



Brown Boi Project youth leaders Nini, Edlinda and Jimmy facilitate at the 2012 national BUTCH Voices conference.

Photo credit: Anthony Dimaano

Brown Bois Building a Sustainable Future

By Dolores Chandler & B. Cole

THE BROWN BOI PROJECT (BBP), founded in 2010, is a leadership development and organizing project that brings together masculine of center women, queer men, trans men, and straight men of color into the same space to transform their privilege around masculinity into tools for racial and gender justice. In our first year, the Brown Boi Project raised \$1,600 in individual donations, but in 2011, we grew that number to more than \$20,000. Our goal for 2012-13 is \$35,000, and eventually we hope to have 45% of our budget come from individual donations. We have built a culture of giving and asking that allows each of us to hone our skills in raising resources to create change.

Anchored by our core leadership retreat that brings together Brown Bois ages 35 and under from around the country, the program fuses economic justice with leadership development. For each of these young leaders, they not only find a community and family, but they also develop valuable life skills through the program. Sessions are filled with deep conversations

about race and gender, but participants also take away skills in personal finance, fundraising, community organizing, self-care, networking, communications, and health.

For each cohort of 16 to 20 leaders, more than 200 apply. Brown Bois are directors of organizations, but they are also working on food justice in kitchens and on farms and aspiring to be police officers, fashion designers, and media moguls. We just celebrated our two-year anniversary and have already had over 100 leaders complete our program. In 2011, we were able to participate in the Fundraising Academy for Communities of Color. It was an amazing experience that helped us provide critical fundraising support and training for our board, members and key staff.

Building Social Capital

For Cole, the executive director of BBP, “Social capital is often the critical missing piece that we don’t get in school. It leverages the education you’ve received—whether on the streets or in an

institution—to build the network and resources you need to create change in the world.” Doing this in a culturally relevant way is just as important to BBP. You can be successful by your own community’s standards and have a meaningful impact without having to conform to the white, heterosexual status quo.

One of the single most important tools to build social capital is understanding how to move resources. The barriers to raising money faced by young people of color leading organizations are staggering. A 2008 study by Funders for LGBT Issues showed that 68% of LGBT people of color-led organizations have annual budgets of \$50,000 or less, which underscores why 62% of these organizations also have no paid staff. Expected to do more with less, grassroots fundraising is an optimal strategy to build their organizations.

Many of these organizations are providing critical community and direct service support that reaches those on the furthest margins of our movements. They also form the social fabric of a network that creates long-term cultural shifts within communities of color. Their survival is necessary, and the Brown Boi Project invests heavily in their growth to help effect long-term change.

Leading through Resourcing

The first step we use to build these leaders’ capacity to raise resources is to build a culture of self-reliance and success. The very first cohort of BBP was financed entirely by Cole. Although that meant it only had four people in it, she knew that the idea was so new that it would be difficult to get funders and donors to invest. The ethos of our work has become: if we want to see change, we must lead it and resource it. Each of us has the responsibility to make sure that this organization grows and thrives, reaching even more leaders.

During the leadership retreat, all of the Brown Bois receive basic training in grassroots fundraising. These trainings, led by seasoned grassroots fundraising activists, cover the fundamentals of relationship building, the mechanics of an ask, the history of institutional philanthropy, and strategies for connecting to our personal networks to support work that matters to us. For most, this is the first time they have worked on overcoming their anxiety about asking for money. The participants then go through communications training, which reinforces the fundraising training and helps them refine their messaging, effectively articulate the problems that BBP addresses, and connect fundraising to solving those problems.

After the leadership retreat, we offer coaching circles to the Brown Bois to deepen their skills in a particular area, including fundraising and grantwriting. Our pilot coaching circle, the resource circle, is a three-month course conducted virtually that

brings Brown Bois together from multiple cohorts in groups of six to eight. These circles are led by senior trainers in marketing, fundraising, business financials, and journalistic writing. They meet every two weeks as a large group and one-on-one with the senior trainer in the alternate weeks. From prospecting to understanding the landscape of philanthropy, the resource circles gives Brown Bois the tools to better navigate the field. They also cover how to set fundraising goals, create gift range charts, and develop language to make a successful ask.

Our core trainer, Jovida Ross, shares, “In the resource circles, we demystify fundraising and break it into approachable steps. Then we follow up with practical assignments and one-on-one coaching to hone their skills. They get to learn by taking action on real projects, with support and feedback. The process starts at an introductory level, and by the end, they know how to write a grant proposal, contact a foundation representative, and build a network of community advocates and supporters. They’ve practiced the steps needed and they gain confidence so that they can apply the skills to other projects. Long term, Brown Boi leaders will be able to attract the resources they need to bring their projects to life.”

The group spends the first portion of the resource circle working on a collective goal that relates to raising money for BBP, such as a grant proposal. This way they all develop shared language and a common frame for approaching the work. The latter part of the circle is designed to give them space to work on individual projects, such as identifying prospects and developing content they can use to pursue resources—while still learning from each others’ work. The resource circle allows BBP to increase our grantwriting capacity while the participants develop a level of competency that helps them get promoted and take on new jobs within fundraising. Furthermore, the virtual, part-time structure allows us to build our members’ capacity on a timeline and frame that works with their lives.

