



# In Desperate Times, Bad News Is Good News for Fundraising

by Phil Anthrop

IT BEGAN AS A NONPROFIT'S INNOCENT venting session in a coffee shop but ultimately launched a most unusual fundraising strategy: not recommended, not approved, not ethical. But at the same time, it was, well, effective.

Once again Jenny Arneson could see that Missouri Gun Control Now had entered its fourth financial crisis since she had joined the board, with decreasing contributions and two staff positions that had hemorrhaged the organization's budget. And the looming recession had hit concurrently with a lull in incoming funds and reduced public interest in the issue. Arneson and Brent Newborne, the board treasurer, had to ask the big questions: "Should we go back to operating as an all-volunteer organization? To get Gun Control Now back on its feet, can we realistically rebuild the donor base?"

They always knew it would be a struggle, but something inside Arneson and Newborne snapped when they read articles exposing the well-financed National Rifle Association (NRA) for having hired private detectives to infiltrate a Pennsylvania gun-control organization and for subsequently placing an agent on the organization's board and public-policy committee for 10 years.

When Arneson met Newborne at the Driftwood Espresso coffee shop to review finances, she told him, "This isn't civil

society; this is war. They have no ethics or compunction about lying, while we are transparent and weak," she railed. "Their money and numbers beat us every time—that's why we lost on the conceal-and-carry law. That's why we lost on the silencer bill."

"We shoot ourselves in the foot," Newborne replied. "We're held back because we're small, underfunded, and maybe overly principled."

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"You mean our board is more concerned about being ethical than being effective?" Arneson asked.

"I mean that the way things are going, we're going to be sustainably broke for the next five years, and the NRA and their phony front groups will walk all over us," Newborne replied. "But even if Gun Control Now is ineffectual, at least we can tell our grandchildren we raised important issues and stood our moral high ground. That sucks."

Both sat silently for several minutes. Then Arneson leaned forward and said

quietly, "You know, there could be a way to mess with the NRA and get our donor base jazzed. Somehow get a new red-meat gun group started, get an obscure but outrageous bill introduced, make it our number-one issue, and take it all the way to the bank," she mused.

Newborne laughed. "That would be wrong, of course, and our board could never know about it, but how about protecting the Right to Transport Assault Weapons through Playgrounds Act?"

"Or the Parental Discipline Taser Freedom Act," Arneson countered. "I'm sure Representative Smarts would like that one."

"OK, so the group that wants to be able to carry assault weapons through playgrounds because it is an infringement to have to walk around a park could be called the Safe Transport Coalition."

## From Humble Beginnings

That's how it started. By definition a conspiracy requires more than one person; but generally, the fewer the better. Arneson and Newborne decided to keep the closely held secret to two. After the staff at Missouri Gun Control Now was laid off, Arneson and Newborne separately left the board but promised to return as soon as they could.

Having seen all varieties of Astroturf

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organizations used against them (such as fake grassroots campaigns on behalf of farmers defending newborn lambs from wolves, gun-owning widows that had been burglarized, grandmother-and-granddaughter moose hunting clubs, and so on), Arneson and Newborne had an idea about how to get started. They decided that they could establish their new organization online, a largely anonymous and virtually zero-cost method.

Newborne purchased a cell phone and created a P.O. box in Washington, D.C., giving the Safe Transport Coalition a 202 area code and 20036 zip code as its away-from-home base.

Arneson and Newborne created an elaborate Web site describing the Safe Transport Coalition as a large national grassroots campaign formed to defend the Second Amendment rights of gun owners carrying firearms from restrictions on travel.

Arneson called one of the Jefferson City lobbying firms that represents the NRA, Palin Ellerbe, and discussed a retainer to represent the Safe Transport Coalition and help it move as-yet undrafted legislation.

Arneson and Newborne spent a month drafting a bill called the Safe Transport Law that included vague language about the need to keep transportation systems, streets, sidewalks, public places, and private workplaces safe from hazard, including (but not limited to) sharp overhangs at eye level—with a long list of statutory references and inclusions. If anyone had taken the time to piece together the complex chain of 13 citations, it would have been clear that the proposals created a new right for any gun owner to bring any kind of firearm to any workplace, post office, child care center, counseling center, hospital, courtroom, or playground.

With newly established Gmail accounts, Arneson and Newborne wrote

earnest e-mail messages on behalf of imaginative names to newspapers, blogs, discussion boards, and legislators complaining about how the Safe Transport Law hadn't gotten anywhere.

Via e-mail, blog, Web site, and robo-calls to lists of gun magazine subscribers, they created buzz about the Safe Transport Coalition and convinced three other gun owners' rights groups to endorse the gun control legislation.

The trap was almost set.

Still, it was discouraging. The NRA was so well financed and had hundreds of thousands of die-hard supporters who truly believed that you could only pry their guns from their cold, dead fingers.

The number of gun deaths hadn't decreased, however. Many of Gun Control Now's most active members had lost family members to guns. More guns in more places had made the United States not a safer but instead a more dangerous place for everyone.

Each year 2,000 bills are introduced in the Missouri legislature, and getting one more introduced is no difficult task. Senator Smarts hardly needed persuading. The firm Palin Ellerbe was a trusted vehicle, and from force of habit all the players knew how, amid the rush of legislative business, to play their roles.

## A Year Later

A year later, some good fortune had finally come to the gun control advocates' corner. Missouri Gun Control Now had moved into new offices, with four and a half staff and a now-healthy board-designated reserve. The firestorm over the Safe Transport Law had been horrendous—Missouri Gun Control Now's fundraising went through the roof—and embarrassed various Second Amendment advocates. As the chamber of commerce, hospital association, postal service, and child care association held a joint press conference denouncing the legislation, the press and

everyone else desperately searched the audience for a representative of the Safe Transport Coalition to comment on the situation.

And when the NRA publicly alleged that the Safe Transport Coalition was an unfair ruse cooked up by its enemies, it was viewed as just one more denial in the world of Astroturf politics as usual.

At Merrick Neighborhood Center, the weekend before the new legislative session, the newly expanded Gun Control Now board and staff held its all-day Saturday planning retreat and covered the walls with ambitious plans and reframing statements. Newborne rejoined the group as the treasurer, and Arneson returned as the chair of the Committee on Public Policy. During a lasagna lunch, Arneson and Newborne got some ribbing for their return. "When the going gets easy, the easy get back on board," their colleagues joked. Newborne laughed it off by saying, "Oh, well, you know the old saying, 'Bad news is always good news in fundraising.'"

After the last Next Steps flipchart sheet had been completed, Arneson's cousin Rob (and the event's volunteer caterer) came to collect the dishes and took Arneson aside with an early copy of the *Sunday Post-Dispatch*. Rob said, "I thought you would want to see this."

Page two featured a full-page ad with a bold proposal. In neighborhoods with children, it called for house-to-house police search and seizure for unlocked guns and hunting knives of nine inches or more by the new organization Seize Missouri's Dangerous Guns and Knives Now!

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