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THE YOUNG AND THE HELPFUL

Newer volunteers may hold the key to metro nonprofits' futures

BY JEWEL GOPWANI
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Metro Detroit's charities -- long reliant on corporate giving and older donors -- may come to depend on younger people like Mary Kay Jerneycic, 36, of Beverly Hills.

Jerneycic, who grew up watching her [parents](#) support the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, is one of eight people organizing a \$50 afterglow to the soup kitchen's annual fund-raising dinner.

The Second Helping Afterglow, slated for Oct. 9, is aimed at younger adults who may not know about the soup kitchen or may not be ready to spend \$250 on a ticket to the main fund-raiser.

"Our goal is to have some of the regular attendees of the afterglow attend the main event, and use this as a stepping stone," Jerneycic said. "When you start hearing some of the stories and seeing some of the good that they are doing ... that's when you get hooked."

Efforts like hers are growing in importance as local charities find their base of donors growing older and shrinking.

The need for young donors also is more pronounced as charities struggle to raise [money](#) amid cuts to corporate giving and high unemployment rates that have curtailed donations.

"There's been a shift of people leaving Detroit or being downsized," said Mariam Noland, president of the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan. "We're going to be looking for new people to get involved."

Non-profits seek new leaders

As local charities launch programs to attract younger donors, they're also developing another essential element for the future: new leaders.

Charities like the Capuchin Soup Kitchen and the American Cancer Society are enlisting young people to start and foster new fund-raisers that introduce those causes to their peers.

"We're the next generation of leaders," said John Nechiporchik, who is among the organizers of the American Cancer Society's new fund-raiser aimed at people under age 40. "We're young and we're excited and we're passionate about helping," he said.



Andy Schmitt, 32, of Birmingham serves up lunch at the Meldrum location. (PATRICIA BECK/DETROIT FREE PRESS)



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Nechiporchik leads a group of 35 people who are [selling](#) tickets and organizing the American Cancer

Society's new fund-raiser, called More Bull. The \$75 ticket consists of the last two hours of the Cancer Society's Cattle Baron's Ball, which usually costs \$175 a ticket.

Nechiporchik has tapped into his vast network of peers -- through groups like the Detroit Young Professionals, with a mailing list of 15,000 people -- to get the word out about the Cancer Society's mission.

"Hopefully it's around the corner, relatively speaking, that these young professionals can step up and start taking a lead in these organizations," said Christianne Sims, director of Fusion, a young professionals' group within the Detroit Regional Chamber with about 700 members.

For the second year, the Capuchin Soup Kitchen will host an afterglow to the soup kitchen's largest fund-raiser, its annual Support Our Capuchin Kitchen dinner next month. With a lower price and an '80s cover band, the event is aimed at a younger audience.

"We need to broaden our base of support," said Jerry Smith, executive director of the 80-year-old charity.

But involvement of young professionals does not always have to be separate from a group's mainstream efforts.

Southwest Solutions, which offers counseling, literacy, housing and other services, has brought on young professionals to boards and committees, and routinely invites young adults to see the organization's efforts in southwest Detroit.

Cultural organizations are also reaching out to younger audiences.

Last year, the Michigan Opera Theatre started offering low-priced seats to the opera and dance performances to those ages 18 to 45, which includes other benefits, such as a chance to meet the cast after the show.

"We're cultivating the next generation of our audience," said Kathi Kucharski, who helped organize the Michigan Opera Theatre's ticketing program. "We know the core of our donor base is people who come to the opera."

Focusing on younger generations may offer a fund-raising boon to groups that are having trouble raising money.

"It's an especially challenging time to be trying to solicit donations, particularly when the economy is as it is right now," Smith said. "As it becomes more challenging to raise money in this type of environment the need becomes greater than ever."

But these groups seem to be taking the right path, said Mariam Noland, president of the Community Foundation of Southeastern Michigan.

"Those who are engaged are your best supporters," she said.

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