



Sunflower House

A Child Abuse Prevention Center



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The idea that someone might hurt a child through neglect or abuse is so repugnant we are tempted to close our eyes and turn our thoughts elsewhere. Fortunately, there are places where people face it head on, embracing and protecting those struggling with abuse's devastating consequences.

Sunflower House is such a place. It offers prevention programs, interventions and assistance with the aftermath of abuse. Equally critical, it provides neutral, safe ground for victims and their loved ones to interact with officials. Sunflower House is located in Shawnee, Kan., just west of Kansas City, Mo. It serves families in the Kansas counties of Johnson and Wyandotte.

Before the establishment of Sunflower House in 1997, victims frequently had to make formal disclosure of abuse as many as seven different times. Social-service agencies, law-enforcement officials, medical and legal professionals and others all had their procedures and preferences for gathering information – often with conflicting and competing objectives. The children were bounced from pillar to post. Adding to the ordeal, investigations often took place in police departments, suggesting to children they were the ones in trouble and reinforcing their trauma.

The repeated, stressful investigations – often without the videotaping that could protect the integrity of the statement – tended to confuse the children. This regularly led to conflicting testimony or even retractions. The resulting legal doubt allowed many alleged abusers to walk free.

Into this frustrating situation stepped the caring leaders of Sunflower House. Their goal was simple: create a comfortable and safe environment that encourages children to open up and let the truth tumble out. Turf wars had to be left outside; stress and trauma mitigated as much as possible. The best interest of the children was their *only* interest.

As Brenda Sharpe, Executive Director of Sunflower House put it: “We keep the attitude, ‘What if this were my child?’”

In 1997, the Sunflower House board and staff put a great deal of time and effort into developing a strategic plan to address this clear need for a safe environment. They clearly defined the mission and put a penetrating focus on long-term goals. The capital campaign, a \$4.25 million effort known as “*Promise to Protect*,” was a natural outgrowth.

“Once the campaign was underway, the strategic plan became even more important,” Sharpe said. “We learned



early on that not all gifts are ‘free.’ Some offers came with strings that would have limited our long-term goals. Because we knew where we wanted to go, we were forced to turn down some offers. What looked appealing initially would have created more problems down the road.”

The board retained Hartsook Companies in 1999 to consult on the \$4.25 million campaign. That next summer, board members offered stretch gifts totaling \$150,000 – for each, a considerable jump from their typical \$50 to \$500 annual-fund gift.

Everyone knew how important the campaign was to the mission. They also recognized the importance of 100-percent board participation.

“I can’t emphasize this enough.” Sharpe said. “Nonprofits that think they can get around this one are fooling themselves. We were asked about board participation again and again, in writing and verbally. Foundations and individual donors wanted to know if board participation was 100 percent.”

Campaign goals included \$2.89 million for land and facility, \$360,000 for programming and \$1 million for endowment. Hartsook President and campaign consultant Robert Swanson advised that current foundation giving would be adversely affected by the campaign. This piece of realism allowed the organization to plan ahead and raise money for programs that might see diminished giving during the campaign.



From September to December 2000, staff pledges came in. Every staff member contributed. The executive director set a pace gift of \$10,000. This level of giving demonstrated the people closest to Sunflower House truly believed in the organization.

In January 2001, co-chair Mark Parkinson (his wife Stacy served with him as co-chair) and others flew to Tulsa to deliver a proposal to the J.E. and L.E. Mabee Foundation. “We had an ‘ask’ figure in mind,” Sharpe said, “but the meeting was going so well that Mark felt confident enough to increase the ask to \$450,000. We had learned by this point

that prospective donors can always say no, but if it’s an appropriate amount, you might as well ask.”

In mid-March, the Mabee Foundation tendered the gift as a challenge to Sunflower House. Now they had one year to meet the matching requirement. To accomplish this, they turned to people familiar with area foundations. Through their growing relationships and strong case for support, they received a \$210,000 gift from the Sosland Family Foundation, and \$650,000 from the Hall Family Foundation, the largest Sunflower House ever had received. Within the year, Sunflower matched the Mabee challenge and received the gift.



It was a portent of good things to come. Of the approximately 300 gifts solicited during the campaign, only two were turned down. “One reason our success rate was so high,” Sharpe said, “was because we always went in prepared. Hartsook Companies got us ready for every solicitation. They coached us before every visit and let us know what to expect.”



