

Chapter 6

FUNDRAISING AND PRINCIPLE

Grant Funding

When Bobby accepted employment with the nonprofit organization on dwarfism research, we knew we would be involved in fundraising. Grant dollars funded Bobby's salary and the initial grant would end in six months. As a result, I utilized the Foundation Center in Washington, DC, to sift through thousands of foundations to find the few focused on medical research.

The next step was to write the actual grant requests, a huge volunteer task that required 100% effort. It resulted in 81 initial requests for funds, two small grant donations, and lots of waiting. We lived in hope of landing *the big one* that would support the research and Bobby's job.

Direct Mail Letter

The doctor directing Bobby's research recruited a retired marketing executive to write a draft letter intended for a direct mailing to research organization supporters. The letter featured both of us, but was so far off base we did not even recognize ourselves. It was clear that the writer knew nothing about little people—much less Bobby or me personally. Indeed, his fundraising philosophy was to tug at the emotional purse strings of the intended donors. The letter was loaded with images of dependency, distress, exaggerations, and offensive words—victim, crippled, plight, and suffering. Bobby was portrayed as a pitiful *poster child* type needing to be rescued from pain and the jaws of death. The depiction was of a patient, not a professional. There was no mention of his success as a biomedical engineer with a master's degree coming to the organization to do medical research.

When we refused to endorse the letter, the only positive change was the removal of the fictional story about me—the pity-party philosophy still dominated. We discussed our concerns with the doctor and he agreed to meet with us and the letter writer. However, on the date set for the meeting, the doctor was unavailable and sent his assistant in his place. We explained that such fundraising tactics cause little people to be pitied and patronized. In turn, such misrepresentations hinder any conception of little people as equal contributing members of society.

At the same time, we presented a philosophy that would preserve Bobby's dignity and show his success. We argued that donors respond to knowing that their contribution is a worthy investment in a people with ability, determination, resilience, hope, and a future. Clearly, the writer was hearing such ideas for the first time. We hoped he could see that our philosophy and his letter were incompatible. Yet the next draft of the letter was virtually unchanged.

The doctor shut down our discussions with the letter writer and met with us separately. He appeared to understand our concern, but that understanding never translated into changed words on the page. Despite numerous attempts to reach common ground, all draft letters continued with the emotional appeal for funds. Bobby could not agree to this use of his name and person. It was a matter of principle.

As Benjamin Franklin said, “If principle is good for anything it is worth living up to.”¹

Unfortunately, our stand on principle had caused an early rift in the working relationship between Bobby and the doctor. Bobby had come to the nonprofit to improve the lives of little people—he could not endorse a letter that would encourage potential donors to view little people as helpless victims dependent on charity.

Eventually the nonprofit gave up seeking Bobby’s endorsement of the letter. But this wasn’t the end of the matter. Trust was completely broken when the nonprofit mailed the letter without Bobby’s knowledge or permission.

Family and Church Support

We needed some time-out after the distress created by the secret mailing of the fundraising letter demeaning Bobby’s name and achievements. The break came as a Christmas gift from Bobby’s mother and sister, Paula—airline tickets to Florida. We had three great weeks to enjoy Christmas and the 1983 New Year celebrations, sunshine, and family. It also gave us time to rest, reflect, and recognize that any future with the nonprofit would not fulfill Bobby’s dream of using his biomedical engineering education and talent for the benefit of little people.

Our Christian faith was a critical support that helped us through the demands of work and law school. Upon our return from Florida in January 1983, we were finally successful in finding a church family at the Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore. It was a large church where we enjoyed the service, the choir, the people, and the minister. Despite their gracious intent to make us comfortable, we declined the offer to build us a custom footrest. They did insist on reserving a front-row pew for us.

Within two weeks of our first church attendance, Reverend Smart made an unannounced home visit. We were shocked because this was February of 1983—when almost 23 inches of snow covered the city after the second biggest snowstorm on Baltimore’s record books. But the Reverend, well used to harsh climate conditions in Scotland, walked the half mile from the church to our apartment. It was a safe assumption that he would find us at home. I especially appreciated his visit after learning that, like

me, he was an alien resident and a former practicing attorney. We benefited from the reminder that despite the storms of life, God always shows us a way through.

