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9/11 Charities Look to Seize Rare Moment

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

The executive director of the nonprofit Tuesday's Children, Terry Sears, knows that the upcoming anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks is likely to draw more national attention than the day has in recent years.

After a slow couple of fund-raising cycles in 2008 and 2009, the nonprofit that serves 9/11 victims is stepping things up this year: Organizers are holding a gala with the goal of raising $250,000. Next month, they are releasing a book, "The Legacy Letters," with proceeds going to the charity. And they are exploring the possibility of a national text-to-donate campaign, which they hope will expand their contributor base beyond the tri-state area.

For many 9/11-related non-profits, the 10th anniversary of the attacks—and the anticipated media spotlight—represents a solemn but crucial moment to rally donors around their missions, expand their reach and set an agenda for the future.

"If you're not doing OK this year, next year is going to be sort of bleak," Ms. Sears said.

More than 1,800 groups received contributions to aid Sept. 11 victims and affected communities in the aftermath of the attacks, according to a December 2004 report of the Foundation Center. At the time, more than half the groups were based in New York. No data exist on the number of current charities, but those that do include everything from memorial scholarship groups to international nongovernmental organizations.

The timing for a fund-raising push might be good: Nationwide, the philanthropy community experienced a small rebound in giving in 2010 after two years of sharp declines in 2009 and 2008, according to a survey released in June by Giving USA.

But nonprofits say they face significant challenges overcoming 9/11 fatigue, especially as sharp memories of the event fade and the pool of available cash dwindles.

Jennifer Adams, chief executive of the Tribute WTC Visitor Center in downtown Manhattan, said she has heard potential donors remark, "Aren't we over that, aren't we done with that?"

Fund raising for the Sept. 11th Families' Association, the organization that runs the Tribute WTC Visitor Center, has been difficult in recent years and made more so "because $500 million has been raised across the street," she said, referring to the National Sept. 11 Memorial & Museum.

The memorial and museum has brought in around 400,000 donations totaling about $400 million for construction, according to a spokesman. That fund-raising effort "tapped out not just our fund-raising, but fund-raising around the city," Ms. Adams said.

Lee Ielpi, president of the board of directors for the Sept. 11th Families' Association, also sits on the board of the National Sept. 11 Memorial & Museum and said that there was an overlap in the donors who give to both organizations.

Joe Daniels, president and chief executive of the National Sept. 11 Memorial & Museum, said, "The Memorial is fortunate to have hundreds of thousands of supporters from every state and from all around the world who are helping to build this national tribute to the innocent victims of 9/11. Their heartfelt support is dearly appreciated; we could not dedicate this memorial in 53 days without their generosity."

Ms. Adams said this year there has been an uptick in giving, including first-time interest and donations. She credited a message that the organization has an established history and a clear future. The lease on the space for the Tribute WTC Visitor Center runs into 2015.

The majority of income for the nonprofit comes from a $15 admission fee for the center, which gets half a million visitors annually.

Ms. Adams knows that there will be an increased demand to visit the National Sept. 11 Memorial when it opens this fall and, in response, the center will increase the number of daily tours. It will also release a commemorative book.

This will also be a key year for My Good Deed, a Sept. 11-related service organization. Founders Jay Winuk and David Paine led the effort to make Sept. 11 a federally designated day of service. "This is now a matter of law that we hope to build on in a very positive way," Mr. Winuk said.

My Good Deed has brought in nearly $3 million in corporate sponsorships and an additional $10 million of advertising and public-service announcements this year, far surpassing past efforts.

Messrs. Winuk and Paine say they also recently experienced a small "bin Laden bump," according to Mr. Paine—a few extra calls and some increased interest by funders after al Qaeda leader Osama bin Ladin was captured and killed by U.S. forces.

It was not a bump experienced by other organizations interviewed for this article.

The millions raised, mostly from corporations, will fund a national push that includes a media campaign featuring celebrities and others pledging to volunteer for the day in the name of a Sept. 11 victim. The campaign begins on the organization's website this month and will continue with public-service announcements and a heavy radio and TV rotation beginning in August. The week before the anniversary it will be nonstop.

Mr. Paine predicts it will take another decade to get to the point where Americans wake up on Sept. 11 and know instinctively that it's a day of service. That's a long way off, but Messrs. Winuk and Paine aren't worried about collective weariness of Sept. 11.

"There was a 9/11 fatigue in years past that I don't sense now," said Mr. Winuk. "It's hard to predict what will be in years 12, 13 and such, but what is one of the things that distinguishes us

is that we are so forward-looking."

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