

Sierra Nevada Children's Museum

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Fundraising and community outreach are key to success at any nonprofit. Carol Meagher, Executive Director of the Sierra Nevada Children's Museum, found her time for those critical functions limited because of ongoing bookkeeping issues. Supporting Strategies freed up Meagher's time — and also provided much-needed transparency into the museum's finances.

Client Profile

The Sierra Nevada Children's Museum (also known as the KidZone) has been a popular family destination since moving to its current location in the mountain community of Truckee, California, in 1997. The nonprofit relies on a variety of grants to fund its operations, which include a planned expansion. A larger facility is required to accommodate a projected increase in visitation of up to 81% over the next 20 years.

Exceeding Expectations

When Meagher reached out to Jen Ellermeyer, Managing Director of Supporting Strategies | Reno - Tahoe, her goal wasn't to improve the KidZone's bookkeeping — it was just to get the bookkeeping done, period. The museum's former bookkeeper had decided not to return from maternity leave, and a prospective replacement hadn't

panned out. Ellermeyer, who had taken her own kids to the museum many times, was happy to help. "It was a labor of love," she says.

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And it took lots of love to straighten out the KidZone's chart of accounts and item list, which Ellermeyer likens to "a tangled ball of yarn." She adds that "there were probably 750 different items that any given transaction could be coded to. Even the staff managing the grants found it confusing."

That meant items were frequently miscoded, and it cost Meagher and other staff time and money to track down the errors. "We implemented a much more methodical system," Ellermeyer says. "It requires just three identifiers on each transaction: general ledger account, class code and grant identifier. That's it."

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Educating the Client

For Meagher, the Supporting Strategies approach was a revelation. "They do something that's very important for nonprofits," she says. "They take the time to really understand our accounting, and then they help us to understand how we can benefit from improved reporting. For example, we're getting profit and loss reports now on specific fundraisers so we can measure their effectiveness. And we now get grant accounting updates every month for the income and expense per grant. That's essential."

Meagher was impressed with Supporting Strategies' proactive problem-solving. One government grant was particularly cumbersome to process, "but I thought that was just the nature of it," Meagher says. Supporting Strategies contacted the grantor to ask if they could streamline the process — and the grantor readily agreed.

Software Fit for a Museum

Supporting Strategies also spearheaded an overhaul of the KidZone's antiquated, server-based software systems, which were slow and plagued by connectivity issues. Meagher had to be onsite to sign checks, and somebody had to physically be at the museum just to turn on the computer that hosted QuickBooks Desktop.

In addition to migrating the entire system to the cloud, Supporting Strategies implemented a variety of industry-specific software applications. "I could see a lot of areas where we could improve things, keep them moving and make some processes more efficient so Carol could get out in the community more," Ellermeyer says.

The technology upgrades also reduced the amount of paperwork that had to be processed and physically stored — a huge help at a museum that has outgrown its space.

Helping the KidZone Grow

With the museum having recently commissioned a feasibility study on its planned expansion, the improved transparency in its financial reporting couldn't have come at a better time. "Now we can really see where we are financially and compare things year by year," Meagher says. "I get a better picture, and the board gets a better picture."

Meagher also has a much better picture of what Supporting Strategies brings to the table. "I wasn't expecting to be able to streamline our financial operations so concisely and completely," she says.

Get started today!