Good News, Bad News

After more than a year of my volunteer grant-writing for the nonprofit, the long-awaited break finally came. A well-endowed national foundation approved a grant to fund medical research for a specific type of dwarfism. The check was in hand and the vital research could continue. At least that is what should have happened. Bobby went off to the nonprofit board meeting prepared to celebrate. I stayed at home to study in final preparation for law school exams.

The board was definitely excited to have received the foundation check. Organization funds were low and this grant presented as the answer for paying staff salaries. However, the board did not take kindly to Bobby's insistence that the funds were restricted to the research as described in the grant. They agreed with the doctor that they had the discretion to spend the grant money as they pleased. The good news had definitely turned into bad.

Bobby had three choices: (1) work contrary to the grant purpose; (2) resign; or (3) face discharge. Bobby chose to resign. He came home from the meeting and was almost inconsolable as he knelt on the floor and sobbed into my lap. The doctor had not only directed the board how to act, but he also had insulted us both when he told Bobby that he had changed since he married me. Bobby resented the wedge the doctor tried to place between us. If there was any change in Bobby, he had developed the courage to stand up for what was right.

I was so thankful for the stance he was taking. Nonetheless, it was a tremendous strain on both of us. My law school exams would begin in a few days and studying under these circumstances was extraordinarily difficult. Bobby was heartbroken. Not only did he lose his dream job, he also lost his friendship with the doctor. When the doctor tried to salvage the relationship by sending flowers to our apartment, it was as though they were for a funeral. The accompanying note expressing the desire for the friendship to survive this time of sorrow and tribulation was hollow, given that the doctor had inflicted the sorrow.

In one sense, the breakup seemed sudden; yet, in another, we knew after all the fuss about the fundraising letter that a parting of the ways was inevitable. We were just surprised at the timing. The level of dishonesty compelled us to seek independent counsel. Our first advisor was a former editor of a foundation magazine. This advisor told us that Bobby had a legal duty to inform the foundation of the change in circumstances. When Bobby advised the foundation of his resignation, the funds to the

PASS ME YOUR SHOES: Detours of a Couple with Dwarfism as They Find Love and Faith

nonprofit were frozen. This is when the nonprofit learned that indeed they did not have the discretion to use the grant money as they pleased.

Our second advisor was the director of the Legal Services Clinic at the University of Maryland School of Law. While I was at the law school taking exams, this experienced attorney met with Bobby, the doctor, and the nonprofit attorney to negotiate Bobby's severance agreement. As a result, our interests were well protected.

A Budding Tomorrow in Midnight

Although I wondered if God was allowing all this to happen to discipline us for our own dishonesty in the past, I also knew that God had previously moved us to take pre-emptive measures. As the poet John Keats wrote, “There is a budding tomorrow in midnight.”²

Soon after the *midnight* of the fundraising mailing behind Bobby’s back in December 1982, Bobby began searching for another job. By the time of his resignation four months later, he already had a full-scale job search underway.

By the beginning of May 1983, Bobby had a job interview lined up in Cleveland, Ohio, while I was taking my law school exams. A week later, Bobby accepted a job offer as a rehabilitation engineer at a hospital in Cleveland. We saw the *bud in tomorrow* and were well aware that God was guiding us through the other side of the storm.

We still had a deep sense of loss.

But as our friend George so rightly said, “You have to go where you can put bread on the table.”

The hardest thing for me in leaving Baltimore, as it was in leaving New Zealand, was leaving friends. However, the blow was softened because most of these friends were members of LPA that we would continue to see at events over the years.

On June 4, 1983, we hosted our official farewell—an open house from 1:00 p.m. until 11:00 p.m. Apartment living made it necessary to spread out the guests and a *come-and-go* event gave us a better opportunity to spend one-on-one time with people. We exchanged thoughtful reminders of each other as some brought us gifts and I gave away plant clippings.

The sentiments expressed in cards and notes like these touched us deeply:

Life wouldn't be half as nice without friends . . . ~Norma and Richard

Good friends are never far apart. ~Betty and Charlie

Here's the saddest goodbye that has ever been said . . .

but the gladdest of wishes for good times ahead. ~Robin

Chapter 6, Fundraising and Principle

¹ “Benjamin Franklin Quotes About Integrity,” AZ Quotes, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.azquotes.com/author/5123-Benjamin_Franklin/tag/integrity.

² John Keats, AZQuotes.com, (Wind and Fly LTD, 2020), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1043909>.