

# THE MISSING MIDDLE PART III

A Snapshot of Middle Donor Fundraising  
Late 2020 / Early 2021



# INTRODUCTION

YOU KNOW THAT FAKE CAMERA CLICK ON YOUR PHONE, THE ONE THAT IS SUPPOSED TO MIMIC THE SOUND OF AN OLD-SCHOOL CAMERA SHUTTER? THAT'S THE SOUND THAT SHOULD ACCOMPANY THIS REPORT.

Click. Here we have a snapshot. The state of middle donor fundraising in late 2020 and early 2021.

## WHY A SNAPSHOT?

We'll spare you the long context setting. You lived it and likely don't need a play-by-play. Suffice to say the events of 2020 and early 2021—a chaotic pandemic, a racial reckoning, an outlandish election, a new U.S. administration, an insurrection—have had a uniquely extraordinary impact on our lives, on our priorities and on our organizations.

That's why we're calling this report a snapshot.

Middle donor fundraising continues to evolve in sophistication. And we find ourselves in a mini-moment. How these two truths reconcile remains to be seen. Some of the trends we highlight in this report may be very different a year from now. And some may be the seeds of the next phase of middle donor fundraising.

We offer this snapshot as a conversation starter. But first, let's time travel back to 2014—when we set out to shine a spotlight on the phenomenon of mid-level donors.

Back then, we defined mid-level as donors giving between \$1,000 and \$10,000 cumulative in a year. During a first-of-its-kind study we conducted, we found that while few in number, mid-level donors were, in many cases, generating as much as one-third of an organization's income from individuals. Yet, at the time most organizations did at best a marginal job of engaging these donors.

The resulting white paper, *THE MISSING MIDDLE*, helped galvanize our fundraising comrades to up their game in their treatment of these incredibly valuable and chronically ignored donors.

In 2018, we launched *THE MISSING MIDDLE: PART II* (creative title, right?). We wanted to get a sense of what had shifted—and we were delighted to see that mid-level fundraising had evolved dramatically in four short years.

Chief Development Officers had turned their attention (and investment) toward mid-level. There was more staffing of mid-level programs. Direct marketers and major giving officers were cooperating and collaborating in new ways. Even the definition of mid-level had become more dynamic in service to an organization's unique philanthropic landscape. In 2014, a typical mid-level program topped



out at \$10,000. After that you were in the hands of major gifts officers. In 2018, we found some organizations classifying donors giving as much as \$25,000 or even \$100,000 as mid-level.

Now we find ourselves in 2021.

## MAKING LEMONADE OUT OF CHAOS

Necessity is the mother of invention. And COVID sure as hell has made us innovate. We're struck by how organizations have leveraged the pandemic to make transformational changes in their mid-level programs. They've readjusted benefit-driven strategies to mission-driven strategies. They've redeployed staff and volunteers to virtually engage mid-level donors. They've hired additional staff to handle an influx of mid-level donors in an effort to retain most of them. And they've gone virtual, hosting creative events online.

But there are still unanswered questions. What recently implemented tactics will organizations invest in beyond the pandemic? How will digital engagement continue to evolve, especially in a post-pandemic world? Are there standard business guidelines that can successfully help organizations maximize cradle to grave fundraising efforts without messy attribution tussles? How can we hire, train and manage mid-level fundraisers in a highly competitive market?

The basis of this report is a snapshot look into the mid-level programs of 19 organizations covering a range of issues from human health to animal welfare to social justice.

Fundraisers at each organization submitted their program data (see page 6). We hosted a round table discussion for mid-level practitioners to share insights, breakthroughs, and challenges and we conducted in-depth interviews.

Finally the necessary caveats, and an invitation. We hope and believe that the organizations participating in the study serve as a representative cross-section of groups, and that therefore most of what is contained here is broadly applicable to the sector. That said, there are 1.5 million nonprofits in the U.S. alone. So if your experience has been radically different, we would love to hear about it.

And the invitation: In keeping with our passion for mid-level fundraising we created a free (and commercial-free) Google Group/listserv open to all mid-level practitioners, consultants, and curious onlookers. Our group is now 500-strong and filled with generous and seasoned individuals, many of whom are quoted in this paper. Throughout the pandemic, we have kept each other inspired, comforted and supported. You are warmly invited to join (if you aren't already there) by sending your request to [info@seachangestrategies.com](mailto:info@seachangestrategies.com).

