



Trashmagination Podcast #93 –Fundraising Quilts from Scraps

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about how I do fundraising with scrap quilts, and how my approach is different from how many other quilters fundraise with quilts. This episode is helpful for anyone who wants to fundraise for a cause.

If you search Pinterest for "fundraising quilts," most involve selling raffle tickets or selling the quilt in an auction. With raffles, ticket buyers are anonymous, and auctions only allow one person to give money for the quilt. In my opinion, neither of those two options build community.

My fundraising quilts have two goals – raising money but also growing community. To achieve those goals, I ensure that each supporter is acknowledged within the quilt design. When the project starts, I don't know if the quilt will have 10 blocks or 100 blocks – it just depends on the number of donations we receive. I love that the quilt grows as the fundraiser grows.

When I did my first fundraising quilt project, we set a minimum donation to be acknowledged on the quilt. Since then, I have learned that it is better to let people donate whatever they are moved to donate. When you leave it open-ended, I find that people donate far more money. In my later fundraising quilt projects, people donated hundreds and thousands of dollars. They might have donated those amounts without the quilt, but the quilt was the reason why they donated at this moment.

Some raffle and auction quilts are made by more than one person and so they do build a community of makers. For example, sometimes members of a quilt guild will each sew a block and then someone sews them all together into a quilt. Or at a school, each student dips fabric into dye and then a quilter sews them into a beautiful quilt. Those are fun projects but my goal is to build a community of donors for an organization.

My Scrap Fundraising Quilts

My first fundraising quilt was in 1998 for an organization called the Peace and Environment Resource Center in Ottawa, Canada. The quilt featured a tree trunk and each donor had their name sewed on a tree leaf.

My second fundraising quilt was in 2017. As I mentioned in previous podcast episodes, I am a member of a taiko or Japanese drumming group named Nen Daiko. We were invited to perform at the North American Taiko Conference in California. We live near Washington DC so the goal of the quilt was to offset the costs of our travel expenses. It was also a way to gather our supporters before this milestone performance and bring them along with us virtually to the event.

I just finished my third fundraising quilt. This was a fundraiser for Lester B. Pearson College in British Columbia, Canada, which I attended 30 years ago. All the people who graduated with me fundraised for a scholarship for a current student.

Another scrap fundraising quilt that I saw was made by a member of the group Quilters Unlimited. She was fundraising for Habitat for Humanity and she made a block of a house for each donation she gathered.

The Importance of Social Media in Scrap Quilt Fundraising

So now I want to talk about the story of a quilt fundraiser and how best to engage your supporters. I love to quilt and I also love to share good stories on social media. Social media is the perfect forum for these fundraisers. The only way you will get a lot of donations is if you can tell a compelling story over and over again without getting boring. Most

supporters need to hear about an opportunity to donate many times. They only see a fraction of the social posts or emails because they are busy. In many cases, if you just say, “please give us money for this good reason,” they will tune out because they hear the message repeatedly without much creative variation.

But the absolutely wonderful thing about scrap quilt fundraising posts is that the social media posts don’t get boring. Why? Because in every post, you unveil a new quilt block. And since every quilt block is different, then every post is intriguing. What will this block say? How will this block be more beautiful? How does this block represent the donor?

You *could* email your supporters every time there is a new quilt block, but social media works better because it’s a public forum. People will like the quilt block and comment. If it’s hidden in people’s in-boxes, it doesn’t feel like a shared experience.

It’s really important to emphasize that this is a storytelling campaign, not a fundraising campaign. You will get more donations if you tell better stories. When a donor sends their message to sew, I try to ask follow-up questions about why they want that message. Then when I share a photo of a finished quilt block on social media, I can add tell a better story about that supporter which inspires other donors. For example, someone requested the fun message “Drink coffee, eat cheese.” In the social media post, I was able to share his favorite cheese which was a fun tidbit that brings the whole community closer. It reminds other donors that we are all good people working together on a mission.

Part of the reason why these quilts work is because of peer pressure. If we see our friends donating, we think, “it appears that all these people who I respect are donating, so I think I will do that as well.” The quilt makes it okay to say that you donated, which is not info you might share otherwise. It normalizes generosity.

One of the coolest things that I have seen is when friends sponsor a quilt block for their friend. On the quilt that I just finished, there is a block that was sponsored in honor of one of my classmates who is in poor health. Her classmates wanted her to be part of this project, and I was so moved by their actions.

Another important aspect of fundraising is for the request to be urgent. When there is an oil spill or a natural disaster, it’s clear that we must donate urgently. However, many causes do not have this type of urgency. With a fundraising quilt, you don’t want to be sewing this quilt forever. There is a natural end to this project after a reasonable amount of time. Ideally the deadline is connected with a logical date. Maybe you need to give the quilt to someone on the day they move into the new home you built for them. Maybe the scholarship recipient is going to graduate. The deadline is clear and that will encourage more donors to make their donation today.

Give the Quilt to an Inspiring Recipient

That leads me to my next big recommendation. The quilt will encourage more donations if you give the quilt to someone special when it’s done. I learned this lesson from Susan Barrett Merrill from Weaving a Life. I used to organize green lifestyle tours each summer. In 2013, I was organizing a tour in Maine. I learned that one way Susan teaches weaving is to set up a huge loom and then encourage a group to weave together. To start the weaving session, she asked the group if there was someone who would benefit from receiving our weaving. The group decided to make the weaving for a local couple who had been taking us kayaking and teaching us about the area. During our Summit, there had been a lot of damage to their downtown store caused by a fire I think (my memory is a bit fuzzy). So everyone talked about this couple and we wrote them messages of encouragement on slips of paper that we wove into the piece. A few days later, we gave them the weaving, and it was a very meaningful event for both the participants and the couple.

