

# CULTURAL ICONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE



The Iconic Impact Series  
Bridge Philanthropic Consulting, LLC



IS THE GALA  
**DEAD** OR STILL THE  
**WORKHORSE OF**  
**THE FUNDRAISING**  
**WORLD?**

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and Carter D. Womack

# Special Introduction

## Event Planning Experts Share their wisdom

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofits struggled with how to not only continue to provide critical services but raise much-needed money to fund those services. Gone were big fundraising events. Gone were intimate donor cultivation events. Gone were educational tours and celebrations. Even one-on-one ‘get to know you’ opportunities with donors had to be canceled.

In other words, the status quo no longer existed, forcing nonprofits to reimagine how to move forward.

Many organizations pivoted seamlessly to virtual events, coming up with creative ways to engage with donors. And while some groups benefitted from the cost savings, others were mindful that most high-net worth individuals prefer the dynamics of face-to-face engagement.

Therefore, as the world returned to a ‘new’ normal, the go-to gala was replaced with a hybrid event, allowing for limited in-person contact. But is it enough? In today’s uncertain world, organizations are considering how to best deploy their fundraising resources for long-term benefit.

We decided to ignite a conversation about the enduring value of the annual gala and the opportunity it gives for supporters to celebrate impact, reinvest, network, and challenge their peers to up their game. After all, an organization’s gala is typically the Who’s Who of the philanthropic community. It provides a link to the organization in a way most other fundraising events can’t, helps to educate, and strengthen an individual’s interest and relationship to the organizational mission.

So, regardless of the changing  
world around us,  
the gala may be the one event that stands the test of time.

**Jason O. Parker, Senior Meetings and Events Planner, Accenture**

**Carol Campbell, Executive Director, University Events and Protocol, Prairie View A & M University**

**Latoya Henry, Vice President of Programs, The Usher New Look Foundation**





The Bridge Philanthropic Consulting team has managed, and or advised on hundreds of different fundraising events throughout our years of professional experience, giving us a unique perspective on their viability. There are a few undisputed facts which define both the pros and cons of event fundraising:

## Pros

Events increase brand awareness and value

Events are a great platform for cultivation and stewardship

## Cons

Events are expensive

Events can be taxing on the organization's capacity even when outsourced

If not done well, events can negatively impact your organization's reputation and donor's perception of the leadership team.

If you are staff, board, or a volunteer in the nonprofit sector, you've probably asked, "Why don't we hold a special Anniversary Dinner, Annual Gala, Luncheon, conference, or reception? And yet, if you work in a non-profit organization who hosts an annual event with increasingly diminishing returns, you've probably asked yourself, "Why are we still hosting this event?"

Special event fundraising is the go-to vertical for most organizations, especially emerging and BIPOC organizations who may not have access to wealthy prospects. But rather than asking what event you should undertake; the more important question is – are they worth it?

Staging a special event is the most labor intensive and expensive way to raise money. In fact, it costs an average of \$.50 on the dollar to stage an event in terms of direct and indirect costs. In addition, some events, like marathons, can be a challenging way to connect with donors.

## **So, why do so many nonprofits turn to special events?**

It's simple. They work. While fundraising experts can be quick to give you reasons not to stage a special event (and the cost is one of them), there are specific reasons why you might consider one. After all, the fact that so many organizations do them on an annual basis says something about their potential. But as you develop a concept, be sure to consider the risks. Organizations who successfully stage large events understand cost vs benefit and have found ways to minimize the costs while maximizing the benefit, thereby reducing the risks. You should, too.







Consider the Met Gala, which is lauded globally and incorporates a marketing impact worth hundreds of millions of dollars in PR value alone. According to the tracking firm Launchmetrics, in one night the Met Gala generates \$543MM in media impact value, compared with the Super Bowl's \$520MM. Widely attended by influencers, celebrities, wealthy donors and corporate partners, it is one of their major fundraising vehicles.

How do you do that? The primary goal of a special event does not always translate into immediate revenue. In fact, when organizations assess the return on investment (ROI) through a special event, the net funds raised often become only one of many outcomes when determining the success of the event.

