

November 28, 2010 8:00 PM

Working harmoniously: Longtime collaborations have nonprofits playing in tune

By [Sherri Welch](#)

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Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings executives Natalie Bruno (left) and Maureen Kickham “are integral to the success we’ve been having,” said Maury

Okun, Detroit Chamber Winds trombonist and executive director.

Many organizations view collaboration as a way to get through hard times.

But for **Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings**, collaboration with other nonprofits became an intrinsic part of its business model long before the economic collapse.

The Southfield-based nonprofit has forged ongoing operational collaborations of varying degrees with six other nonprofits since 1992, and it expects to add two more organizations to the group on Jan. 1.

Those efforts are helping each member build capacity and increase outreach and revenue.

Detroit Chamber Winds’ efforts are also attracting attention from funders interested in the multiplier effect of making a grant to one nonprofit but helping several others.

In another form of collaboration, Detroit Winds last fall launched a joint ticket program, Passport to the Arts, with other performing arts groups in an effort to attract more young patrons. The program sold out in 2009 and again this year.

Next year, Detroit Winds is taking that program a step further through a cultural exchange with **IndyHub**, an Indianapolis nonprofit, which will bring its own "passport" holders here for an **Eisenhower Dance Ensemble** performance and take a group of metro Detroiters there for one. For all of those reasons, Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings is *Crain's* 2010 Best-Managed Nonprofit.

"We've always thought of collaboration as capacity-building," said Maury Okun, executive director of Detroit Chamber Winds, the **Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival** and Eisenhower Dance.

"None of us could do this on our own."

Small nonprofits always struggle with identifying staff resources to fulfill their missions, Okun said. Collaboration "has enabled us to build enough critical mass that we can identify and retain an outstanding staff ... (which) is every bit as valuable in good times as in bad."

Early collaboration

After numerous programmatic collaborations, Detroit Chamber Winds began combining backroom operations with Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival in 1993. In 1996, it added Eisenhower Dance Ensemble.

Today, the three share Okun -- a trombone player for the Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings and the **Michigan Opera Theatre's** orchestra -- as well as other staff, office space, technology and administrative services.

Through the collaboration, the combined annual operating budget for the three nonprofits increased to \$1.4 million in fiscal 2010 ended July 31, up from about \$250,000 total for all three their first joint year in 1996.

Detroit Chamber Winds acts as fiduciary for all three, hiring staff, leasing office space and taking the lead on other business decisions. After setting goals for the year and agreeing to the number of staff hours needed to accomplish them, the other two organizations pay Detroit Chamber Winds a monthly fee and participate in the hiring and evaluation of executive staff.

Together, Detroit Chamber Winds and Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival have raised just under \$1 million in endowment funds for the two organizations since 2001.

"The collaboration has allowed us to build organizations that are robust enough that people will invest in them for the long term," Okun said.

Detroit Chamber Winds itself ended fiscal 2010 with an excess of about \$4,000, up from a slight loss of \$141 in fiscal 2009, due to endowment losses, he said. Its total revenue for the year was \$625,000, up from \$589,165 last year.

Adding other groups

Since 2003, Detroit Chamber Winds has extended development and marketing services to other nonprofits and currently provides them to **Rackham Symphony Choir**, **Motor City Brass Band**, the **Cultural Alliance of Southeastern Michigan** and the School of Transnational Law of **Peking University**, the one non-arts partner it is assisting, based on Okun's personal relationship with the dean.

Detroit Chamber Winds tailors its fund-development and capacity-building services to each organization, said Natalie Bruno, vice president for development and marketing.

For example, it urged Motor City Brass Band and Rackham Symphony Choir to create youth education programs to broaden their community outreach and strengthen their annual appeal.

Detroit Chamber Winds plans to bring the **Birmingham-Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra** and **ProMusica of Detroit Inc.** into its arts organization collaboration in January.

It's secured a \$200,000 grant through the **Michigan Nonprofit Association** to extend some of the marketing, fundraising and administrative services it's provided for years to Eisenhower Dance Ensemble and the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival to the two newest members and to Motor City Brass Band and Rackham Symphony Choir.

To accommodate the expanded collaboration, Detroit Chamber Winds has promoted its former director of marketing services, Maureen Kickham, to executive director for the four newer collaboration members. It also plans to hire a communications manager, a development officer and two part-time employees -- a development and marketing assistant and a database manager -- by the end of the year, Okun said.

Detroit Chamber Winds has been providing development services to Rackham for the past five years. With only three part-time employees, "We do not have the staff ... (or) expertise to write grants," said Melissa Bunker, administrative and marketing director.

Detroit Chamber Winds is "so entrenched in the community they know who is funding and what types of programming they are funding," which has helped Rackham secure new grant funding, she said.

This year alone, that's helped it to increase its operating budget; it's now \$200,000, up from about \$150,000, Bunker said. That money, in turn, has allowed it to add educational and other programs, she said.

"They've also helped us identify new board members and trained (Rackham) on how to define the roles of the board to maximize the board's impact," things the small organization couldn't have done without assistance, Bunker said.

Passport to the Arts

Being a collaborative organization at its core has led Detroit Chamber Winds to look for other collaborations, Bruno said. Led by Bruno, Detroit Chamber Winds in September 2009 launched Passport to the Arts, a program designed to attract young, midcareer professionals -- and future donors -- to the arts.

The program includes Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival and the Eisenhower Dance Ensemble, as well as **Detroit Symphony Orchestra**, Michigan Opera Theatre, **Detroit Film Theatre** and **Hilberry Theatre**.

With the purchase of one ticket or "passport," young patrons can enjoy one performance at each participating cultural institution, followed by a social activity tied to that event. In its first year, the reduced-price ticket program sold out its first year at 300 tickets. This year, the program -- now open to people of any age -- sold out again, with 400 passports, Okun said.

Cultural exchange with Indy

Detroit Chamber Winds is now working with IndyHub, the founder of the passport program, on a cultural exchange for next year. Detroit Chamber Winds' efforts have caught the attention of several funders.

The **Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan** in September 2009 made a \$60,000 grant to fund an education/outreach coordinator for the three initial sister organizations and to launch the Passport to the Arts program.

The Troy-based **Kresge Foundation** two months later followed that with a \$50,000 grant to fund the work of Boston consultant **Technical Development Corp.**, which is looking at ways to optimize and expand Detroit Chamber Winds' business model in new areas and with new partners, Okun said.

With collaboration, "the opportunities are endless," Bruno said.

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