During this same period as the Mabee challenge was being worked, Sunflower House paid their first visit to the Kresge Foundation in Troy, Mich. It was to be the beginning of the most intense application process Sharpe said she has encountered in her career. Their request: \$400,000.

“Everything had to be backed up and documented,” Sharpe said. “Fortunately, much of the research conducted for our strategic plan was transferable. Otherwise, it would have taken us twice the amount of time to complete.

“Had we tried this campaign without professional consultation, we might have gone to Kresge much earlier in the campaign and been laughed out of there as a consequence. Timing is so important with Mabee and Kresge. Without Hartsook Companies’ expert advice, we would have gone in at the wrong time, with the wrong information.”

The smart work paid off. Kresge offered a \$400,000 matching grant in December 2001. To meet the challenge, Sunflower



Sunflower House had to raise an additional \$1.3 million in the next 10 months. They were fairly confident about \$500,000 of it, but the rest was uncertain.

While individual solicitations continued, campaign leaders paid a visit to the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation. “The Foundation’s response,” Sharpe said, “was ‘We will not let a Kresge matching gift be lost from the Kansas City area.’”

Hearing them say “we” was a great comfort, Sharpe added, especially during the last push of the campaign. Sunflower House would not be alone as they raced toward the finish line.

On literally the last day of the campaign, Sunflower House still needed to raise \$18,000 to match the Kresge gift. “We worked all day trying to raise the remainder and then we received a call from Lloyd and Sue Ann Hill,” Sharpe said. “Lloyd is the president and CEO of Applebee’s International Corporation. He and Sue Ann were already big contributors to Sunflower House. He said, ‘Do what you can and at the end of the day, we’ll make up the difference.’”

When all was said and done, Sunflower House raised \$4.29 million – exceeding its \$4.25 million goal. In August 2002 they moved into their new building; at year’s end, they paid off both the land and the building. Money raised went first to pay for capital, then to programming, and finally to establish and grow the endowment.

“Our development director, Michelle Lawrence, deserves all the logistical credit. She worked tirelessly preparing for solicitations and follow up,” Sharpe said. “If it weren’t for her, I would never have agreed to do a campaign. She’s been on staff with Sunflower House for 10 years, which far exceeds the turnover rate in the professional fundraising field. This alone gave us a great deal of credibility with donors and conveyed the stability of our key personnel.

“Additionally, I think it is critical for any campaign that the executive director and development director have a terrific working relationship, can handle one another’s job when

necessary, provide moral support when faced with campaign disappointments and share in the celebration when things go well.”

Although Mark and Stacy Parkinson never had chaired a campaign, their leadership was exceptional in every way. Their lead gift of \$50,000 and two additional gifts at critical junctures in the campaign—for a total of \$100,000—were financially significant and gave the campaign great momentum.

“This campaign was a great experience,” Mark Parkinson said, “We learned there is a right and wrong way to conduct a campaign. Hartsook Companies offered a roadmap with strategies showing us how to do it right. Especially for an organization that has never conducted a campaign, professional consultation is a must. You need to understand there’s a methodical process and each step must be accomplished in turn. You need a great organization with great leaders, a supportive board and cultivated relationships in the philanthropic community. You can’t just call a foundation without developing a relationship.”

Fortunately, the organization had the right motivation, the right people in place, and smart strategies for a successful campaign.



“Making a positive difference in the lives of others is the foundation of any campaign,” Swanson said. “This was a textbook campaign from a technical standpoint. But it was the passion and professionalism of staff and volunteer leadership that drove this campaign to success. They were able to share, one on one, a powerful message for helping the most vulnerable members of our community. As a result, they brought hundreds of new supporters – hopefully lifetime supporters – to their fight against child abuse.”

Sunflower House’s success translates into positive change in how child abuse cases are handled today. Following an interview at the new Sunflower House, children are invited to visit an impressive bear showcase and choose a bear or toy in recognition of their courage. Such a small but significant gesture reflects a “*Promise to Protect.*”

It is a far, dignified cry from the trauma of the past.

To learn more about Sunflower House call 913.631.5800 or visit www.sunflowerhouse.org.

About the author – Denise Rhoades is a free-lance writer living in Newton, Kan. Denise has worked on several projects for Hartsook Companies and regularly writes campaign case statements and articles for Hartsook clients.

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