

*Hosting a Non-Profit Launch Party: A Beginners Point of View*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Hosting a non-profit launch party is the first big event the organization will put on. Beneficence Family Scholars is a non-profit in Muncie, Indiana that was created by 16 Ball State University students. None of the students had experience hosting an event as large as a launch party and had to overcome challenges along the way. This paper discusses the planning and execution of the launch party, invitations, silent auction, venue, catering, florist, entertainment, speakers, and fundraising that went in to hosting a successful launch party, followed by suggested improvements that could have been made or should be made in the future.

## **Acknowledgments**

I cannot express enough appreciation to Dr. Jason Powell for giving me the opportunity to be a part of the life-changing immersive learning project of creating Beneficence Family Scholars and for his patience, guidance, and support while I worked on my thesis. I couldn't imagine having a better advisor and friend.

My completion of my project couldn't have been done without all the students that created Beneficence Family Scholars and organized the launch party. Thank you to Lydia, Rebecca, Zach, Liz, Steph, Tristan, Olivia, Eliza, Phil, Dorien, Liz, Bobbie, Alli, Elianor, and Abbie. And a special thank you to Ball State Honors College for giving me the opportunity to be a part of something big.

Lastly, I would like to thank my caring and supportive fiancé AJ. Your support through the times when I got discouraged cannot be appreciated enough.

## **Process Analysis Statement**

This project is very near and dear to my heart and it was a joy to work on and reflect upon all the hard work that went into the launch party. When I had the opportunity to step-up and be a part of the group that focused on organizing the launch party I jumped at the chance. I have always enjoyed planning events and had experience in planning events for small groups, but not as much experience planning large professional events.

As I search for post-graduate jobs, I have been reflecting on the experiences I have had and think how much I enjoy all the planning that goes into events and how I am able to see all the hard work pay off. When the idea of a launch party was first mentioned, I knew I wanted to do my thesis over it in some way. As planning took place, there were so many different options and avenues we could have chosen, and we did some research on how to execute different things like the silent auction and fundraising, but it left me wondering, “Is there a better way we could have done this?”

Throughout this project, I reflected on how and why we did things and read through numerous academic articles looking for research and advice on planning launch parties and events for non-profits. This is an area that is not heavily researched or compiled into one source, so I hope that one day my experience and research can help someone. I read blog posts and newspaper articles of people giving advice and took that all into account when analyzing our planning and execution and when making suggested improvements.

The experience of hosting the launch party and analyzing the process has been eye-opening and one that I am proud to talk about. There is so much that goes into planning events and throughout this process I have gained so much appreciation for those who plan events for a living and for the events I have attended. There is so much background work that goes into each

little detail and numerous ways to get there. I will carry all the knowledge I have gained throughout this process with me into my future endeavors and am grateful for the opportunity to help plan the launch party for Beneficence Family Scholars.

## Hosting a Non-Profit Launch Party: A Beginners Point of View

### **Introduction**

I have always been fascinated and interested in event planning and have even considered it as a profession. Since I was a child, I was always helping with the logistics of events from Vacation Bible School, funeral dinners, high school events such as prom and into my college career planning events for organizations I am a part of and now planning events related to my wedding. Not only choosing venues and decorations, but the substantial parts of the event being the logistics and making sure every aspect goes smoothly. When I had the opportunity to be one of the key leaders in supervising and organizing a launch party for a non-profit, I was involved in creating; I jumped on it.

On Friday, April 26, 2019, the non-profit Beneficence Family Scholars was officially launched. The launch party was a success and had wonderful food, décor, and fundraising efforts, but with all events, now that it is over, it is time to reflect on what we could have improved upon that would have made it even more successful. By reflecting on past mistakes and discussing potential improvements, the next event Beneficence family Scholar holds or the next event I help to plan should be even more successful.