From that event, I learned about the power of making art as a gift of encouragement. So when we did the quilt for my taiko group, donors at first only requested their names, but then they started requesting messages of encouragement to our group for a good performance. And with this most recent quilt, the quilt featured many messages of encouragement for our scholarship recipient.

By sewing messages of encouragement and giving the quilt to a special recipient, the supporters get to express the feelings that we all have when we make a donation to any cause. We want the recipients to know that we care and we

wish them the very best in their mission. We would not donate unless we believed in them. The wonderful thing about these messages of encouragement is that they can be very personal to the donor. They can be in many languages. They can be wise or poetic.

In this latest quilt, people also started to request small images – like a flower from their country, a snowflake, a sun, a ball of yarn. Why would they request these things? They want to remind the recipient that the world is beautiful! Even when we are sacrificing for a larger mission, it can bring us comfort to remember the small wonderful things in life.

You might think that some people would not like to be thanked publicly on a quilt. Some people do want to remain anonymous. But the good news is that messages of encouragement and embroidered images represent their identity. Even anonymous supporters see themselves reflected in the quilt without giving up their privacy.

It is lovely when you can share a photo of the finished quilt in the hands of the special recipient. In the case of my taiko group, we shared photos of ourselves after the concert in California, holding up the quilt while we were beaming with appreciation. So be sure to include such a photo in your donor thank yous after the quilt is done.

Keep the Quilting Achievable

Next I want to talk about how to make sure this project gets done in a reasonable amount of time.

You could recruit a team of quilters. You could provide each quilter with a template for a simple block. For example, if you were fundraising for an organization that helps cats, maybe you share a simple block with a cat design.

If you want to make the whole quilt yourself, keep the blocks simple. The first fundraising quilt I made with the appliqued leaves was too much work. The next quilt I made was simple rectangles. The quilt I just finished was hand-stitched English paper-pieced hexagons, which sounds complicated, but I could work on it while I was not at a sewing machine, which suited my available time.

Depending on the size of your blocks, you need to calculate the maximum length of a message that someone could request. I usually say they can have up to 25 characters. That takes me about 30 minutes to sew. I sew my letters with embroidery floss.

You don't have to use scraps to make these quilts, but I always do because it's a great way to reduce my giant stash of scraps. Plus this is a podcast about creative reuse so of course I'm going to encourage you to do that! I also think that when you tell supporters that this quilt was made with recycled fabrics or scraps, it communicates a culture of frugality and that you are not going to waste their donations! That's certainly a good message to tell any donor.

As I said, the quilt needs to look good with 10 blocks or 100. I usually share the blocks on social media as individual units and not sewn together in their final layout. That's because I don't know how it's going to fit together until all the donations come in. Will it be four rows of three or six rows of five? We'll see! And if I am short one block to make a nice design, I make a donation on behalf of my parents and they get to be on the quilt as well.

At the end of the project, be sure to put a label on the back of the quilt with the names of the people who sewed it, as well as the year and perhaps the reason why it was made. It seems obvious to you now, but it is amazing how quickly things can be forgotten within an organization. On my latest quilt, I made the label into a pocket and in the pocket, I added a letter with more information about the blocks. I translated the messages that were not in English and I explained the significance behind the embroidered images.

Technical Donation Stuff

I know some of you might ask how to gather donations for these quilts. The first quilt it was all cash and check donations because the internet did not exist yet. The taiko quilt, we make a GoFundMe page. The advantage of GoFundMe is that you can set up a page in only a few minutes even if you don't have a website for your organization. The disadvantage is GoFundMe takes a small fee from the donations. Also, make sure you keep the community discussion and stories on your social media, because you don't want to build the community on GoFundMe which is only a temporary place for

this campaign. For the alumni quilt, my college already had an online donation system in place. The alumni relations team would email me when someone from my year donated so I could reach out to them and start their quilt block. But actually in most cases, my fellow alumni would message me as soon as they donated or even before because they were excited to be a part of the quilt and wanted to give me their message right away.

Top 10 Tips for Scrap Fundraising Quilts

Now I'll summarize my top 10 recommendations for doing a scrap quilt fundraiser:

- 1) Design a quilt that will look good with 10 donations or 100.
- 2) Make your quilt from recycled fabric or scraps to communicate a culture of frugality and sound money management.
- 3) Use social media to keep the quilt popping up to your supporters and they can like other people's blocks. This builds community, peer pressure and urgency.
- 4) Post every time you make a new block and remind people how they can support the project and be represented on the quilt as well.
- 5) Have a quilt recipient in mind who represents the organization's mission.
- 6) Tell supporters that they can put their name, a message of encouragement or a simple embroidered image (if you are able to do embroidery).
- 7) Don't set a specific amount that people have to donate in order to be on the quilt. Instead leave it open-ended.
- 8) If making a whole quilt seems overwhelming, recruit a team, and keep the blocks very simple.
- 9) Wait until you have made all the blocks before sewing the blocks together in a logical layout.
- 10) Add a label on the back of the quilt to document who made it, when it was made and for what purpose.

Here's a final thought about these quilts that I only learned recently. These quilts become a time capsule of your organization's supporter community. As time goes by, and people pass away, you will see names on the quilt of people who are not with us anymore. You can run your finger over the stitches that represent their contribution. They loved this organization and now it is up to us to carry on our mission in their memory.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know if you have done a fundraiser with a scrap quilt at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see scrap quilts as a creative way to fundraise for the causes that you care about!