While not everyone can duplicate that kind of success, there are an abundance of good reasons to consider staging an event. For instance, special events offer:



One of the best ways to raise unrestricted dollars



The chance to influence a large group of potential donors all at once by telling your story.



Expanded brand visibility gained through marketing and promotional efforts.



The opportunity to cultivate potential sponsors, board members, existing donors, and community advocates.



The opportunity to recruit large numbers of volunteers who may become community ambassadors, annual donors, or even potential staff.



A platform to bring in potential new donors to your organization through ticket sales, table captains, and event signups.



A media asset to announce important upcoming campaigns, donor societies, or shifts in program priorities.

If you can successfully manifest even a few of these benefits, you'll understand why special event fundraising can be one of the best tools in your fundraising toolbox. But that's the macro view. Let's frame this discussion by focusing on the ever-popular gala event.

Galas are probably the industry standard for special events (if there is one). Besides golf tournaments, holding a gala might be the most popular way to generate short-term revenue for your mission. Galas come in all shapes and sizes. Some incorporate live and silent auctions, while others focus on a celebrity guest, creative theme, or honorees. Most are sit-down dinners with a program, while others offer heavy hors d'oeuvres with a room full of entertaining activities. Regardless of the format, it's attention to detail that wins the day.

But the traditional gala is changing, and some people feel they have overstayed their welcome as a key fundraising vehicle.

In the early days, galas were black-tie affairs expected to last late into the evening. Today, many galas are more relaxed with themed attire and offer a short program with an evening of fun and time to socialize. Donors are changing as well. Today's donors, especially millennials, are more interested in mission-related programs rather than appearances by random celebrities. They want to know not just how their money is being spent but what difference it has made.

While it's common to have testimonials from those you benefit, some groups go farther. For instance, organizations that support educational programs can incorporate their students as table hosts, performers, or docents for displays around the room. Donors find it inspiring to see firsthand the people who benefit from their support.

Regardless of how you stage your gala, you'll need to plan on how to take advantage of every potential benefit available to make the most of your time and money. To do that, your staff will need to map out all the different ways in which you could benefit from the event (see the list above). Some of them, like promotion, are obvious. Others will take extra effort. For instance, once you're in the room that night you can't only focus on what's happening on stage. You will need to pay attention to your audience.



Creating interactive opportunities with audiences has also become more and more popular. Rather than having people merely sit at a table listening to an endless line of speakers, staff are becoming creative in how they present their programs by integrating professional videos, streaming, and connecting to social media in real time.

In other words, use the night as a cultivation opportunity. Assign board members to specific sponsors, dignitaries, or major donors in the room. Even potential donors. Script your board members if you must, but make sure each board member takes a moment during the evening to introduce themselves to people on their lists and thank them for attending. Be sure to have those board members report back to you to share their experience and any related comments made by the attendees. When sending thank you notes to important attendees after the event, put a more personal twist to it and have that board member write a personal note saying how nice it was to see them at the event.





But what about those who feel galas are a thing of the past?

Beyond staging a first-class event, the challenge in today's fundraising world is to keep your gala relevant and fresh. How do you do that?

First, cultivate feedback from your donors and listen to what they say. Watch your ticket sales. If it's becoming more and more challenging to reach your sales targets, find out why. The same thing is true for sponsors and volunteers. If the event isn't desirable enough for people who support you, you'll likely have difficulty selling tickets to complete strangers.

Always hold a wrap-up meeting with everyone who had a hand in staging the event. Even better, provide refreshments and call it a recognition celebration. The point is to evaluate what worked and what didn't work so that changes can be made. It also gives insiders an opportunity to share their opinion and to feel valued. Then, be sure to use that feedback to tweak the event the following year with an eye towards not only making it better but slightly (if not significantly) different.

And lastly, for any event to be successful, it's critical to pay attention to details. That means hiring professional sound and lighting people so that even people in the back of the room can see and hear the program. It means scripting what your speakers will say. It also means giving guidance to those who will give testimonials, perhaps even rehearsing them. There's nothing worse than someone coming to the microphone and garbling their all-important message about your organization.