### **Background**

In the Spring of 2019, I was part of an immersive learning project at the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry through Ball State University. 15 other Ball State University Honors College students and I created the non-profit Beneficence Family Scholars (BFS) from the ground up, led by Honors College professor Dr. Jason Powell. Many of us had experience volunteering for or working with non-profits, but none of us had ever been involved in the creation of one. Along the way, we ran into many roadblocks, but by the end of the semester, we

had a successful launch party and raised over \$8,000. Beneficence Family Scholars is now a successful non-profit that is continuing to impact the Muncie, Indiana community.

Beneficence Family Scholars is an affiliate of Family Scholar House in Louisville, Kentucky. Family Scholar House was originally formed in 1995 by a collaboration of religious women who named it Project Women. Project Women aimed to assist single mothers in earning a college degree. In 2005, Family Scholar House's current CEO and Chief Possibility Officer (CPO) Cathe Dykstra joined Project Women and helped the program to grow and open up to help single parents and not just single mothers. In 2008 Project Women changed its name to Family Scholar House, beginning the legacy it has today (Changing Lives and Communities Through Education).

Family Scholar House provides all-encompassing support to their participants through helping to provide housing, academic support services, and family support services. Their mission statement states, "The mission of Family Scholar House is to end the cycle of poverty and transform our community by empowering families and youth to succeed in education and achieve life-long self-sufficiency," (About Us). As of 2019, Family Scholar House has 585 families in their residential program and has provided support to participants to earn 445 degrees (Changing Lives and Communities Through Education).

During the Summer of 2018, current President and Founder of Beneficence Family Scholars Lydia Kotowski volunteered with Family Scholar House and found passion in their mission. Lydia wanted to create a similar impact in the Muncie, Indiana community where she is a current undergraduate at Ball State University. After much work and research, she proposed the program to Dr. Jason Powell, and through some timely opportunities, it eventually became an immersive learning project at the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry.

Below is an excerpt from the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry's page on the Ball State University's website discussing how students are chosen for the project and how students are able to dedicate themselves for a semester to this project:

Each year, four Ball State University faculty members are chosen to lead teams of 15 students in these interdisciplinary, immersive seminars. The students are chosen by application or audition. Working together with a community sponsor, each group of faculty and students creates a product to engage the community in public dialogue.

The center provides a summer stipend for each faculty member to prepare the seminar. The center also provides a semester's "leave" for the four fellows—two in the fall and two in the spring—to teach these seminars. Students enrolled in each seminar receive a full semester's credit for their work. And to help facilitate that work, the center provides each seminar with a significant budget to produce its project (Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry).

Dr. Powell wanted to share this opportunity with as many students as he could, and he started sharing information with the classes he was teaching in the honors college. An excerpt from the Virginia Ball Center's page on Ball State's website discussing the goals and of the project is included below:

**Spring 2019 Semester:**

**Jason Powell**, Honors Humanities - "*Beneficence Family Scholars*"

Jason and his students will examine the issues of generational poverty, specifically in Muncie, Indiana, as they relate to promoting the value of education, the humanities, and equality. Using the model established by the **Family Scholars House** in Louisville, Kentucky - a pioneering organization that has successfully helped hundreds of families overcome the social, educational, and economic obstacles unique to generational poverty - the student team will create a nonprofit organization that seeks to address the comprehensive needs of the whole family, including housing, education, healthcare, nutrition, access to technology, career readiness, and financial literacy. The seminar will select and work with five single-parent families to begin a pilot program - to be introduced in the fall of 2019 - whose primary objective will be to provide the opportunity for these parents to attend college and work towards obtaining a four-year degree. Students will also develop skills in promotion and marketing, grant writing, leadership, and organization, and endeavor to develop partnerships and attract community donors in order to create a long-term, sustainable program model. The seminars community partners include the **Ball State's Honors College, Ball State's Office of the President, and the Excel Center** (Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry).

