is what girls right now is. I went to my with an idea and the idea was to launch what I was calling a partnership committee. And the goal would be to bring in three to five volunteers who would join the partnership committee. And they would be ideally executives across different industries, not just publishing because communications is a critical skill for every industry. So how could we broaden the number of industries represented on our board? How could we identify young women in professional organizations, companies who would be interested in learning more about girls right now, learning more about fundraising and then setting a goal for them to fundraise for the year with the outcome being that if they could successfully bring in corporate dollars, they would be voted onto the girls right now, board and Maya being Maya was very open to the opportunity and we set a fairly modest goal for what we thought a partnership committee could bring in.

Ellen Archer:

Cuz remember, if you're asking a nonprofit to give some of their staff time to helping you create a new kind of opportunity, like a partnership committee, you want it to also be bringing in dollars because that's what it's all about raising money, right? <Laugh> so we set a goal of \$50,000 for this partnership committee. And I began to network and identify several women who were excited to join the partnership committee and I set up a calendar of meetings and the goal would be to also have the meet current board members to ask questions and learn about the work that we do as board members for girls right now meet the girls right now, staff to ask them questions about the organization and also have the opportunity to network with Maya, us family, executive director. So we started off with four women,

one who worked at Warner media, one who was at the Estee Lauder company, another who was with a healthcare company and another who was at a marketing agency. And it was a diverse group of women primarily in their late forties, early fifties, all of them with the understanding that there was a gift get expectation as a board member, but we would be helping them understand how to tap into their industries to showcase possible corporate partnership or sponsorships with girls right now, and how to create them in a way that would be appealing for each of those industries. The outcome of this in a nutshell was the partnership committee ultimately ended up raising over \$200,000 in less than a year. Wow.

Katie Pooser:

Four times your goal,

Ellen Archer:

Four times, our goal and three of those four partnership committee members were voted onto the board. One opted not to join because she was too busy professionally, but wants to continue her partnership with the organization. And so we, we have constructed basically now a framework where we can continue on and I have in this year passed the Baton to a board member who was just voted on, who was on the partnership committee to take over the partnership committee so that excellent. She could put her own stamp on it because I feel like that's the other thing is to create frameworks and then to give other people the opportunity to then forge ahead with them in a new and different way.

Katie Pooser:

That's excellent. There are two elements of the story that I think you modestly left out. The first part is that it was genius of you and Maya and the staff at girls right now to come together in this partnerships committee and talk to the companies about their priorities and what the companies wanted to achieve. And that's a critical element of fundraising, not just what are the organization's values and the donors values, but also what are you looking to create within your company within the nonprofit? And then how can we create a compelling presentation or story? So that, as you said before, everyone wins, everyone gets what they're looking for out of the partnership.

Ellen Archer:

Yes, exactly. And I can say that in advance of the partnership committee, I started to formulate the idea for it based on an internship program that I introduced at Holton Mifflin hardcore. When I was president of the division, I came to them with the idea of starting a girls right now, internship program, because as many people know the publishing world is pretty clubby and insider and doesn't always have the kind of diversity that one would hope for. And when I saw how extraordinary these young women were and how talented they were, I thought there was a wonderful opportunity for Houghton and Mifflin hardcore to introduce an internship program for these girls. And so we created a six week program for them where they could cycle through all of the various divisions of a publishing division to learn about editorial and sales and art. And then by the end of it have had enough exposure that they could confidently go to publishing houses and interview with some experience to speak about, which turned out to be a win-win, as you said, for all, because we actually at Houghton Mifflin at the time hired one of the interns into a full-time role.

Ellen Archer:

And another intern actually landed a great job too, at a different publishing house. So it actually, and we, we had hope Mifflin actually give money to girls right now as a corporate sponsor in exchange for helping to create this internship and for, for bringing the students to us, to interview and select for this opportunity,

Katie Pooser:

What a special extension of the existing programming too. You know, it's not just about fundraising. Fundraising is about creating the programming that changes the world. So that's incredible. And I don't know how you wanna share this news, but I think it's also a very important part of the story. You were just telling that one of the partnership committee members successfully secured a partnership at her corporation and that happened. And, and then what happened, Ellen?

Ellen Archer:

Oh, I love this story because I think this also speaks to when you're fundraising, you just never know how the ripple effect might bring in additional gifts that you hadn't even anticipated. So in this situation, we had secured this wonderful partnership committee member and she had successfully received funding from her corporation for girls right now to start a very exciting partnership. And that company promoted the partnership with girls right now on its intranet. And one of the top executives at this company saw that this new partnership was showcased on the company's intranet. And a couple of weeks later girls right now received a call from this person's attorney. And he asked a few questions about the organization. And then a few days later, the organization received an additional check from this executive, a personal donation of six figures because she was so inspired by the mission of the organization and the work it was doing.