As always, we are humbled to be part of this thoughtful community of fundraisers. The issues your organizations work on are demanding. Your jobs are hard. And yet, you show up every day. Because change doesn't happen if you don't have money to fund the change.

Thank you for your dedication.



**Alia McKee and Mark Rovner**

Principals, Sea Change Strategies

May 2021



**Mark Rovner**



**Alia McKee**

## JOIN OUR FREE GOOGLE GROUP

Open to all mid-level practitioners, consultants, and curious onlookers.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our deepest thanks to the fundraisers who participated in this research. You inspire us each and every day. What you are practicing and learning will fuel our sector for years to come.

We'd like to give a special shout out to mid-level teachers who went above and beyond for this report:

**Donna Batcho**, CAP, Share Our Strength–No Kid Hungry.

**Laura Brouse-Long**, The Smithsonian Institute

**Karyn Bryant**, World Relief

**Barbara Camick**, Best Friends Animal Society

**Megan Den Herder**, Wildlife Conservation Society

**Meghan Lee**, ACLU

**Amber McGarvey-Moreland**, RVH Foundation

**Lori Hutson**, Planned Parenthood Federation of America

**Andrea O'Brien**, The Wilderness Society

**Tiffany A. C. Wollin**, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières

**Suk Wortman**, Arbor Day Foundation

Sann Knipple, our intrepid business manager and research deity, outdid herself in managing the countless moving parts of this report.

And a heartfelt thanks to all of you who make mid-level donations to the causes that are dear to you. You are so much more important than you will ever know.

Following is a list of participating organizations:

American Civil Liberties Union

American Rivers

Arbor Day Foundation

Best Friends Animal Society

Defenders of Wildlife

Environmental Defense Fund

Friends of the Earth

Human Rights Campaign

National Park Foundation

The Nature Conservancy

Partners in Health

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

RVH Foundation

Save the Children

Share Our Strength/No Kid Hungry

The Smithsonian Institution

The Wilderness Society

Wildlife Conservation Society

World Relief

# A SAMPLING OF MID-LEVEL DONOR PROGRAMS

ORGANIZATION	MID-LEVEL PROGRAM STAFF FTES	NAME OF MID-LEVEL GIVING PROGRAM	MID-LEVEL GIVING FLOOR AND CEILING	TOTAL INCOME FROM MID-LEVEL DONORS LAST FISCAL YEAR	MID-LEVEL GIVING AS % OF TOTAL INDIVIDUAL GIVING	% OF TOTAL INDIVIDUAL DONORS THAT ARE MID-LEVEL	1ST YEAR RETENTION RATE OF MID-LEVEL DONORS	MULTI-YEAR RETENTION RATE OF MID-LEVEL DONORS
ACLU	5	ACLU Impact Society • Freedom Circle • Justice Circle • Leadership Circle	• \$1,000 - \$4,999 • \$5,000 - \$9,999 • \$10,000+	\$43.5 million	11%	2%	15%	37%
American Rivers	2.5	Anglers Fund River Guardian	\$1,000 - \$10,000 \$1,000 - \$10,000	\$0.7 million	15%	1.3%	27%	84%
Best Friends	3	Golden Circle	\$1,000 - \$24,999	\$15.2 million	33%	3.3%	44%	76%
Defenders of Wildlife	1.5	Leadership Council Wildlife Ambassador Wildlife Advocate Wildlife Protector Wildlife Champion President's Circle	\$1,000+ single gift \$1,000 - \$4,999 \$5,000 - \$9,999 \$10,000 - \$24,999 \$25,000 - \$49,999 \$50,000+	\$1.2 million	22%	87%	37%	21%
EDF	3	Leadership Team Catalyst Circle	\$500 - \$4,999 \$5,000 - \$25,000	\$15.6 million	11%	2.7%	39%	50%
Friends of the Earth	1	Vanguard Society	\$500 - \$9,999	\$1.7 million	20%	0.9%	30%	Not reported
Human Rights Campaign	6	Federal Club	\$1,200 - \$4,999	\$8.3 million	19%	2%	80%	85%
Partners in Health	2.5	Leadership Giving Society • Leaders in Hope • Leaders in Commitment • Leaders in Solidarity • Leaders in Accompaniment • Leaders in Impact • Leaders in Innovation • Leaders in Vision	• \$1,000 - \$2,499 • \$2,500 - \$4,999 • \$5,000 - \$9,999 • \$10,000 - \$24,999 • \$25,000 - \$99,999 • \$100K - \$1M • \$1M+	\$18.9 million	14%	11%	37%	27%
Planned Parenthood Federation of America	7	President's Circle	\$1,000 - \$24,999	Not for publication	28%	5%	52%	77%
Share Our Strength	2	Circle of Strength	\$1,000 - \$9,999	\$3.7 million	11%	2%	36%	68%
The Nature Conservancy	3.25	Conservation Partner Nature Guardian Last Great Places Society	\$1,000 - \$4,999 \$5,000 - \$9,999 \$10,000 - \$99,999	Not for publication	29%	2%	54%	79%
The Wilderness Society	2.5	Advocates for Wilderness	\$1,000 - \$24,999	\$1.7 million	8%	0.4%	40%	68%