Students were ecstatic about the opportunity, many attending information sessions. Dr. Powell had planned to open the application for the immersive learning project to the entire campus, but he had so much interest from honors students that he kept it exclusive to honors students. To be considered for the project, students were required to submit an application that included:

1. A short essay why they wanted to participate in the course
2. Specialized or unique skills/abilities they could bring to the course

3. Major(s) and Minor(s)
4. Projected graduation date
5. Any courses they think they may be able to get credit for through the course
6. Courses they must take on campus the next semester
7. Special circumstances such as a work schedule, disabilities, etc.
8. Lastly, their current understanding of generational poverty

In addition to Lydia Kotowski, 15 honors students were chosen to be a part of the project to create Beneficence Family Scholars. Students from many majors such as Marketing, Legal Studies, Telecommunications, Psychology, Spanish, Communication Studies, and more came together to do something they had never done before. Create a sustainable non-profit that focused on aiding in the stoppage of generational poverty.

### **Showcase & Launch Party**

One requirement for immersive learning projects through the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry is to hold a showcase at the end of the semester. Showcases each semester are unique to the project that was worked on and is meant to present everything the group accomplished within the semester. Some showcases in the past have included a theatrical performance, presentations to community members, Ball State faculty, and even members of local and state government, presenting research at conferences, and more. With the creation of our non-profit Beneficence Family Scholars, we wanted to do more than a presentation of what we had accomplished; we wanted our showcase to be the launch of our organization, our Launch Party.

We wanted to invite our families, Ball State faculty, Family Scholar House employees, community members, and more to the launch party. Ideally, our goal was to get the word out about Beneficence Family Scholars and raise money so we could get the ball rolling on programs for the families that would eventually become our Scholars. Planning an event in this fashion in less than 6 months may be difficult for an experienced event planner, let alone 16 students who have little to no event planning experience. For each aspect of the launch party, I discuss what we did to plan and our thought process behind it, followed by how we executed it, then include my thoughts and research on how others have planned non-profit launch parties and fundraising events that leads into a discussion on what we could have done differently.

Planning the launch party was a challenge. Not only because we had never done it before, but because there were 17 people brainstorming ideas—resulting in 17 unique visions. Our group had big visions, but they were easier said than done and we ended up having to scale them back into a more realistic outcome. The guest list was over 200 people and we were able to fit food, a silent auction, guest speakers, a documentary, and a fundraiser all into less than 3 hours. In the end, we had a successful launch party and raised over \$8,000 that would go towards helping our organization grow and serving the Muncie community one family at a time.

## **Launch Party Goals**

### **Planning & Execution**

A unique aspect to our launch party is that we had many goals: show our families and professors what we had accomplished, show community leaders what their

organizations could partner with in the future, and to gain donors for our organization. In other circumstances, the launch party for Beneficence Family Scholars may have been different, but as students, we were putting the focus on meeting the requirements for a showcase for the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry, while launching a non-profit for the Muncie Community.

### Suggested Improvements

We succeeded and at the end of the night we all felt proud of our accomplishments, but I believe we could have prospered more in each area if we focused our energy into one goal instead of three. Kathy Bonk, the author of *Communication and Small Profit Organizations*, writes that when planning an event for a non-profit, there needs to be a clear definition of what you are trying to accomplish. You need to present your goal to your target audience in a clear and compelling manner (Bonk et al., 2008). By focusing on too many goals, we confused attendees. After speaking to my family members following the event, they were not sure if they were there to see our progress or donate to a non-profit. In reality, we invited them to do both. I believe that we should have focused on one goal and put all our energy into that.

## Invitations

### Planning

To save on money and be more environmentally friendly, our group wanted to send out mobile invitations through our website. The thought process behind this was that we could save on both paper and postage. Invitees would be able to RSVP via an online

link and all the contact information and RSVP's would be streamlined into one area, giving us access to all our information easily.

### Execution

We sent invitations out a little over a month before the event. A few challenges we came across when using the form of mobile invitations were finding the emails for everyone we planned to invite. When finding them ourselves through contact lists and searching on the web didn't work, we would have to make phone calls or contact them in a different way to get their email. After invitations went out, we were puzzled by the lack of RSVP's, only to find out the invitations were sent to 'junk' for many people, leading to us having to send out a second round of invitations and hoping we had the correct email addresses.

