

CASE STUDY

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✓ PREMIUM

How 4-H Turned Its Largest Fundraising Dinner Into a Virtual Event

By Eden Stiffman



PHOTO BY GREG GIBSON

The National 4-H Council holds its largest fundraising event in the spring, but this year it shifted to a virtual event.

Like many nonprofits, the National 4-H Council holds its largest fundraising event in the spring.

The organization's Legacy Awards dinner was scheduled for March 25 at the Ritz Carlton in Washington, D.C. About 400 people typically attend the event, which brings in more than \$1 million.

"It's something we build up to all year," says the council's president, Jennifer Sirangelo. "It's our big highlight of the year where we thank our donors and we honor our high-achieving youth

who have overcome obstacles to contribute back to their communities."

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The lively dinner begins with a cocktail reception and often features a celebrity emcee and performer. Last year it was Jennifer Nettles of the country group Sugarland, as well as a young 4-H performer from Texas.

But by the second week in March, the country was facing a frightening new reality. More and more cities and states were issuing stay-at-home orders, and Covid-19's rapid spread dominated the news. The National 4-H Council's leaders and board members agreed they needed to shift their big dinner to a virtual event.

The group scrambled. The event didn't bring inasmuch as it normally does, but because the council's expenses were lower, the group met its net fundraising goal. Just as important, it found a way to connect with corporate supporters and some new donors and emphasize the importance of its work.

Long known for its agricultural activities, 4-H's work spans a broad range of youth development, service, and mentorship programs. As one of the largest out-of-school-time educational providers in the country, 4-H reaches every county in the United States — urban, suburban, and rural, Sirangelo says. "We really see ourselves and 4-H as education's first responders because we know schools can't do it alone," she says. "We've always been a partner to schools, and we know we need to step up in an even bigger way now as they're making huge transitions."

So Sirangelo's staff decided to create a shorter event that would run on Facebook Live.

That meant reimagining and quickly adapting and condensing event festivities to less than 30 minutes while still highlighting sponsors and showcasing four 4-H youths for their accomplishments.

Celebrity chef Carla Hall, who was supposed to serve as the dinner's emcee, spoke about her experience as a 4-H alum and made an appeal for donations.

During the live event, Sirangelo announced the launch of the Fourward Fund, an effort to raise \$10 million in four to six months to support the organization's Covid-19 response. The event brought in more than \$900,000 for the fund, and as of mid-April, donors had contributed more than \$3.5 million.

The national council will distribute funds to local 4-H clubs on a rolling basis. The goal is to make sure that youths and their families have access to the resources and educational materials they need to keep young people engaged and learning despite being in an unstructured environment. It will also support training for 4-H staff and mentors to help youths deal with mental-health challenges and social isolation.

The pivot to a virtual event was hard on 4-H staff, who had planned the in-person awards dinner, Sirangelo said. "We really love having the big in-person event to tell our story, but we were really so happy with how it turned out."

New Uses for Party Favors

Aside from trustees, most of the event's supporters are corporations, and the shift to digital meant rethinking recognition and stewardship.

Plans for highlighting supporters' brands on social media ahead of the event stayed pretty much the same. But because these donors weren't getting the recognition they would in a physical room, Sirangelo mentioned a few of the sponsors during her speech, and their logos were displayed at several points during the Facebook Live event.

Microsoft was the corporate honoree, and the charity had already planned to highlight a partnership with the company called 4-H Tech Changemakers. The company also partnered with 4-H to release a survey around the time of the event that examined how young people feel the digital divide will impact their future — an issue that's more relevant than ever with the shift to remote learning.

According to 4-H, as many 7 million youths — disproportionately African American, Latino, and rural youths — do not have internet access at home.

During the virtual event, the council highlighted both the company's support and the urgency to address the digital divide.

The organization also faced logistical challenges, like what to do with the party favors another sponsor had donated.

One of 4-H's board members runs Pet Retail Brands, which owns several pet supply brands. The retailer had contributed gift bags of pet food and toys and favors for guests. The charity now plans to send them to its local clubs after shelter-in-place orders are lifted so that youths can donate them to pet shelters and humane societies in their communities. 4-H, in turn, will be able to recognize the company for its contribution again at that time.

To communicate the changes, the charity created customized one-page documents to let sponsors at different giving levels know what recognition they would get on social media and in other 4-H materials before, during, and after the event.

"I think that that made everybody happy," said Cheryl Lesko, senior director of individual giving and events. "They had a further reach and got their name out there to a larger audience."

All of the original event supporters maintained their commitment to the virtual event, Sirangelo said. When sponsors confirmed they would donate despite no longer being able to attend the dinner, 4-H updated acknowledgment letters to reflect the full amount of their gift as tax deductible.

With reduced expenses, the organization was able to meet its net fundraising goal and did not incur any losses. The hotel worked with the charity to transfer food and beverage expenses to December, when they plan to hold a two-day Board of Trustees meeting along with a small donor stewardship reception for some of the sponsors who would have attended the dinner.

In the meantime, the organization is finding other ways to engage supporters virtually while social-distancing measures continue. Sirangelo, together with other experts, hosted a video call with the organization's major donors and prospects on the state of youth development today.

"It's a time of such uncertainty, and I wanted to ground them in what's going on and 4-H's response as the largest youth-development organization," she said.

Longer Shelf Life

Not everything in the quick pivot to digital went smoothly. The organization tested a text-to-give service, but that was not as successful as it had hoped. People primarily gave through the 4-H website.

Some people continue to respond better to direct mail, so 4-H sent a postal appeal in late April to continue promoting the Fourward Fund to both current and prospective supporters.

But the online event also helped the group secure new donors who would not have participated in the in-person event. Staff on the charity's digital-media team were logged in to a Zoom call to coordinate their engagement with viewers as questions about 4-H came in through Facebook's live feed during the digital event.

In addition to the increased engagement, the virtual event has had a longer shelf life than the group's traditional dinner. The Virtual 4-H Legacy Awards have now been viewed more 50,000 times on social media, Sirangelo said. "That's a much larger reach than we ever would have had in a ballroom."

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COVID-19 COVERAGE: FUNDRAISING EVENTS

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