THEME ONE:  
**THE COVID ACCELERATOR**





## THEME ONE: THE COVID ACCELERATOR

COVID delivered a shock to a fundraising environment already reeling from a host of challenges. A decade of declining donor rolls, weak retention, and growing recognition that the whiteness of philanthropy in America is long overdue for attention all made 2020 a year of change. Add in COVID, and the change was abrupt and dramatic. But not all bad.

During a mid-level roundtable discussion, participants reported a number of both positive and negative effects of the pandemic.

First, the negative. An economy in a once-in-a-lifetime moment of pandemic-related uncertainty. In-person fundraising events cancelled. An unexpected and immediate forced shift to digital communications. Huge obstacles to getting the mail out on time. Not to mention the whole 'working from home on Zoom' thing. Many fundraisers feared the worst.

Another negative worth calling out: Even as the murder of George Floyd brought new awareness to the corrosive effects of systemic racism, it's possible that the urgent focus on adapting programs to the pandemic distracted from addressing the disturbing relationship between American philanthropy and white supremacy.<sup>1</sup>

As it turns out, the one downside that did not materialize was lost income. "Nothing tanked to the extent that people were worried about. We're so grateful for our loyal donors." says Barbara Camick of Best Friends Animal Society.

Most groups we spoke to, in fact, reported strong results in 2020. That may speak to the nimbleness with which fundraisers adapted their programs, and also to the unexpected industry-wide flood of giving from people not economically affected by soaring unemployment. Whether and to what extent these new 'COVID donors' will retain weighs heavily on many minds in 2021.

**“FINANCIALLY, WE ENDED  
UP HAVING A REALLY  
STRONG YEAR.”**

**BARBARA CAMICK**  
BEST FRIENDS ANIMAL SOCIETY

<sup>1</sup> There were some notable steps forward in the effort to decenter whiteness in philanthropy in 2020. [Community-Centric Fundraising](#) became a focal point of thinking and action to reimagine philanthropy. And at the [Oregon Food Bank, a project to decenter money](#) and center love and equity gained critical momentum.

**“IN DECEMBER, WE WERE EXPERIENCING HEARTENING AND GENEROUS REVENUE GAINS, EXTENDING THE TREND OF GOOD GROWTH YEARS ACROSS THE LAST FIVE YEARS.”**

**LAURA BROUSE-LONG**  
THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

The other upsides for mid-level giving over the ‘year of living pandemically’ are subtler, but important.

To name a few:

- **Mid-level fundraising went digital much faster due to the pandemic.** Pre-COVID, we had found many mid-level programs to be late adopters of email, virtual gatherings and other digital communications. That changed, of course, and virtually overnight.

One caveat to this: many mid-level donors, among them baby boomers and older, are not eager to go digital. For some, printed communications and live events will remain their engagement preferences. Mid-level programs will need to be careful not to leave large swaths of their donor base behind. Here’s how one fundraiser put it: “I actually have had people tell me on the phone in the last

couple of months, ‘Oh, I don’t do email.’ I have one donor who gives me \$10,000 a year. And she actually goes to a neighbor’s house once a week to read her email.”

