

Starting from Scratch

Fund for the School District of Philadelphia holds first-ever awards gala to honor alumni, increase engagement amongst former students



About four years ago, the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia began a process to find greater fundraising opportunities to support its programs and services. This effort, led by then-incoming Executive Director Donna Frisby-Greenwood, aimed to significantly increase individual donations, as the organization relied mostly on foundational and corporate support.

"As I was thinking about which individuals would be most likely to give, I started to think about alumni of our public schools," Frisby-Greenwood says. "It was a little difficult, because many of our high schools have alumni associations [of their own], but a lot of our elementary and middle schools do not."

Frisby-Greenwood and her team began reaching out to alumni, who tended to share very fond memories of their time throughout Philly's public schools. Despite this, they had never been invited to revisit those schools or make meaningful contributions to them. The question became: how could the Fund best engage these alumni and give them more opportunities to support the city's schools—even if they no longer live there?

The Fund launched an all-city initiative to engage students who had attended public school in Philadelphia.

"We needed to own the narrative for what it meant to be a Philly alum. For many years, the only news you heard about our public schools was bad news," Frisby-Greenwood says. "We wanted to do something to remind people that we produce great graduates. We thought that by highlighting some very prominent alumni, we could do that."

The Fund also wanted to ensure that any initiatives it undertook would not step on the toes of the often highly engaged alumni associations of the district's high schools. Its team came up with the concept of honoring alumni for their positive contributions, primarily through an annual awards gala.

The organization began looking at various possible options to help reach its goals. Most of the solutions available seemed to offer only software or web platforms to engage alumni through an existing list. Because the Fund did not have a significant database of its own, it needed help building one from scratch.

That's where Alumni Nations came in. After some due diligence, the Fund realized that Alumni Nations could not only assist with the gala and engagement efforts, but could also help build the much-needed database. The firm presented an all-encompassing alumni engagement strategy, beyond what a software solution could ever provide on its own.

In other words, The Fund was seeking a true partner versus just another software supplier. The team needed people who would answer the phone and take the action necessary to secure the outcomes the organization needed in its efforts. That partner was Alumni Nations.

Gaining a foothold

At the first annual Philly Alumni Awards Gala, the Fund honored Joseph M. Field, an alumnus who founded a major media company that operates 235 radio stations nationwide. Fields has given \$10 million to his alma mater in the School District of Philadelphia.

The gala also honored singer and actress Jill Scott, Temple University head basketball coach and former NBA player Aaron McKie and Ellen Lissy Rosenberg of the Goldenberg Group, who created Dress Down Day for Philly Public Schools.

Additionally, the Fund asked the district's high school alumni associations and principals to nominate active alumni for recognition. This included individuals of all ages and who have been engaged in a wide variety of activities and professional fields in Philadelphia and beyond. Michael Brown, president of the West Philadelphia High School Alumni Association, was selected as the honoree.

Finally, the Fund issued its first-ever Class of Philadelphia Award, recognizing an individual who is not an alumnus, but who has made significant contributions to Philly's public schools. The first recipient was Dr. Janet Haas, chair of the William Penn Foundation—the largest philanthropic foundation in the city and an organization that has made numerous large donations to the city's public schools.

The gala included a dinner, dancing and the awards ceremony.

"The event went very well," Frisby-Greenwood says. "We got some good [media coverage] from it, and that helps us get the attention out to some alumni as we move forward."

An unexpected challenge

Just as the Fund was planning for the gala and awards program, the organization lost its lead marketing person. The organization hired an outside marketing agency to assist in the short term, but by that time there was only about a month out from the event weekend. At the time, an alumni website home page had been half-built, but not completed.

The Alumni Nations team took over and completed that page. They then developed integrated action pages and functions, including for event information, ticket sales, an alumni directory and signups. This allowed alumni to purchase tickets and make donations, while enabling the Fund to track engagement and send out communications to their alumni. Alumni Nations also created these communications and sent out email blasts.

"Even with not as much marketing as we would have liked, I think it was really important for us to continue to move forward and get off the ground," Frisby-Greenwood says. "Now, people have seen more than just a concept on paper—they can see what we are trying to do. I think that helped crystallize it for people and garner even greater support for next year."





A bright future ahead

While the Philly Alumni Awards Gala and awards program has already been a great success for the Fund, Frisby-Greenwood is looking forward to continuing to make improvements as the organization forges ahead with the effort.

"I think we would have liked to have done more outreach to the [high school] alumni associations from the start—and spent more time with them," Frisby-Greenwood says. "One, it would allow us to get more nominations for the Most Engaged Alumnus [award]. And two, we may see more diversity in who we see turn out for the awards program. That's really where more work needs to be done."

The Fund has already collected thousands of alumni names and contact information in its database, which continues to grow on a daily basis.

Thanks to innovative thinking, a creative approach and a big assist from Alumni Nations, the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia is off to a fantastic start as it ramps up its alumni engagement efforts. The future looks bright for this exceptional organization supporting one of the nation's largest public school districts.

"You don't have to start big—just start," Frisby-Greenwood says.