### Suggested Improvements

One improvement to make certain invitees would have seen our invitation is to send paper invitations. If we had done that, we would have instead had to seek out invitees' physical addresses, which may have been just as challenging. One way may have been able to avoid our invitations going to junk mail is to send them from personal accounts rather than our newly built website. Because we were inviting mostly personal contacts to the launch party, most of the invitees were personal contacts. By sending them from personal accounts, we could have also attached what our impact on the project was and the importance it has in our lives. This would have added a more personal and emotional attachment to the invitations, giving them another reason to want to attend the launch party. For future events and fundraisers that Beneficence Family Scholars organizes, sending out invitations from an official Beneficence Family Scholars email

address would be fitting because invitees would most likely be past donors and have previous knowledge about the organization.

## **Silent Auction**

### Planning

For one of our fundraisers at the launch party, we decided to organize a silent auction. The students and families involved with the creation of Beneficence Family Scholars donated items if they were able, each board member that had been recruited donated a gift basket, and the rest of the items were donated by business in and around the area. These donations were acquired by calling, emailing, and visiting businesses. Many businesses we contacted explained that they only accept donation requests at a certain time of the year or need more than a month or 2 in advance to be able to donate. Many enormous companies like Target, Kohls, etc. asked for donation requests to be submitted 6 or more months in advance. We had the most luck with local businesses that a group member had a personal connection to.

### Execution

The silent auction went tremendously, and we met our goal to sell each item for over half its original price. We had made silent auction bid sheets and framed the title and information of each item to set next to the item. A list of our donors for the silent auction is below:

Greek's Pizzeria, TIS Bookstore, Ball State Athletics, Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens, Crew Carwash, French Lick Winery, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Muncie Civic Theatre, Thr3e Wise Men Brewing Co.,

Newfields, Phoenix Theatre of Indianapolis, The Pickled Pedaler of Indianapolis, Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Squire Boone Caverns, Sun King Brewery, Fort Wayne Tincaps, Titanic Museum of Pigeon Forge, The Caffinery, Eliza Roark, Mae Baczynski, Lisa Rowe, Laura Sorce, Kristina Powell, Kim Martin, Mary Dollison, Brandy James, Wilisha Scaife, Jeongyoon Lee, and Lydia Kotowski

The silent auction was open for bidding when the event began, but we had to close the bidding at some point. We closed the bidding during our programming, which meant attendees left the room to make their last bids, or attendees were hesitant to leave during the program for last bids. In our announcements, nor our program had we set an exact time for the silent auction's end, we only made the announcement, "The silent auction will be closing in 15 minutes." After finishing out other fundraising activity, we announced the winners of the auction items and they picked up their items on their way out of the event.

#### Suggested Improvements

In different circumstances, more than a few months to plan and organize a silent auction would be ideal. It would give the organization time to reach out and ask for donations from more businesses, companies, and individuals. An area where we could have improved upon that was in our control was to use a bigger space for the silent auction. We held it in a lobby area of our venue, and we underestimated how much space we would use. Another aspect we could have improved upon is our silent auction transitions. As mentioned, we did not set an exact time for the silent auction to close and

attendees did not know when the bidding would end until we told them so during our programming. In the book *Effective Fundraising for Nonprofits*, it is suggested that activities don't get into one another's way. You should stick to a strict schedule and not overlap fundraising efforts. Doing so could exclude potential donors who may be likely to donate in another way if they did not win a silent auction item (Bray, 2016). The way we organized our event, there was a sense of ambiguity when the silent auction would close and who won items until after our other fundraising event. Having a set time for the auction to end that was publicized to attendees would help to lessen ambiguity and not overlap fundraising efforts as much.