- **An opportunity to make big changes.** There’s a political saying that one should never waste a good crisis. Some fundraisers leveraged the disruptions of 2020 to restructure their programs in ways that might have faced resistance in a normal year. “We’re in the middle of changing the program,” one fundraiser reports. “So it allowed us to just get rid of a bunch of stuff... It helped us wake up to the need for a more mission-driven vs. benefit driven strategy.”
- **Many organizations reached new people.** The transition to online events, while a mixed blessing in many ways, eliminated geography as a barrier to participation. Says Smithsonian’s Brouse-Long, “This is the silver lining of the pandemic. We saw interest and attendance [in virtual events] from national members—that grew through the ongoing months of the pandemic.
- **Fundraisers returned to neglected fundraising basics.** Many fundraisers reported increased outreach to mid-level donors through handwritten notes, phone calls and Zoom visits. For more on stewardship and cultivation lessons from 2020, see below.

All in all, the pandemic may have helped the bottom line as much as it hurt. Mid-level fundraising teams transformed their digital strategies and most had successful years financially.

Now perhaps attention can turn to another challenge that was spotlighted in 2020, namely the foundation of white supremacy on which most fundraising is built. Decentering whiteness will be an enormous, complex and difficult transformation—and an urgent one. There is little debate that philanthropy in America is built largely on wealth accumulated at the expense of Black and Brown people, and has been so for generations. Following the lead of Community-centric Fundraising, the Oregon Food Bank and other pioneers, it falls to all of us in the fundraising business to do our own work, to take a hard look at where donors' money comes from, and explore the ways in which we are legitimizing a deeply inequitable system.



*One Place NOT affected by COVID. Mark's favorite reef in Cayman.*

— Photo by Mark Rovner





THEME TWO:

# NEXT LEVEL STAFFING, COORDINATION BETWEEN DIVISIONS, & PROFESSIONAL SKILL SETS

## THEME TWO: NEXT LEVEL STAFFING, COORDINATION BETWEEN DIVISIONS, AND PROFESSIONAL SKILL SETS

How far we've come.

In 2014 when we launched our first mid-level study, few organizations had even one person dedicated to mid-level fundraising. Further, the no person's land between direct marketing/membership and major giving was vast, with little coordination between divisions. The tactical and cultural gap between direct marketing and major gifts officers was leaving mid-level fundraising in the lurch.

Then in 2018, we saw positive shifts on both the staffing and coordination fronts. When we launched our second study, we found many organizations had hired one or more development staff members with the primary responsibility of growing and stewarding mid-level donors. And we saw huge improvement in coordination between direct marketing and major gifts teams with donor moves management guidelines taking shape.

If you thought these shifts in 2018 were exciting, then hold onto your hats. Today, the value and rigor placed on mid-level programs is next-level.

**TODAY, WE ARE EXPERIENCING  
A QUANTUM LEAP IN STAFFING,  
COORDINATION BETWEEN DIVISIONS,  
SOPHISTICATED BLENDING OF DIRECT  
MARKETING AND MAJOR GIVING SKILL  
SETS, AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF  
MID-LEVEL FUNDRAISING AS WE KNOW IT.**



## 1. More Dedicated Staff

2018 was the year of the mid-level manager. 2021 is the year of the mid-level team. Today, organizations report an average of 3.2 full-time employees supporting mid-level. In many cases, a Director of Mid-Level heads the program and reports into direct marketing (see organizational structure in bullet 2).

For COVID-related causes, a surge in donations (especially at the mid-level) made a clear case for hiring additional mid-level staff in an effort to steward, retain and upgrade these “emergency” donors.

In describing her experience, Donna Batcho, the Associate Director of Share Our Strength–No Kid Hungry says, “There were two of us on the team. But our shared portfolio increased by more than 1,000 new donors after the pandemic struck. This past winter, we hired a new mid-tier manager to support the program.”

**2018 WAS THE YEAR OF THE MID-LEVEL MANAGER. 2021 IS THE YEAR OF THE MID-LEVEL TEAM.**

## 2. Clarity on Mid-Level Within the Organizational Structure

Because mid-level fundraisers strive to create intimate-feeling programs at scale, mid-level fundraising is either staying in direct response or migrating to direct response from major giving departments—where mid-level donors tended to wither in the shadow of large major donor-level contributions. However, there is very close coordination and alignment with major gift teams.

Megan Den Herder with the Wildlife Conservation Society says, “Mid-level had been major donor team-driven, but it was on autopilot. It wasn’t a huge driver of revenue for them. This year, we streamlined staff and combined mid-level and low dollar under an Annual Fund umbrella to help spur growth of the program.”