Katie Pooser:

That's incredible. Yeah, that's incredible.

Ellen Archer:

<Laugh> it was incredible. And because this person is a bold face name, there's also an opportunity as well to build on that relationship and to see how we might partner with her, to bring in her own network of friends who might also be equally enchanted with the mission and the work that girls right now does.

Katie Pooser:

That's wonderful. Just a quick note intranet for those of us, not yet in the workforce, it's the internal communications within the company. So the company wasn't promoting this, even outside of the company, just within their own company, they found more people who cared about the work that the girls right now was doing.

Ellen Archer:

Exactly. So, and, and this year the partnership's goal because the partnership raised \$200,000 last year, the goal this year is \$250,000.

Katie Pooser:

All right. As should

Ellen Archer:

Be ambitious, right?

Katie Pooser:

Yes. Yes. That's a critical element, you know, pushing, pushing the boundaries. Once you told me that you believe that the million dollar mark for a nonprofit is a tipping point, and I couldn't agree more once a non-profit is raising enough money to provide programming at a million dollars. If you can get there, you're in a whole nother tier of organizational strength and possibility for fundraising, ultimately.

Ellen Archer:

Yes. And I think too, when you begin to see the results, you get even more excited and, and I think it just propels you to that next level, because you realize like so much of what, what blocks us is just in our heads. And you can just get past that and and, and, and see the joys of, of helping support a nonprofit in its mission. I think there's just nothing more rewarding than that.

Katie Pooser:

Well, on that note, Ellen, I have to ask you a personal question. Sure. You've had a fantastic career in publishing. And one thing we talk about on this podcast is the idea of making a career transition from the private sector to the nonprofit sector. L you clearly have the skills as a strategic thinker, and you have experience making creative and professional asks. So have you ever considered making that transition yourself from the private sector to the nonprofit sector?

Ellen Archer:

I have, and I am, I am active now on several boards and I'm really loving the work I'm doing there and am exploring different roles in nonprofit. That might be a good fit for me, where I can help advance the mission, use my corporate skills in a different sector and spending my time thinking deeply about what organization would be the best fit for me, where I could give the most from experiences I have.

Katie Pooser:

That's great news on my end. <Laugh> I'm so glad to hear that. You're thinking about that as the board chair, do you take part in the hiring process or do you inform the hiring process in any way for any positions?

Ellen Archer:

I do not. That is the role of the executive director. However, there are times when Maya will reach out to me and we might talk about the pros and cons of the candidate, and I'm always happy to meet with the candidate. And we've talked about it in the past. I've never had to, you know, Maya has a very good team of people and they go through group interviews and they've been successful. Although, as we all know, it's a, it's a tricky situation right now, holding on to people, both in the nonprofit and the corporate sector. But many of her team members are very engaged and have been with her for a long time, which is a real Testament to Maya's leadership.

Katie Pooser:

Absolutely, absolutely. The longer tenure does say quite a bit. You mentioned that girls right now serves underserved young women, and I'm wondering how that population and the concept of diversity, equity

and inclusion come together. Do you see diversity, equity and inclusion as an issue that girls right now is facing head on? Or is that just part of the day to day work of girls right now?

Ellen Archer:

So that's a great question. And thank you for bringing it up. We as a board and we have a wonderful board really looked deeply at our board complexion, as well as the staff complexion of girls right now, and recognized as many nonprofits are doing now that we needed far more diversity both on the board and on Maya's team. And we really set a challenge to change the complexion of both teams. And I'm really happy to say that through the partnership committee where I did focus on tapping a diverse group of young women, that we are now 60% BI on the board. And I think about that as well on the staff of girls right now. And, you know, it took effort and it took a lot of focus because it really is important for, for every organization to have diversity because, you know, you're never as good if you don't have diverse voices, it's of all kinds of age and profession and race, you need it all gender.

Ellen Archer:

We've got two men on our board because, you know, everyone comes at problems differently. And my feeling is the best kind of teamwork is when you've got lots of different people coming in and sharing different perspectives. It keeps you on your toes. It, it makes you more sensitive to areas that you just might be blind to. So I, I feel like it's been such a gift to bring on such interesting eclectic board members and as well as for Maya's team as well. It's only been more, more gratifying and, and richer and deeper for all the staff to have such a great diverse group of people they work with.

Katie Pooser:

That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Ellen. We really appreciate your time today and all the incredible work that you're doing at girls right now, and the other nonprofit boards you serve on. And the problem solving that you bring to the sector really makes a difference. So thank you.

Ellen Archer:

Thank you. I'm honored to have been here and I wish you and your listeners all of the best of luck and lots of success and fundraising and problem solving.

Speaker 4:

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