

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

by Christine Webb

\$10,000???? I could barely conceive of having to raise that much money, and thinking of raising it in less than six weeks seemed impossible. Our homeschool Destination Imagination team had done what we never really conceived of - they'd won the state DI championship in their division and were headed to the international competition in Ames, Iowa. We needed to raise money to transport seven kids, two team managers, numerous chaperones and huge props. In addition to that, we needed funds to pay for food and lodging and lots of other expenses. What a daunting task.

As we began to strategize it became clear that being homeschoolers would be both a blessing and a problem. First, we lacked a "captive audience" like those of the teams who represented public and private schools. There would be no selling candy bars in the hallways or arranging for special pizza nights at local restaurants. We would have to turn to the homeschooling community and to our local community for support. The only problem was that, in general, neither our homeschooling community nor our community at large had a clue that we existed, and that would make fundraising particularly difficult. We would have to do some quick and effective selling of ourselves in a very public way.

The most important part of fundraising is to gain exposure so that when you ask for help you're a known entity. The quickest way for us to gain this exposure in our local community would be to convince our twice-weekly newspaper to do a story about the kids - fast! The story itself might generate some interest, but our goal was to be able to include copies of the article in fundraising letters and displays in the coming weeks. In short, we needed something that would give us credibility and exposure in a hurry.

Publicizing an organization or event is not a difficult thing to do if you think the way the media thinks. First, you have to have an event or cause that is newsworthy. Your job is to make your event interesting enough to gain the media's interest. In our case that was fairly easy. Our kids had won a state championship, they are all homeschooled, and they are teenagers. This was news. I would just have to frame it in a way to make it seem interesting to a reporter.

I called the local newspaper and spoke to a reporter who was very interested in the story. I knew in advance what I wanted to say and rehearsed the important "sound bites" mentally before I picked up the phone. I had several dates and times pre-arranged for possible meetings with the team. I had a short, one-page biography of the kids, information about the organization, and a press release that contained information about their upcoming fundraising events available to fax her in advance. As it turned out she used this information to create her questions and also drew heavily on it for her story. I spent time working with the team members to prepare them for the interview. We discussed what they wanted to tell her and how to respond to difficult questions. We also more clearly defined our goals. She spent a couple of hours one afternoon talking to the team members, watching their performance, and having their photographs taken. It was a very successful experience. The kids were relaxed and confident and conversed with her easily. It was obvious that this was a very special group of teenagers and her story reflected that. It was warm and creative and filled with quotes from the team members.

The resulting story gave our team the springboard we needed to solicit funds and other needed resources from area residents and businesses.

Success!

POINTS FOR GIVING AN INTERVIEW

Giving an interview, particularly when children may be involved, is something you will want to prepare for carefully. Here are some tips for working with the media.

1. Be polite, punctual, positive and persuasive!
2. Call back or arrange an interview as quickly as possible. Reporters have deadlines and if you put them off you will lose the opportunity. If a reporter wants to do a telephone interview and you aren't prepared, arrange to call back within ten minutes or so if possible.
3. Fax background information to the reporter in advance of the interview, if possible. You can help the reporter do his or her job better by providing information you would like to see in print. But keep it brief - a couple of pertinent pages is enough.
4. Be prepared. Never enter an interview without preparing yourself and any children who will be talking to a reporter. Practice what you want to say and discuss any issues with the children you do not want to address. Help them practice saying what they want to say in appropriate ways.
5. Focus on just two or three main points. You can steer the conversation by bringing it back to your topic. "The important issue here is" "What I'd like you to remember is" "My point is" are all excellent bridges to turn the conversation in a direction of your choosing.
6. Avoid making negative statements. Practice turning negative statements into positive ones. This is where those "sound bites" will come in handy. Humor, personal experience and interesting anecdotes will help. Prepare these little snippets in advance.
7. Be enthusiastic but honest. Avoid blanket statements ("Homeschooling is better than public school") and unsubstantiated data. Rephrase questions that make you uncomfortable or ones where the answer may be misinterpreted.
8. Remember to thank the reporter!