Suk Wortman, who leads Arbor Day Foundation’s direct response team, reports, “When we revamped the Oak Society beyond major giving to include a missing mid-level program, we blended the best of direct response and major giving practices. We wanted to leverage the scale, testing and analytics prowess of our direct response team, while keeping a sense of exclusivity, access and special status of the major giving team. Our director of development is crucial in our planning. She and I work together to make sure no one falls through the cracks.”



### 3. Stronger Coordination Between Direct Response and Major Gifts

Arbor Day Foundation is in good company. In 2021, we're seeing a giant leap in sophistication and coordination between direct marketing and major gifts teams.

One key collaboration effort is managing the pipeline of mid-level donors who are strong major donor prospects, while keeping other mid-level donors happy at the mid-tier.

Barbara Camick with Best Friends Animal Society says, "Our prospect management team identifies the pipeline of major donor prospects from mid-level or new donors. They are Switzerland when it comes to deciding which relationship experience is most appropriate for the donor, and when it's time for a donor relationship to move up or down to a different level. Fundraisers may not all agree, especially when deep donor relationships exist, so we defer to our research team as a neutral third party."

Lori Hutson at Planned Parenthood Federation of America convenes an annual meeting of all Direct Response program leaders across our offline and digital channels. She reports, "Every year, we evaluate our donors by giving behaviors and identify clusters for upgrades."

At World Relief, Karyn Bryant says, "Twice a year, I identify mid-level donors who have the potential to transition from mid-level to major. I share the list with the head of our major gifts team and together, we talk to individual major giving officers about each donor prospect

**ONE KEY COLLABORATION EFFORT IS MANAGING THE PIPELINE OF MID-LEVEL DONORS WHO ARE STRONG MAJOR DONOR PROSPECTS, WHILE KEEPING OTHER MID-LEVEL DONORS HAPPY AT THE MID-TIER.**

moving onto their lead list. I introduce the donor to the major gifts officer who follows up with specific steps to establish a relationship."

"The biggest learning lesson we had is that rather than immediately adding someone to a major gifts portfolio (and removing them from mid-level), we add them to a 'lead list' for the major gifts officer. The donor remains in the mid-level program until the officer connects with them and establishes a relationship. If the donor is unresponsive to our efforts, then eventually we take them off the lead list and keep them in mid-level to be considered again at a future date. It all helps to ensure a smooth donor experience whether they finally move into a major gifts portfolio or stay mid-level."

Another key collaboration effort is on cultivation.

Megan with Wildlife Conservation Society says, “We have some mid-level donors who are in managed relationships because of their potential, but they’re only giving at a mid-level amount. In that case, the mid-level program manages their solicitations and gifts, while the major gift officers manage the cultivation and stewardship to move them up.”

Finally, organizations are beginning to coordinate downgrades from major giving into mid-level. Tiffany Wollin with Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières says, “The segment we are working with is a small percentage, so best practice based on data is difficult to ascertain. But for now, when a major donor has maxed out their active period without making a gift and are not in conversations, their membership type changes to mid-level and they are flagged ‘Former Major.’ We simply flow them into unbranded treatment without an announcement. The special opportunities are similar to our branded mid-level — there is not too much variation in the donor experience.”

#### 4. Clarity On Necessary Skill Sets

Mid-level fundraisers used to be unicorns. It was really hard to find someone who could juggle the rigor of direct response fundraising with the donor-facing skills needed to steward mid-level donors.

These days, many organizations are hiring mid-level officers with strong donor-facing skills who can get support in qualifying and scaling engagement from direct response teams.

Suk Wortman with Arbor Day Foundation says, “We hired our mid-level officer from our major gifts team. My direct response team can provide the scaling support. We needed someone who could deepen the donor community with meaningful engagement.”

Barbara Camick with Best Friends puts it this way, “You should feel their smile through the phone.”

## MID-LEVEL FUNDRAISERS USED TO BE UNICORNS.

Laura Brouse-Long with the Smithsonian Institute emphasizes that your mid-level officer should be knowledgeable and passionate about the cause. “They are the concierge of your organization for this level of giving. They need to be dedicated to what you do.” Megan Den Herder shares that one of the best things she’s done is “hire a mid-level manager who could speak about our conservation work with a lot of authority.”