Consider the annual gala held by the Studio Museum of Harlem which raises upwards of \$3MM. A key component of the event is awarding the Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, established by jazz impresario George Wein. The coveted award recognizes the artistic achievements of an African American artist who demonstrates great innovation, promise, and creativity.

The United Negro College Fund, which has chapters all over the country, benefits from regional premier fundraising galas entitled “A Mind Is...”® Gala. The extended organization considers these important social events for each region, which focus on raising awareness of the need and benefits of a college education at historically Black colleges and universities.

There is also Break the Silence’s Purple Gala, which is a black-tie event to support and honor both advocates and survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and pay tribute to those lost due to IPV. The organization stages the gala as an evening to celebrate the beauty of life. The highlight is a fashion show featuring domestic violence survivors as the models. Think of the emotion created by that and the link back to their mission

The NAACP also benefits greatly from gala fundraising across the country. As the largest and most influential civil rights organization in the nation and a \$29 million per year non-profit focused on lobbying and civic engagement, the NAACP has successfully replicated its Freedom Fund Awards Gala in multiple markets, utilizing local and national dignitaries to attract attention.



These are all good examples of organizations that have successfully used gala fundraising to build their name recognition locally and nationally, attract new donors, honor long-time donors, and educate and inspire ongoing support for their very worthy causes.

Like any undertaking, when you consider staging a gala or special event to raise much-needed dollars, you need to understand the commitment and the complexity of the decision you're making. To do that, take the time to answer the following questions:

1. What is the goal of the event? (Close a budget gap, establish a new revenue vertical, and/or steward donors and new prospects)
2. Do you have the resources (money, staff, volunteers, time) it will take to do a credible job?
3. Should you hire an external consultant to manage the event to avoid over-taxing your staff?
4. What event will best fit your organization?
5. Can you create an event that not only raises money but supports your message?
6. If you don't have the expertise to pull off the chosen event, can you recruit volunteers to provide the support that you need?
7. Are you willing to invest in what it takes to make the event a success?

While special events are labor intensive and soak up resources, the real magic happens when the organization takes the time and effort to make the event work for them instead of against them. In other words, when you make them part of your overall fundraising strategy, special events have the power to not only put previously unknown organizations on the map but attract the kind of people that just might have the resources to help secure the organization's future.

**And that's why Galas are still alive  
and important to the fundraising ecosystem!**





# About Bridge Philanthropic Consulting, LLC



Bridge Philanthropic Consulting (BPC) is the nation's only full-service Black-Owned Philanthropy firm. Our company has a proven track record of extraordinary success in helping philanthropic organizations and institutions to realize their dreams, accomplish their missions, and grow their aspirations. With more than 600 years of combined experience, our leaders have raised billions for clients throughout the world.

## Iconic Impact Series- Co-Authors

### **Dwayne Ashley, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, BPC**

With over 30 years in the philanthropic industry, Dwayne Ashley has utilized his knowledge of fundraising and passion for social justice to create opportunities for people of color through his founding of Bridge Philanthropic Consulting, the nation's only full-service Black-owned fundraising firm. Throughout his career, Dwayne sought to align with organizations that shared his values regarding the betterment of Black-and-Brown people and, through that alignment, has raised over \$1 billion to support those communities.

### **Sylvia White, Chief Operations Officer, BPC**

Sylvia White is the Chief Operations Officer at Bridge Philanthropic Consulting and a seasoned executive with experience managing teams in every development area, inducing major gifts, corporate and foundation relations, annual giving, stewardship, systems, and research. With significant experience in principal and major gifts, Sylvia has worked with top-level donors to secure millions of dollars in pledges to various organizations and businesses championing change. In addition to her professional accolades, Sylvia has published articles in the New York University College of Dentistry's Global Health Nexus, The Positive Community Magazine and is a proud member of, The Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest operating Black Writers Workshop in the United States.

### **Carter D. Womack – Executive Consultant, BPC**

Dr. Carter D. Womack is currently President & CEO of Leadership At Its Best, LLC, a Columbus, Ohio-based company that provides Leadership and Development Training, Executive Coaching as a certified coach of Coachville, Leadership and Development & Life Skills Training for Pre-College and College and University students.

