



STORYCAUSE PARTNER FEATURE

Like many recent graduates, Melanie Hittinger didn't know exactly what she wanted to do with her degree. Her first couple of jobs provided a paycheck but left her feeling unfulfilled.

Something was missing. Melanie wanted her work to be more meaningful. When she moved into a position at Legacy Youth Tennis and Education, a local nonprofit, she knew she had found her passion.

"I could immediately see the impact we were making on the youth in my community and that felt so special to me. I knew then my career was meant to be in the world of philanthropy.

Today, Melanie is the Senior Development Manager for Operation Smile, a global organization that works hand-in-hand with local communities to provide educational programs and free, life-changing cleft care.

She has been overseeing their successful mid-level giving program since its inception a little over three years ago.

According to Melanie, focusing on mid-level supporters, which Operation Smile considers to be in the \$1000 to \$9999 giving range, is a newer strategy in donor management overall, becoming more prominent in the last ten years. Operation Smile was keen to explore what it could look like for their organization.

"It has been a phenomenal," shares Melanie proudly, quick to share their success. "Whether it's a phone call every couple of months to say thank you or share what's new, an email, or even a visit, Melanie says that hearing from one of their "dedicated to them" gift officers – without there being an "ask" – has made a positive difference in terms of how much and how often these donors give.

By building more personal and consistent relationships with their mid-level donors, gifts increased more than 75% from FY23 to FY24, and 50% from FY24 to FY25. And when their fiscal year ends this June, Melanie is optimistic Operation Smile will have exceeded their goal.

So, what's their secret to building and managing a strong mid-level program?

Melanie is quick to point out that it all starts with leadership. She credits their willingness to let her experiment with different approaches and opportunities, allowing her team to build a solid foundation and create meaningful one-on-one relationships with these particular donors, something they'd not done at scale before.

"I think these donors have been pleasantly surprised by the extra attention. It wasn't something they were used to experiencing. And it definitely has increased the participation we see from them."

Melanie says that being given the trust, flexibility and support by leadership to try new ideas, like incorporating a concierge program, has also been a driver of success.

"Working with a company like StoryCause is very new for us. We have the most amazing inhouse team who has cultivated relationships with these donors in a very different way than we had in the past. We are super protective of our donors and our process. We were given free rein to try – and it's been better than expected!"

The partnership with StoryCause has been so successful, Operation Smile has already hit their fiscal year goal for that segment of the program (donors in the \$1,000 to \$3,000 range) – six months ahead of schedule.

"It's getting harder and harder to get and keep the attention of donors at all levels. Mid-level donors can be especially vulnerable, but they are so important to our giving programs. It's all about finding and implementing new ways to propel their generosity to the next level."



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