Further, opportunities to hone mid-level fundraising skills are more prevalent. Mid-level is now a standard conference track and communities of practice like the mid-level listserv managed by our firm Sea Change Strategies provide a place where mid-level fundraisers can chat about best practices, challenges and opportunities.

Finally, many organizations are investing in professional development for their mid-level fundraising teams, including coaching and leadership development. Mid-level fundraisers are the linchpins for fundraising growth and collaboration. You should invest in them wisely.

## OPERATIONALIZING COORDINATION MEETINGS: **CASE STUDY WITH AMBER MCGARVEY-MORELAND AND THE RVH FOUNDATION.**

We have approximately seven staff on our philanthropy team. As the Gift Officer, my mid-level program includes our monthly, mid-level annual, and legacy donors. One of my key responsibilities is moving mid-level donors to major gifts or mid-level pledges and generally feeding the pipeline. We've found that operationalizing coordination meetings has been key to our success.

- **Philanthropy Team Meeting:** Monthly, the team meets to discuss philanthropy revenue and financial targets across major giving, events, direct mail, legacy and annual giving portfolios. We share our best donor experiences and discuss any barriers to our roles and work plan objectives. We hope for participation from every philanthropy team member.
- **Prospect Clearance Meeting:** Twice per month, the philanthropy team has a 15-30 minute meeting where we discuss moving specific donors into other portfolios as donors

may advance from annual to mid-level and major giving prospects. Volunteers (board & sub-cabinet members) may request prospect clearance if they are working on a call plan or participating in the relationship leading to a gift.

- **Donor Opportunity Meeting:** Monthly, each team member brings 3-5 priority opportunities for discussion (these can be with existing donors or new prospects). We begin by sharing the current status (identified, cultivating, solicitation, stewardship, achieved), the last action with the donor (phone call, email, meeting, event, etc.) and the next planned step (tour, solicit, etc). We discuss any barriers or collaboration opportunities with the team. Usually 1.5 hours is scheduled. This meeting holds our team more accountable for our next moves.



THEME THREE:  
**CULTIVATION THAT SCALES**



## THEME THREE

# CULTIVATION THAT SCALES

An effective mid-level program combines properties of a one-to-many direct response program with the one-to-one attention of a major gifts program. As noted previously, we have seen a steady trend toward direct response serving as the primary player, with major gifts playing a critical supporting role.

Further, mid-level tiers are expanding. Some program ceilings have gone up from a typical \$10,000 major donor threshold to \$25,000 or more, with direct response continuing to do the heavy lift.

The pandemic, however, has led to a shift back to providing more personal attention. Much of that interaction, of course, was digital.

Mid-level fundraisers learned a lot about online engagement in a short period of time. Deadly dull webinars with slide after slide quickly gave way to interactive features such as live music, video and Zoom breakout rooms to stimulate small-group interaction. Organizations quickly learned that audiences lost interest in online experiences lasting longer than 60 minutes, and often less.

Both Smithsonian and Planned Parenthood have experimented with mixed events, with presentations by organization leaders followed by small group interaction. “We heard from donors that they would

appreciate short Zoom-focused meetings of 20–25 minutes for program,” says PPFA’s Hutson, “and then small break-out rooms, where they can engage with like-minded supporters.”

As the pandemic worsened, many organizations grew concerned about retention. Keeping the donors already on file giving became a major priority. Plus, as Best Friends’ Barbara Camick notes, there was a reservoir of available talent in the form of public facing staff who could no longer do their regular jobs.

## MID-LEVEL FUNDRAISERS LEARNED A LOT ABOUT ONLINE ENGAGEMENT IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME.

“One thing we did that worked really well and I think made a big difference was we started to do outreach calls to our donors,” says Camick. “We had a lot of staff members who were redeployed if they couldn’t do their regular job because it was public facing. We had a whole army of internal volunteers who started to do stewardship calls to our whole member base. They didn’t ask for donations, they just thanked donors for years of loyal support.”