Brown Boi Teresa M. from Arizona shares, “The coaching circle was truly able to honor the experiential knowledge that I have, while expanding my knowledge on what fundraising and grantwriting can really be. The coaching circle gave me room to process some of the issues I have, and am working through, around the pressure of needing to give something to get people to give, and general issues surrounding conversations around money. In addition to the room to process, I was given tools to really move forward and hold conversations about fundraising and partnerships as political actions.”

“I learned the skills it takes to write a grant and the appropriate way to approach funders,” shared Megan B., one of our Brown Bois from Los Angeles. “It is not easy for me to discuss money, but this gave me the language and confidence to do so. I appreciated

the fact that the circle consisted of folks working on several different community projects. This coaching circle has given me a framework to take back to my core partners and has grounded me in understanding nonprofit fundraising. I feel one step closer to building a sustainable community and getting funding for my projects.”

A great example of the impact our coaching circles can have is the path of our first development and communications coordinator, Dolores Chandler. Before becoming a Brown Boi, Dolores had never written a grant proposal or made a major donor ask over \$100. In the resource circle, Dolores wrote her first successful grant proposal and discovered that she had a gift. Now Dolores runs our single largest fundraiser of the year, the Brown Boi Affair, and works on development prospecting, bringing in \$10,000 to \$20,000 annually. Dolores also provides one-on-one coaching to Brown Bois who are planning to apply for resources to support their local and regional gender justice community work.

Says Dolores, “The leadership training provided me with the tools and skills necessary for success, not only in my activism, but also in my personal well-being. After expressing interest in further developing my fundraising skills during the leadership retreat, I was given the opportunity to participate in a grantwriting circle and receive communications and fundraising training. It is often argued that success is as much about access to resources and opportunities as it about raw talent and intelligence. BBP works to build our leadership and economic self-sufficiency and in my case, it has succeeded in that goal. I am proud to be a Brown Boi, and I am committed to taking advantage of every opportunity BBP gives me so that I can continue to succeed.”

30 Days of Brown Boi

All of this training comes in handy when we launch our end-of-year campaign in November called 30 Days of Brown Boi. Each Brown Boi sets a goal of raising at least \$100 (but many set their goals higher) by December 31st. Last year was our first year running the 30 Days of Brown Boi, but we were still able to raise \$10,000 with just 30% of the Brown Bois participating. This year we hope to have 50% participation and have set a goal of raising \$15,000 total. Using a group fundraising page, each Brown Boi sets up an individual page to share with their family, friends, and community. The trainings on fundraising we offer during our leadership retreats serve as an anchor for the Bois during the 30 days. But it is really the success they have in tapping their networks that changes the way they see fundraising. Weekly updates provide a chance for coaching, support, troubleshooting, and recognizing accomplishments.

This campaign is our biggest opportunity to ask our entire

community to support BBP. We use Facebook, Twitter, and weekly email newsletters to ask all of our supporters to give. A fun and engaging part of the 30 Days of Brown Boi is that we feature a different Brown Boi or BBP All Star on our social media streams every day. All Stars are core mentors, volunteers, coaches, and contractors that make all of our work possible during the year. By telling these stories, we help supporters see what a deep investment their donation will be in our entire community.

Brown Boi Affair

Our signature event is the Brown Boi Affair, held each Spring in the Bay Area. Featuring a supper quiz and game show, the event also includes a silent auction, a live musical or dance performance, and a dance party at the end. Popular in the UK, supper quiz events pit teams against each other in trivia areas like world history, music, literature, and pop culture. With free childcare and a zero waste policy, the event also puts our principles into practice, while celebrating the achievements of the last year.

Each team of seven to eight people sets up a team page with a minimum goal of \$700, and individual members can create their own pages to ask their community to support them. In addition, organizational allies and corporate sponsors join our host committee by giving \$250 to \$5,000. In 2011, our first Brown Boi Affair raised \$10,000, half of which was by the teams, and this year we are shooting for \$15,000.

The evening is made all the more special with classy touches such as an upscale meal with passed hors d'oeuvres and drinks; decorations, flowers, and table designs to create the right aesthetic; and of course, a great DJ to set the mood. All of the vendors we use are part of the BBP community.

Conclusion

Our approach to fundraising is to build a culture where each of us has lots of room to practice, tools to help us increase our effectiveness, and space to learn, fail, and learn some more. All of the Bois receive basic fundraising training and have the opportunity to master these core skills. We see this as just the beginning of building a sustainable future for our community and movement. ■

Dolores Chandler is a queer butch dandy, performance artist, and immigrant of African and Greek descent. She currently lives in Austin, Texas, was a Brown Boi in 2011, and is the Brown Boi Project's first Development and Communications Coordinator. Cole holds an MSc from the London School of Economics and has worked as a community facilitator, strategist, and consultant for the last ten years. She launched the Brown Boi Project in 2010.