## **Venue, Catering & Florist**

### Planning

Looking up and choosing a venue, florist, and catering options was a daunting task and took a lot of calling and emailing different people and businesses to get price quotes. We toured a few venue options and our top choice was to have the launch party on the Ball State campus. We looked into the L.A. Pittenger Student Center and the Alumni Center. Both options were free to use because of our affiliation with Ball State, but required the use of Ball State catering, which would result in a higher bill than other venue and catering options together. For food, we decided to have hors d'oeuvres instead of a meal. It was more budget-friendly and would be easier for people to eat and socialize, as well as go for multiple trips for food if wanted. For decorations, we wanted to purchase floral centerpieces and would plan to ask for a donation if attendees wanted to take them home at the end of the event.

## Execution

For each venue, catering, and florist, one of the biggest deciding factors for us was that they could offer us a discount because we were a non-profit. For a venue, we chose the Grand Hall at Cornerstone Center for the Arts in Muncie, IN because of their beautiful event spaces and the discounts they could give us. The Grand Hall's ornamented walls and impressive ceiling drew us to this space, thinking it would go well with our decorations and match our organization colors of yellow and green. We were able to use the Grand Hall and the lobby area outside the hall, which we used for welcoming our guests, the silent auction, a photo booth, hors d'oeuvres and non-alcoholic drinks. Right in the entrance to the Grand Hall, we placed our cash bar. For a caterer, we chose Once Upon A Plate, a local Muncie business. Once Upon a Plate worked with us to create our ideal hors d'oeuvres spread and set up a beautiful table full of food and drinks. When choosing food items, we took into consideration those who may be vegetarian, vegan, or dairy-sensitive and made it a goal to have choices available for all attendees. They also worked with us to provide a cash bar for our attendees. A list of the hors d'oeuvres were arranged to be served is provided below:

Spinach and artichoke dip with blue corn tortilla chips, Italian bruschetta with baguette, pepperoni calzone, Caprese skewers, crudités, fruit with dip, domestic cheese and crackers, and chicken lemongrass potstickers.

For a florist, we chose Normandy Flower Shop, another local Muncie business. They could give us a significant non-profit discount on floral arrangements and created beautiful arrangements using our organization colors of green and yellow. At the end of

the event, we were left with very few leftovers making the amount of food we ordered perfect and many attendees did donate to take floral arrangements. We had a few leftovers and we gifted those to our board members.



*Image 1: Grand Hall*

### Suggested Improvements

Generally, our venue, caterer, and florist were all huge successes, but there were a few minor adjustments we could have made to improve upon what we did. As mentioned earlier, our silent auction was held in the lobby area right outside the Grand Hall and we could have used a bigger space for the auction or organized it more suitably. For future events, a venue that could support our programming, food, and silent auction all in one space could improve upon the flow of the event. We were hesitant to offer a cash bar to guests, not wanting to pressure anyone into drinking, and not knowing if it would be worth it. At the end of the event, we had not sold many drinks at the cash bar and either

just broke even or were just under breaking even. I believe that not having a cash bar—or any bar at all—would have been an improvement to our event. Many of the attendees came to the launch party to see our accomplishments, and at a showcase/launch party, I do not think the cash bar was as successful as it would be at future events.

## **Entertainment & Speakers**

### **Planning**

Like any other event, we wanted guests to be entertained the duration of the event. We planned to show a student-made documentary over the creation of the non-profit and in addition to the documentary we wanted to have a few people speak and have live music when people were not speaking. There was also a plan made to create a photo booth in the hallway for guests to take pictures at if wanted.

### **Execution**

A friend of Lydia Kotowski, current President, and Founder, David Kuo graciously volunteered his time to be our pianist for the night. He played from the start of the event to when our programming began and times in between. I, Mae Baczynski, was the emcee for the night and announced and introduced speakers such as Lydia Kotowski who spoke about the creation of Beneficence Family Scholars and her involvement, Mary Dollison who spoke about her motivation to join the board, and Stephanie Schlichting who led one of our fundraising efforts. We also played a pre-recorded video message from Cathe Dykstra, CEO and CPO of Family Scholar House, who could not make it that night. Between speakers and our pianist playing, we showcased a documentary created by Olivia Rowe and Liz Kim that showed the process it took to create the non-profit. Lastly,

an area in the hallway was decorated with flowers and vines to create a backdrop for a photo booth for attendees to use.