**“WE HAD A LOT OF STAFF MEMBERS WHO WERE REDEPLOYED IF THEY COULDN'T DO THEIR REGULAR JOB BECAUSE IT WAS PUBLIC FACING.”**

**BARBARA CAMICK,**  
BEST FRIENDS ANIMAL SOCIETY

Additionally, organizations leveraged the sudden shift to all-digital to experiment with donor engagement. Several organizations we work with invested in Donor Insight Panels. Often used in the for profit world under the name Customer Insight Panels, these initiatives invite a specific group of donors to share their opinions about varying aspects of the organization's work via a monthly survey. Organizations report back what they hear and leverage the donor feedback to improve efforts, including campaign creative, organizing and advocacy tools, and overall stewardship. The panels provide an ongoing snapshot of how donors are feeling about the world in general and the cause/issue more specifically, serving both an engagement and audience research purpose.

Through their Donor Insight Panel, the ACLU was able to closely track rapidly shifting donor concerns and issues through the pandemic and also through the bitterly contentious November election.

Meghan Lee co-directs mid-level giving at the ACLU. She said, “the ACLU Insight Panel has been invaluable as we connected with mid-level donors throughout this difficult year, charted their passions and concerns, and most excitingly, began a series of educational initiatives. Because of the Insight Panel and our work with Sea Change, we launched the ACLU Issue Spotlight email series, where we unpack complex topics Insight Panel donors want to learn more about. Through these twin efforts, we've been able to move the needle on donor attitudes towards police divestment, voting rights, and redistricting as racial justice issue.”

Not all organizations say their new donors are looking for more interaction. Some of the fundraisers we spoke with say they actually saw an increase in what we call ‘all business’ donors.<sup>2</sup> Reports No Kid Hungry's Donna Batcho, “some donors shared that they didn't want to receive any special attention or updates, they were fine with what they saw and knew, appreciated knowing I was there if they needed me. And ultimately, they've continued and increased their support.”

Many organizations' mid-level files grew considerably in 2020. That makes a one-on-one approach increasingly cost-prohibitive and puts a premium on ‘scalable personal touches,’ such as the business cards Lori Hutson's team inserts into all new mid-level donor packages. Says Hutson, “our stewardship and engagement associate director sends what appears to be handwritten notes to thank donors. They



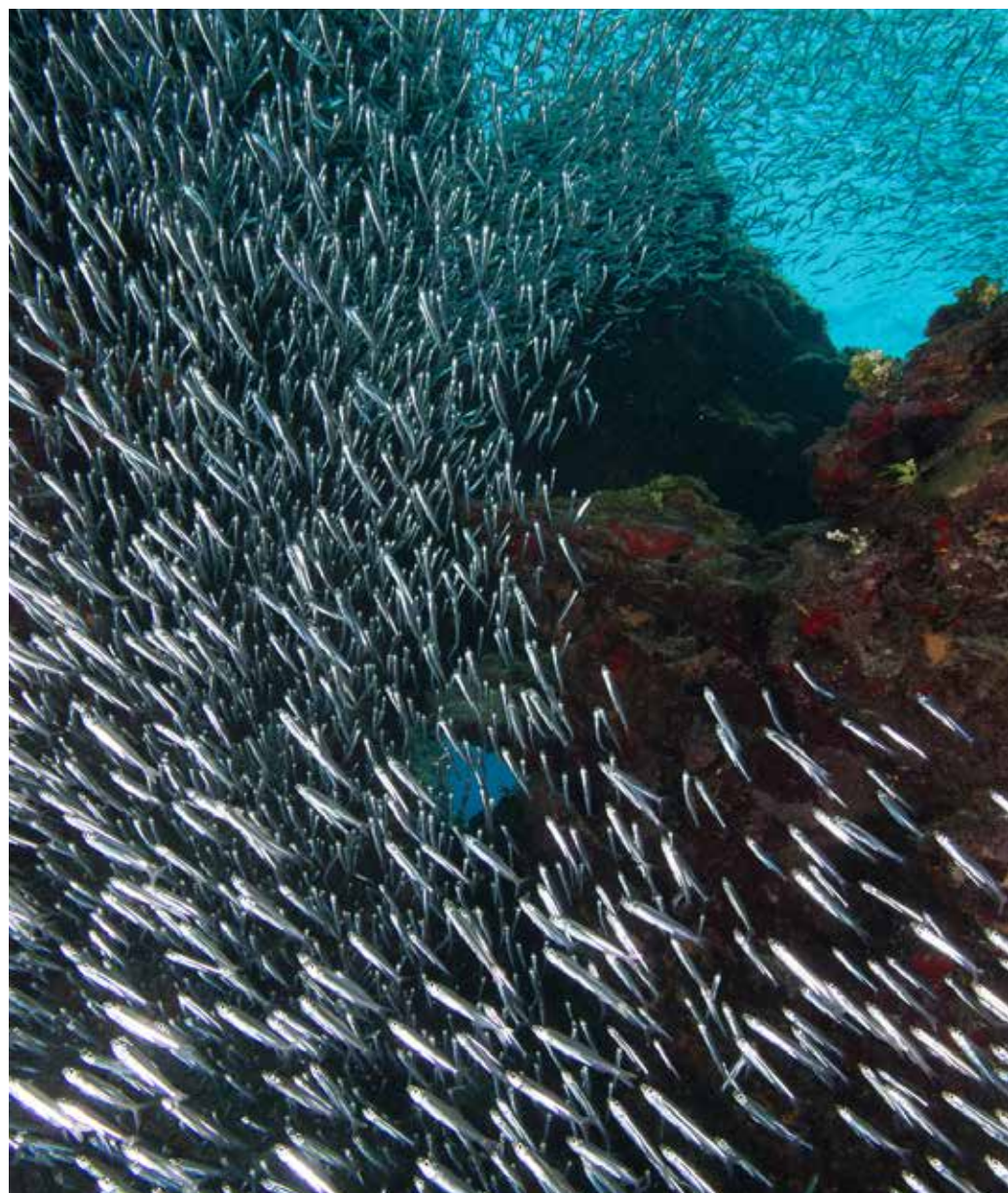
are actually just a copy of her beautiful handwriting, but it looks really authentic. They include her business card and donors will call her to show their appreciation.”<sup>3</sup>

