

MAKING FRIENDS – BEFORE THEY ARE NEEDED **“It’s Hard to Say ‘No’ To a Friend”**

The tendency to measure legislative “success” by simply counting the number of good bills passed and bad bills defeated can overlook other invaluable victories. John Askew, Executive Director of the SunriseArc chapter of the Arc of Florida, reminds us that true legislative success can come in a variety of shapes and forms, including nonprofits becoming friends with policymakers. After all, having informed friends can help nonprofits prevent bad bills from even getting introduced in the first place.

According to Askew, The Arc of the United States and its extensive network of Arc chapters across the country have enjoyed a rich tradition of grassroots involvement in policy issues at the federal, state, and local levels. In focusing on legislative, regulatory, and legal issues that protect and enhance “the vital programs and services for people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities and their families,” the Arc network covers a wide spectrum of policy matters, including: appropriations and budget, civil rights, developmental disabilities, education, employment, family support, health care, housing, Medicaid, social security, and transportation. To cite just a couple of examples, at the local level SunriseArc has taken positions on public transportation issues (advocating for ridership on buses), and at the state level the Arc of Florida played a prominent role in banning the state from imposing the death penalty against mentally retarded citizens.

Despite its long history of grassroots advocacy efforts, the Arc of Florida recognized it needed to re-energize its pool of dedicated volunteers and talented staff. Just like the best sports teams need to recruit continuously and go to training camp to work on basic skills and learn new plays, nonprofit advocacy “teams” must do the same things: recruit new talent, sharpen basic skills, and learn new strategies.

So in September 2005 the Arc of Florida hosted a two-day grassroots advocacy training program. The event pulled in people from more than half of the state’s 43 Arc chapters. Representatives from The Arc of the United States, the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, and the Legislature gave attendees “how to” tools to sharpen their grassroots advocacy skills. The training program “raised the awareness of local Arc leaders to become active in public policy matters.”

So how can someone determine whether such an event is “successful”? Askew observes that the value of such a gathering rarely translates into an immediate defeat or passage of a legislative bill. Rather, he wisely looks more broadly. For instance, at the Arc’s annual day at the Florida Legislature in 2005 – held before the training session – only a handful of people attended. Then, in 2006 after the training session 350 people attended and in 2007 the number shot up to 410 people.

Such numbers by themselves might lead some to shrug their shoulders and ask, “So what?” But informed insiders would understand the power of those impressive numbers. In Florida, groups conducting rallies gather between the old and new Capitol buildings. So when a handful of Arc supporters met at the Florida Legislature in 2005, few really noticed. But when 350 and then 410 advocates rallied for Arc following the training session, they created a visual impact that lawmakers could not ignore.

Indeed, Askew reports that legislators looked out their office windows and could not resist the urge to come down to meet with such a large crowd of advocates, constituents, and voters. That in turn drew in media, thus getting broader coverage of and awareness about Arc issues. With the combination of

advocates and media there, legislators voluntarily came to the podium, took the microphone, and addressed the crowd to show their support for Arc. Importantly, Arc also scheduled the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and cabinet officials to speak. In the midst of this event, Arc renewed important friendships and made many new friends, thus making the event – and Arc—a success for years to come.

Shared “Secrets” of Success

Among other observations, John Askew shared the following insights regarding successful nonprofit advocacy:

- *Proactively Make Officials Your Friends.*
When asked if there is any one lesson he would stress to nonprofits entering the policy arena, Askew shared this insight: “The most fundamental and important contribution that can be made is to acquaint elected officials from your locality with your cause. Personalize and humanize your cause.” Indeed, “in many instances when we had educated, informed, and inspired officials it turned the tide on matters in that we transformed these officials into champions for our cause.” So get to know, become friends with, and inform your officials before you ever need them. As Askew astutely observed: “It’s hard to say ‘no’ to a friend.”
- *Think “Year-Round,” Not “Once a Year.”*
One of the many lessons attendees of the training program re-learned is that advocacy is not a one-day activity. Rather, grassroots advocacy is a year-round activity. So Arc chapters work to establish strong relationships with policymakers in their hometowns. Arc chapters invite officials from their area to tour Arc facilities where they then learn more about Arc’s activities and concerns. That way, according to Askew, “when they are on Capitol Hill or at the state capitol, they know and like us already.”
- *“Keep Sharp”*
Most of Askew’s individual words stressed the importance of nonprofits getting to know policymakers so the policymakers in turn get to know about the nonprofits’ causes. But, a deeper lesson resides in his overall story: for nonprofits to remain sharp in their public policy work, they must work on the basics by recruiting new talent, mastering their skills, and learning new techniques.
- *Coordinate Colleagues.*
With a large group like Arc that has lots of chapters with staff and volunteers eager to help, it is extremely important that all members of the coalition keep in contact with each other so they all “speak with one voice.” If sub-groups go out on their own, they might inadvertently stress different points in ways that might be perceived as being inconsistent with the overall objective. By coordinating in advance, everyone on the team can stay on the same message.
- *Know the Law to Avoid a Headache-Causing Headline.*
Fortunately, Arc officials have kept informed about changes in Florida’s laws concerning interactions between public officials and the public. In particular, Florida’s new Governor recently imposed strict prohibitions preventing certain officials from receiving even the tiniest “gifts.” Accordingly, the Arc could instruct all of its members to avoid offering even the smallest, most innocent gifts, such as buttons.

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