He is a member of many national, state, and local organizations such as Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., where he has served as National Director of Education; 27th National President of the Fraternity, Inc. and the first member to be reelected as the 29th National President; 28th National President of the National Pan-Hellenic Council and Chairman of the Phi Beta Sigma Educational Foundation. He has been listed by Ebony Magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential African American for six years. He was inducted into the first Alumni Hall of Fame for Alabama A&M University Class in 1990.

He is currently member of the Society of Human Resources Management; National Cancer Society as a Volunteer; Life Member Alabama A & M University Alumni Association; National Association of African Americans in Human Resources - National Board of Directors, awarded his Honorary Doctoral Degree in Organization

# Special Introduction- Co-Authors

## **Jason O. Parker, Senior Meetings and Events Planner, Accenture**

Jason Parker currently works for Accenture as their Senior Meetings and Events Planner in the New York City Corporate Office. Prior to joining Accenture, Mr. Parker worked for the Mayor of New York City in the Office of Special Projects and Community Events for over five years which he organized, managed and directed Mayoral public ceremonies, celebrations and receptions for the Mayor.

Prior to working in the New York City Mayor's Office, Jason served at The Rockefeller Foundation as a project special assistant where he streamlined projects and events across the Foundation's Operations Department. Prior to joining The Rockefeller Foundation, Jason was the Manager, Client Events Administration for Nickelodeon which he played a major role in the planning and executing the first ever inaugural Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Sports Awards hosted and executive produced by Michael Strahan in the summer 2014.

Jason holds a Master's degree in Public Administration and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science both from Texas Southern University. Jason is an entrepreneur at heart. He owns and operates Connect The Dots Entertainment Group, a Celebrity Wrangling & Event Planning Agency since 2009. [www.ConnectTheDotsEnt.com]

## **Carol Campbell, Executive Director, University Events and Protocol**

A special events and protocol management expert, Carol Campbell has 41 years of distinguished experience in entertainment and higher education. Before returning to work for her beloved alma mater, Prairie View A&M University, the second oldest institution of higher education in Texas, Campbell spent ten years working with nationally syndicated television shows PM Magazine, Laverne and Shirley, and the Home Box Office (HBO) network in Los Angeles, California. She is the co-author of Thurgood Marshall College Fund's publication, "8 Winning Steps to Creating A Successful Special Event".

Throughout her tenure at Prairie View A&M University, Campbell has overseen several key areas, including alumni affairs, community, and marketing, development, and promotions, under the leadership of four succeeding university presidents. As Executive Director of University Special Events and Protocol, she directs all high-profile events for the Office of the President. Always ensuring that campus special events have a "special, memorable touch," Campbell has overseen grand openings, ribbon cuttings, commencement celebrations, dinners, galas, and speaker series.

Campbell holds a bachelor's degree in mass communication with a radio and television concentration and a master's degree in educational counseling from Prairie View A&M University. Campbell also trained at the Protocol School of Washington. She is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and past member of Jack and Jill of America, Inc.

## **Latoya Henry, Vice President of Programs, The Usher New Look Foundation**

Latoya Henry is a Marketing, Public Relations & Events executive with more than 15 years experience in the corporate and nonprofit sectors. But it's her experience as a high school teacher that has inspired and invigorated her to lend her expertise to children and education focused non-profits like SFK – Success for Kids, A Better Chance, Children of Promise and Usher's New Look; planning Young Leadership functions, award/fundraising ceremonies and managing community relationships. She has mastered the fine art of raising funds and awareness with panache through provocative, experiential events.

Her current role as Vice President of Programs & Partnerships at Usher's New Looks allows her to ignite the spark in young people. Through this role, she's able to help them realize their gifts and talents and show them how they can share those gifts with the world through their education, career and service to improve their lives and the lives of those in their communities. She is responsible for creating enrichment experiences, identifying and collaborating with strategic partners, and increasing awareness of the work that UNL does nationwide.

