

Pledge Funds

In the four years since it began, The Funding Network has raised more than £1m for around 200 small charities.

TANIA MASON went along to one of its meetings

This Saturday (23 September 2006), close to 200 financially secure individuals will converge on the Arts Club in London and give away hundreds, sometimes thousands of pounds of their own money. At an event that one reviewer has described as “a cross between an auction and a revivalist meeting”, representatives of nine small organisations will get the opportunity to stand on stage and wax lyrical about their cause before sitting back and watching the money flood in.

It sounds like a fundraiser’s dream: a captive audience of several dozen wealthy individuals, their chequebooks at the ready, expecting – wanting, even – to leave the room at least a few hundred pounds lighter. There’s not even any catch.

The premise is simple – charities are nominated to appear at The Funding Network (TFN) events by a member, and applicants are considered and chosen by the member-led selection committee. The Network says it especially wants to support small-scale

charities that find fundraising difficult. Successful applicants are given five weeks notice and on the day are allowed six minutes to pitch their cause to the audience, plus a further six minutes for questions. They must be specific about what they would do if they raised £5,000.

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After all the charities have presented, there is a break, and sometimes a celebrity speaker. Then the pledging starts.

The TFN member that sponsored the charity’s application is required to kick off with a minimum donation of £250. Then the fun starts – voices pipe up all over the room: “Douglas 250”, “Susan 100 pounds”, “Charles 750”. Two TFN staff stand on stage beside large flipcharts, frantically scribbling down the names and amounts.

Pledging occurs for each charity in turn, in the same order as they presented to the audience. At the end the pledges are totalled and the audience is told how much unrestricted funding has been raised

for each cause.

At the most recent London event, hosted by Coutts & Co on the evening of 14 June, £49,825 including Gift Aid was generated for five projects. The first, Project Integrar, is a children’s shelter that works to build positive relationships between street kids and their families in Sao Paolo, Brazil in order to reintegrate them back into their family home. Project Integrar raised £6,915.

The second project generated pledges worth £11,731. Prospect Burma invests in the democratic future of Burma by educating young Burmese who have fled the country so that when democracy returns, they too can return with their knowledge and skills.

The project was presented by the former British ambassador to Burma, Martin Morland, who is now chair of Prospect Burma, but his pitch was given an undeniable boost by the arrival on stage and emotive, articulate story of Zoya Phan, a Burmese girl who was forced to flee Burma 11 years ago and was educated in Thailand with the help of the charity.

Two other projects that raised around £7,500 each were Talking about Sex, a Mali youth education project and Bir Makhad (Well at the Meeting Place), which strives to maintain nomadic cultures around the world.

Perhaps the most emotional of the presentations came from

Former Burmese refugee Zoya Phan holds the audience spellbound



Zoe Stevens, project manager at Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID), a charity that works to end arbitrary detention of asylum seekers in the UK. Stevens told the audience that despite having been an immigration lawyer for more than a decade, her work on BID's Right to Liberty project has been so traumatic that she recently started to receive counselling.

She said fundraising for BID has "always been difficult, but has become a nightmare in this politically difficult atmosphere". She appeared close to tears when she spoke of the "horrible, horrible, dehumanising conditions" in detention centres. But she also dangled a sliver of hope: "It is possible to end detention – when I started in this work, people were being locked up in detention centres in Australia, today they are not."

Her pitch clearly moved the members present, and before long bidding had topped £7,000. Then one donor sparked off a spontaneous outburst of cheering and applause by announcing: "I'm Roger and I'd like to match all that has been raised so far and anything else raised from now on, for this project." This spurred the crowd onto another flurry of pledging, and Stevens left the event with an unprecedented £16,111.

Most of the people who attend Funding Network events are not as generous as Roger, but the minimum pledge amount is £100. Opening the June event, Frederick Mulder, chair of the network and one of its four founding directors, said giving feels best "at a level that is somewhere between a gesture and a sacrifice".

Mulder and three other donors launched TFN four years ago after realising that donating to charity is one of the few activities undertaken alone, and that it could be much more fun and rewarding if it became more of a communal experience. Anybody can join, for a fee of £60, and there is no obligation to give to every project.

At the first event in 2002, 40 people gave £60,000 to the

10 projects that presented, which included Transport 2000 and the Jubilee Debt Campaign. "It's clear many of the organisations we get to hear of are well ahead of the curve," says Mulder. Earlier this year, TFN passed the £1m mark, given mostly in pledges of £100 or £200, but many larger gifts too, to almost 200 organisations.

The London model has been rolled out elsewhere and there are now Funding Networks in Bristol, Scotland, Cambridge, the South West, Toronto and Leeds. Coutts is becoming more closely involved and has invited TFN to run funding evenings at both its Liverpool and Birmingham philanthropy forum days.

Roger, the donor who matched all pledges for BID, is not a member of TFN but has given around £18,000 at three of its events to date. He gives at least a few hundred pounds to each charity that pitches.

"Because I spend quite a lot of money, I don't feel I need to join the Network," he says.

Roger, who made his millions in business, also has standing orders to around 40 charities and has set up a trust with CAF through which he and his wife donate. Now that he is 56 and semi-retired, donating to charity has become his main occupation. "I guess I am a serial donor. I love it. From my wealth, this giving does not hurt me, and they say giving to charity is supposed to hurt otherwise it is meaningless." Though he makes the remark in jest, he seems to be taking it to heart at least a little. While he usually gives away around 20 per cent of his income, this year his donations are closer to 60 per cent.

Apart from reading the information that TFN publishes about each project, Roger does no supplementary research into the charities he supports at TFN, trusting the network's selection process to ensure they are bona fide and worth supporting. Matching donations is a reasonably new experience: "It seems to prompt others to give more, and I'm a



reformed gambler so I love all that double-or-nothing stuff."

However, and perhaps surprisingly, he has little interest in continuing to support most of the projects he gives to at TFN. "I was already giving regularly to two out

Network members chat to representatives of the pitching charities

'I'm a reformed gambler so I love all that double-or-nothing stuff.'

of the 18, but I prefer anonymity. I struggle with paperwork as it is, so I tell them I don't want any further correspondence from them – though some slips through, of course."

And has he brought TFN to the attention of his contemporaries? "I have offered to take people but they never come," he says. "The few people I have mentioned it to generally say charities have plenty of money already, that they'll just spend it all on wages and don't do any good anyway. It's not my mission to change those people's minds, I haven't got the energy, and anyway it should be up to the charities to do that through the fruits of their labours."

Fred Mulder told members at the June event: "I want to be remembered as part of a generation that helped to turn things around. We can't say that our generation does not know what needs to be done and how to do it. We certainly can't say our generation can't afford it. Because it is not that expensive to make a huge difference to hundreds of lives." ■

*For further information visit:
www.thefundingnetwork.org.uk*