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SURVIVING GRANT WRITING WITH A SMILE

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Some aspects of fundraising can be fun. Some of us love proposal writing, but very few of us like the politicking of fundraising. There are 73,000 foundations in the United States, with more than \$24 billion in assets. Your organizational goal is to secure some of these funds for your important reproductive justice work. If you are new to the field of grant writing, free fundraising training is available on the link to the Foundation Center website on the SisterSong website at www.SisterSong.net under "Resources for Women of Color." Beyond the basics of structuring a proposal available elsewhere, Sisterlove offers the following "8 BE's" for effective and principled foundation fundraising:

1. Be Strategic
2. Be Diligent
3. Be Persistent
4. Be Repetitive
5. Be Patient
6. Be Respectful
7. Be Grateful
8. Be Honest

To launch the "8 BE's," we have to carefully develop our **strategic plans** for our organizations *before* seeking foundation support. We have to develop a diverse fundraising plan in order not to be totally dependent on foundations. Know what problems you are addressing, how you will address them, and how you will evaluate your results before writing the proposal. If you are unclear about the mission, values and strategic orientation of your organization, this will be painfully evident to experts who read hundreds of proposals each year. If you are unclear about the above, then your organization will be subject to pursuing whatever funding dollar is dangled before you, regardless of your mission. Concurrently, you should have a strategy in place for surviving until the grant check comes 6-12 months later after you win a grant award.

We have to be **diligent** and carefully follow the guidelines of the foundation from which we are seeking support, by providing no less – and no more – information than they are requesting in their grant guidelines. Omitting requested information is as bad as flooding them with unsolicited information. If in doubt, stick to the rules they offer. Flexibility in adjusting the rules is only acceptable when you have extensive knowledge of and personal relationships with the foundation. It is equally important to research the foundation from which you are seeking support because each foundation is different, and you will want to tailor your proposal to the style, program and culture of the individual foundation, while not straying from your mission, values and strategic orientation.



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We also have to be **persistent**. Quite often we will get turned down the first, second or third time we ask for support. Do not take rejections personally. If possible, interview the program officer about what you could have done to strengthen your application.

In order to help a foundation to know your organization and its central, primary message, be **repetitive**. Connect the name of your organization to who you are and what you do in as many different ways as possible in your proposals, your media messages, and your outreach strategies, so that your organization is branded into the public's consciousness. With time and repetition, the right wing has convinced many white Americans that they are the victims of reverse discrimination. It does not matter that this is not actually true in a country founded on white supremacy. They have made it politically true by clever messaging and framing. Reproductive justice organizations must use the same techniques of repetition (without the deception) in order to persuade both our allies and our opponents that this is a viable and winning concept for re-energizing and uniting women's rights advocates.

Being **patient** is probably the hardest for those of us compelled to do this work. Foundation timetables are not our timetables and their priorities may not be our priorities. Foundations purposefully take their time in deciding their grant awards in order to make the best decisions possible. They are deliberate in building relationships with grantees. These processes take time and they seek to exercise due diligence in executing their responsibilities.

Sometimes we present ideas to foundations ahead of their time. For example, a decade ago the concept of funding human rights work in the United States was novel to the foundation world because human rights meant only international funding, while "civil rights" was stretched to cover human rights abuses in the U.S. After more than 10 years of patient grantee briefings of many funders, on July 4th 2005, a group of foundations and individual donors launched the *U.S. Human Rights Fund*, a collaborative funding initiative dedicated to the full realization of human rights in the United States. Through the patient work of people like Dorothy Thomas and Larry Cox, a sizable number of foundations are raising more than \$10 million to support U.S.-focused human rights work, an idea scorned a mere decade ago.

For SisterSong, the concept of reproductive justice faces the same uphill challenges. It is not a term familiar to most funders, and its critics fear that using an intersectional, human rights based approach to protecting reproductive health and sexual rights dilutes a more singular focus on abortion politics. We are not daunted, however, because moving ideas from the margins to the mainstream is what radical politics is all about. Unfortunately, the one side successful in moving its politics to the mainstream has been the opponents of women's rights and we have to meet their power of deception with our Collective power of truth.

It is difficult for many activists in social justice work to **respect** and appreciate the diverse work we all do. We sometimes tend to think we have all the answers we need to engage in whatever aspect of reproductive justice work that attracts us. We have to respect the fact that different people will do the work in different ways and at different levels. In fact, this is a good thing because there is enough reproductive oppression to go around to keep us busy for the rest of our lives. Foundations are no different. From their perspective, they are contributing to the struggle just as we are, just in a different way and often with more power and resources. We sometimes react negatively to their power and resources because of the way power has been used



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against us in the past, and we need to guard against the tendency to have previous abuses of power re-stimulate us and keep us from recognizing our allies who have power and resources. We need to learn the difference between a gatekeeper keeping others out and an advocate kicking open the door to let us in. As a wise Cherokee woman once said, "Friends come and go. Enemies accumulate." So be careful not to inadvertently accumulate enemies as you seek foundation support.

Being **grateful** for whatever funding we receive is important. If we are given only \$20, it is more money than we had before we asked. No grant is ever large enough to meet our vision for what the women we serve deserve. Every funding request competes against other worthy projects all asking from support from finite resources. If you only get the \$20, think about all the rejected applicants who received their letters of rejection long before you received that \$20 check. Besides, getting that \$20 paves the way for asking for \$40 the next time.

The last, but not the least important advice is to be **honest** with your funders. The foundation world in which we seek funds is painfully small and they do talk about their funded projects with each other. Even if honesty appears to be risky, it is better than letting them find out about bad news about your organization from someone other than you. If they are operating in a way that impedes or interferes with your work, let them know and they often appreciate the feedback. Foundations can also provide technical assistance and support to help us address our organizational problems. They can identify other resources useful to us and can establish partnerships with us to help us achieve our mutual goals.

Fundraising does not have to be painful unless we enter it with poor preparation. You may encounter rejections and indifference, but this should not discourage you. If you keep doing the invaluable work of serving your community, the money will find you. In SisterSong's experience, you may arrive at a point at which the foundations seek you out, rather than the other way around.