The fact remains that some donors will only give again if you show them love while others will be put off by the attention.<sup>2</sup> That means it’s more important than ever to know who your donors are and what they expect. The increase in mid-level file sizes and the growing dominance of direct response (as opposed to major gift) strategies puts a premium on surveying donors regularly and watching and reacting to their attitudes and behaviors. This is an important research opportunity for the sector as a whole.

Time will tell whether the stewardship patterns that arose during the pandemic will help retain new mid-level donors who came on to files in 2020. Smithsonian’s Laura Brouse-Long is optimistic: “Don’t you imagine that these [new] people are motivated differently? And don’t you think it will be interesting to see how they renew, how they go or if they stay? This is a major opportunity to maximize personal outreach to them to reinforce the impact of their giving and secure continued support.”

<sup>2</sup> See the paper by Sea Change with Convio and Edge Research: [The Wired Wealthy](#). We found roughly equal numbers of mid-level donors who want a relationship as opposed to those who want to be left alone.

<sup>3</sup> For more affordable stewardship ideas, download a copy of Sea Change’s report, [How to Treat Mid-level Donors like Major Donors Without Breaking the Bank](#).



*There may be lots of good fish in the sea. But in fundraising, keeping your donors is more cost-effective than throwing out a new net.*

— Photo by Mark Rovner

## CONCLUSION AND BIG QUESTIONS

So here we are.

The pandemic precipitated a transformational shift in how we live, work and fundraise. But what will stick? And what comes next?

We believe that organizations will continue to reap extraordinary value from stronger coordination of cradle-to-grave fundraising—of which mid-level is a key part. So our crystal ball points to even more investment in advancing mid-level fundraising. Some key information we'll be watching for:

- How well will donors who first gave during the pandemic retain?
- What pandemic-driven changes will end up being permanent?
- How can we best model and upgrade mid-level donors within the mid-level tier (e.g. from \$1,000 to \$2,500)?
- How can we continue to advance coordination of mid-level with major donor fundraising to maximize those donors willing and able to make larger gifts?
- How will organizations attract new mid-level donors? What outreach strategies can best surface these quality supporters?
- How will digital engagement evolve?

- How can we affordably steward large numbers of mid-level donors so that the donors who expect more of a relationship with you get the attention they desire?
- How will we continue to professionalize mid-level fundraising roles and training staff?

We remain committed mid-level champions and look forward to assessing the next evolution down the road.

## MID-LEVEL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Want to join a generous mid-level community of practice? Be part of the mid-level listserv. Most, if not all, of the individuals quoted in this report frequently contribute to the conversations started there.

Recent threads have included:

- New questions about DAF gifts
- Concierge calling
- Mid-level donor retention analysis

JOIN THE FUN AND THE FUNDRAISERS

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