### Suggested Improvements

Our speakers and pianist all did wonderful jobs and attributed to the success of the night. Out of our control was Cathe Dykstra's preexisting time commitments, making her unable to come to speak in person which would have been preferred. One improvement we could have made with our entertainment was the photo booth. Circling back to the venue, we did not have an ideal space for a photo booth, and we put it in a high trafficked hallway. There was also no photographer or sign letting attendees know it was a photo booth, so it did not get used as much as hoped. Looking back, I think we should have had a photographer there to take pictures to send to attendees later, a sign to put at the photo booth, and should have put it in a less-trafficked area.

## Fundraising

### Planning

While we had been carrying out fundraising campaigns for most of the semester, we wanted to use this launch party to raise money to acquire an office space and begin supporting families. In addition to the silent auction, which was already discussed, we created a campaign called *Fund the Mission*. We planned to place donation cards at each table and asked attendees that if they would like to donate via cash, card, or check to fill out the card and wave it in the air. We would have organization members walk around the room to get the cards and have people set up at the back of the room with credit card

readers. We planned to encourage people to also donate electronically on our website if they would like.

### Execution

One of our founding members Stephanie Schlichting led *Fund the Mission* and explained to attendees how it would work. You could sense a bit of confusion and hesitation in the room about what was happening. Attendees did not wave donation cards in the air as planned but were more reserved in their donating using our electronic options. People also made their way to the back of the room to donate using the card readers instead of having Beneficence Family Scholars members collect donation cards. Our original plan may not have worked, but people were generous in their giving and many donors gave sizeable amounts. With *Fund the Mission* and our silent auction, we successfully raised over \$8,000 at our launch party.

### Suggested Improvements

When non-profits host gala-like events they charge some sort of admission and provide more of a dinner than we did, so for our launch party that had a designated guest list and was by invite only, I think this type of fundraiser was acceptable. I believe the fundraiser activity would have been more successful if we had a larger guest list though. Many of our attendees were family and friends who may have already given to the organization or took part in the silent auction. By doing our fundraiser at the end of the night with our roughly 150 attendees, we may have been asking too much of them and they may not have had the means to give in so many ways. My belief is to how we were able to raise so much money at our event is that it was because of relationship-based fundraising. This fundraising practice is influenced by the theory of relationship

marketing. “Relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges,” (Jung & Lee, 2019). Because of relationship-based fundraising, people gave to our organization because of the relationships they had with all the students who founded Beneficence Family Scholars, not so much that we provided engaging activities and had to persuade attendees. Most attendees were there to see the accomplishments of someone they have a close relationship with. Our fundraising campaign *Fund the Mission* was successful, but not sustainable because founding students will most likely grow away from the organization after the semester ends and their other time-commitments begin again, leading to relationship-based donors to not donate as much because their connection to the organization is diminished.

### **Conclusion**

Planning an event is challenging in so many ways. There are numerous options for each aspect of an event and making sure that all the pieces of the puzzle come together at the right time takes much planning and organization. Beneficence Family Scholars had a successful launch party, but after analysis and research, there could have been improvements that may have made it even more successful in almost every aspect—the launch party, invitations, silent auction, venue, catering, florist, entertainment, speakers, and fundraising. Seldom do people take the time to explain their choices and if they added to a successful event and I would suggest that documentation of event details should take place. This would be helpful for other beginner organizations when planning events and be helpful to those in the organization when planning future events. It is

important to not what succeeded and what did not to avoid mistakes during future events.

This analysis provides suggested improvements of each aspect of the launch party and can help future event organizers.

## Resources

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