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A Leader's Fond Farewell Becomes a Fundraising Bonanza

By Debra E. Blum



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, held several well-scripted events to say farewell to Director Malcolm Rogers, including a "Cheers to Malcolm" celebration that was open to the public.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, couldn't get enough of saying goodbye to its charming, popular, and, at times, polarizing, director, Malcolm Rogers. After he announced in February 2014 that he would retire, "everyone wanted their own special opportunity to say thank you and goodbye," says deputy director, Maria Muller.

And the museum gave it to them.

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A gala in Mr. Rogers's honor later that year celebrated his 20 years at the museum — and gave the institution's biggest benefactors a chance to make gifts in his name. The event, one of several send-offs for the director, raised \$1.8 million for the Malcolm Rogers 20th Anniversary Fund. In

addition, surprise gifts of artwork were pledged in his honor.

As the wave of baby-boomer retirements picks up speed over the next few years, more nonprofits will find themselves dealing with the need to send their leaders off in style. These leadership transitions may present great opportunities to engage supporters, tout the organization's accomplishments — and raise money.

"You can honor someone and build your organization at the same time," says leadership and fundraising consultant Atul Tandon, a former official at World Vision and United Way Worldwide. "You can raise money for something that speaks to a person's legacy but also serves the core and growth of the institution."

The occasion also can be fraught with pitfalls. Nonprofits planning farewells have to be careful not to appear to be straying too far from their mission or exploiting the situation.

"You can't just say, Bill is retiring, we all really liked Bill, so let's go raise money in honor of Bill," says Abbie von Schlegell, a fundraising consultant.



CHRISTINE HAHN

Long Farewell

The farewell for Mr. Rogers at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts was a carefully scripted series of events designed both to celebrate the departing leader and to meet the needs of the museum's many constituents. In addition to the gala, there was a special dinner just for board members, a farewell party with staff attended by 800 people, and a free community event called "Cheers to Malcolm" highlighting Mr. Rogers's favorite artworks.

"When the director of a major organization like the MFA retires, many in its community of board members, donors, volunteers, and staff will want to honor that leader's achievements and reflect on what they have built together over a long tenure," Ms. Muller wrote in an email. "Personal relationships have usually been created over many years, and people need to process such an important change."

The excitement about Mr. Rogers's 20th anniversary as director and the attention to his retirement was "all upside" for the museum, Ms. Muller says. The events helped promote its arts collections in new ways, including a marketing campaign called "20 Reasons to Visit."

"It was a great time to highlight what Malcolm and everyone had accomplished over the last 20 years and remind the public of the treasures at the museum," Ms. Muller says. "We saw it as a very good opportunity all around."

The succession plan at American Jewish World Service included discussions on how to honor, thank, and say goodbye to Ruth Messinger, who oversaw huge growth in the organization's budget, influence, and profile.

Succession Plan

Ruth Messinger says she'd be proud if part of her legacy at the American Jewish World Service was a sizable reserve fund created in her name. But she wanted to make sure it didn't give people the wrong impression.



MARIA AUFMUTH, AJWS

Ruth Messinger is stepping down after leading American Jewish World Service for 17 years. A farewell gala in her honor, scheduled for fall, will raise money for the newly created Ruth Messinger Legacy Fund.

Messinger's departure — she is 75 years old — when the group started mulling a new five-year strategic plan back in 2011.

The strategy, which emphasizes financial stability and organizational sustainability, was integrated into the succession plan for Ms. Messinger. It also informed decisions on how to honor, thank, and say so long to a president who oversaw huge growth in the organization's budget, influence, and profile.

"Before I agreed to a legacy fund," she says, recalling the joke she made around the office, "I needed to know it didn't sound like I was dead, like this was a memorial fund."

Indeed, Ruth Messinger remains very much alive — and involved with the international human-rights and anti-poverty nonprofit. The organization she led as president for 17 years created a new post for her as she continues her advocacy work: global ambassador.

The ascension of Robert Bank, who will take over as president after having served as executive vice president for seven years, is part of a long and well-planned transition. It started with discussions about Ms.

"It was so easy and natural to make it all about sustainability and being able to secure the legacy of Ruth's leadership by securing the financial future of the organization," says Mr. Bank.

By next fall's final farewell gala event in honor of Ms. Messinger, the organization aims to have put \$18.3 million in the newly created Ruth Messinger Legacy Fund. The fund was seeded with \$2 million the group had previously secured, and it has so far raised an additional \$8 million.

The fundraising is part of a broader campaign intended to start the 31-year-old group's first endowment fund.

"Dealing with human rights and issues that are a long way off from being resolved means wanting to make sure we have the resources and strength to continue our work," Mr. Bank says. "That is what our supporters care deeply about, it's what we care deeply about, and it's the greatest gift we can give Ruth."

Fundraisers at American Jewish World Service also found that goodbye gifts could open up future opportunities. "We found that giving for our long-term viability and success was something that really interested donors," Mr. Bank says. "We start out talking about Ruth, and we end up talking about much more."

No 'Big Fuss'

College presidents are often naturally outgoing, and William Johnston, former president of Wesley College in Delaware, was no exception. But when he told the institution's board he planned to retire, he insisted that he didn't want "a big fuss made," a school official recalls. Instead, he planned to say his goodbyes unassumingly during his final academic year at already-planned campus events.

" 'No galas for me' is the message he sent," says Chris Wood, Wesley's vice president for institutional advancement.

Still, Wesley's staff, board members, and donors couldn't resist a grand gesture to honor Mr. Johnston and his wife, Susan. Many people credited the couple with raising the college's profile statewide, and Mr. Johnston was praised for working tirelessly with city officials and campus neighbors to gain approval for campus projects. Far and away the highlight of his seven-year tenure, many agree, was landing a nearby former federal building at no cost for Wesley's expanded health-sciences program. The \$1 million naming rights were still up for grabs in 2014, when Mr. Johnston announced he would retire the following year.

Fundraisers set to work as quietly as they could, inviting gifts to rename the building William and Susan Johnston Hall. When Mr. Johnston learned about the campaign a few months later, he demurred at first but then embraced the project.

"There was genuine humility but also a genuine appreciation for what the money would mean for the college, how it would benefit students," Mr. Wood says.



WESLEY COLLEGE

Fundraisers at Wesley College invited gifts to rename the health-sciences building William and Susan Johnston Hall in honor of the former president and his wife.

An additional bonus for the college, says Mr. Wood, is that the campaign attracted some area residents and friends of the Johnstons — new donors to Wesley. One of those donors, a man especially interested in local history, has already made a second gift to the institution for a new historical marker on campus and to fund scholarships for students in the sciences.

Wesley announced the \$1 million raised — which is being used mostly for capital improvements and scholarships — at graduation last year. The new name of the health-sciences building was revealed, and the Johnstons were thanked for their service to the college.

Mr. Wood says the fundraising campaign was successful not only because donors wanted to honor the retiring president but because naming that particular building "made total sense." Acquiring the health-sciences building was at the core of Mr. Johnston's legacy, he says, and so putting that at the center of his send-off was a natural fit that "made fundraising easy."