

Big Impact, Small Team: Maximizing Donor Engagement with Limited Resources



Association of Donor Relations Professionals (ADRP)
Sarah Spiegel, Director of Development, **Riverlife**
January 2026

Welcome & Introductions

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Board Meetings

Managing the CRM

Grant Deadlines

Human Resources

Special Events

Prospect Research

Coaching Your Team

Emails

Corporate Sponsorships

Appeals

Budgeting for Next Year

...and more!



Reality for Small Shops

- Multiple overlapping/competing fundraising priorities - always after the next gift!
- Limited resources - time, staffing, and budget restraints
- Stewardship often falls to the bottom of the to-do list

Donor Relations and Stewardship is THE strategy

- Stewardship is not “nice to have!”
- Retention is more efficient than acquisition
- Donors who feel connected, stay engaged
- Strong stewardship leads to larger and transformational gifts



Pittsburgh, PA

Riverlife

Fundraising Reality of Riverlife - Annual Development Plan

- **\$2.2M** annual budget
- **332** small and mid-size annual fund donors
- **77** giving society donors
- **27** monthly donors
- **\$40,000** annual expense budget
- **67%** retention rate
- One annual fundraiser for 1,000 guests; 2-3 donor cultivation events



Riverlife

Fundraising Reality of Riverlife - Special Campaigns

- **\$30M** Comprehensive Campaign
- 2023-2026
- **92%** to goal
- **32** major gifts from individual donors (\$25,000 - \$750,000)
- \$300,000 expense budget total



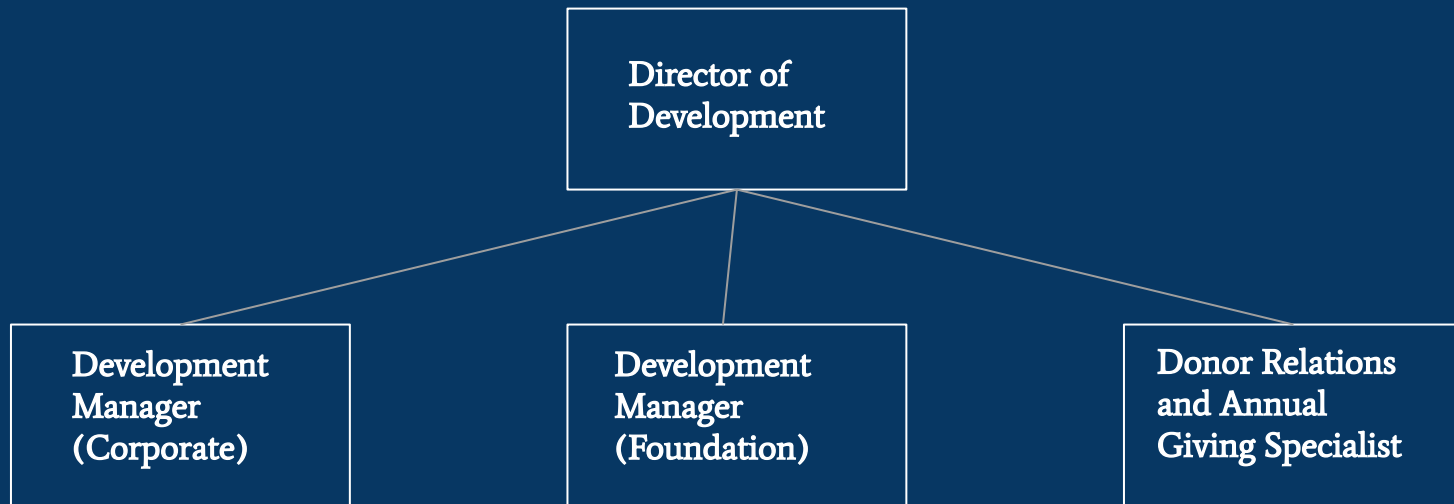
Fundraising Reality of Riverlife - Staff and Capacity

- 4 development staff
- 10 non-development staff
- 17-member Board of Directors
- 12-member Campaign Committee
- 5-member Development Committee



Riverlife

A small but mighty team



Added capacity with 25% Operations Coordinator and support from Communications Officer; Support from consultants and vendors as allowed by budget (design, event planning, etc.)

Our Donor Relations Philosophy

1. We ensure that donors understand the impact of their philanthropy
2. We respond quickly and communicate consistently
3. We focus on meaningful moments over flashy materials
4. We foster a culture of philanthropy at Riverlife

A Small Budget Does Not Mean Small Impact

Be personal.

Be consistent.

Get the basics right.

Donor relations works best when it is human, disciplined, and sustained.



Riverlife

Start with the Basics

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Before adding new initiatives, focus on:

- Timely, sincere, and accurate tax receipts and acknowledgment letters
 - Separate the tax receipt from the personal thank you
 - Automate with a personal touch as much as possible
 - Change up the language
- Accurate donor records
 - Amp up attention to detail; fess up and correct mistakes
- Clear statement of impact
 - Use the acknowledgment to immediately show impact of a gift



A fast, thoughtful, and personal thank you goes a long way.

Simple Segmentation

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Start Small

- No need for complex automation if your budget does not allow
- Can you identify one or two groups?
 - First-time donors
 - Lapsed donors
 - Recurring donors
 - Major donors
 - Volunteers
- Start with one tailored element to your standard materials

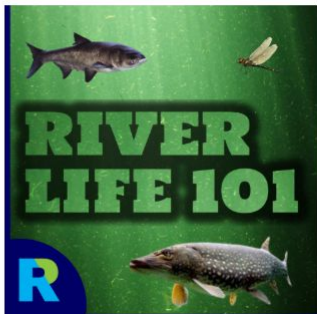
Riverlife's Simple Segmented Newsletters

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Riverlife

SEPTEMBER 2025

ACTIVATE



Completing the Loop Conversations: River Life 101

On **Wednesday, September 24**, bring the whole family aboard **Shore Thing** for a hands-on adventure exploring all the creatures that call our rivers home. Riverlife's partner organizations are experts in the local environment, and will be on deck to present and engage visitors in fun, interactive exhibits about river life here in Pittsburgh.

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RIVERLIFE CREW

SEPTEMBER 2025

Each month when your gift comes through, it feels like a high-five — a reminder that you believe in Pittsburgh's riverfronts as much as we do. **Thanks to you, together we're connecting people to the rivers and to one another.**

This month, Riverlife's Shore Thing programs highlight those connections: explore aquatic habitats, join a fitness class, or enjoy live music with the people you love. **Bringing new ideas and inspiration to Pittsburgh's riverfronts is what Riverlife is all about, and as a member of the Riverlife Crew, you make it possible.**

That's why I hope you'll join us at **Riverlife's Annual Celebration on Thursday, September 25th**, where we'll shine a light on the impact of your monthly gift and share what's ahead for Pittsburgh's riverfronts. Let me know if you can make it. I'd love to see you there!

Alyx Bean
Development Coordinator

**Use What You Already Have to
Show Impact**

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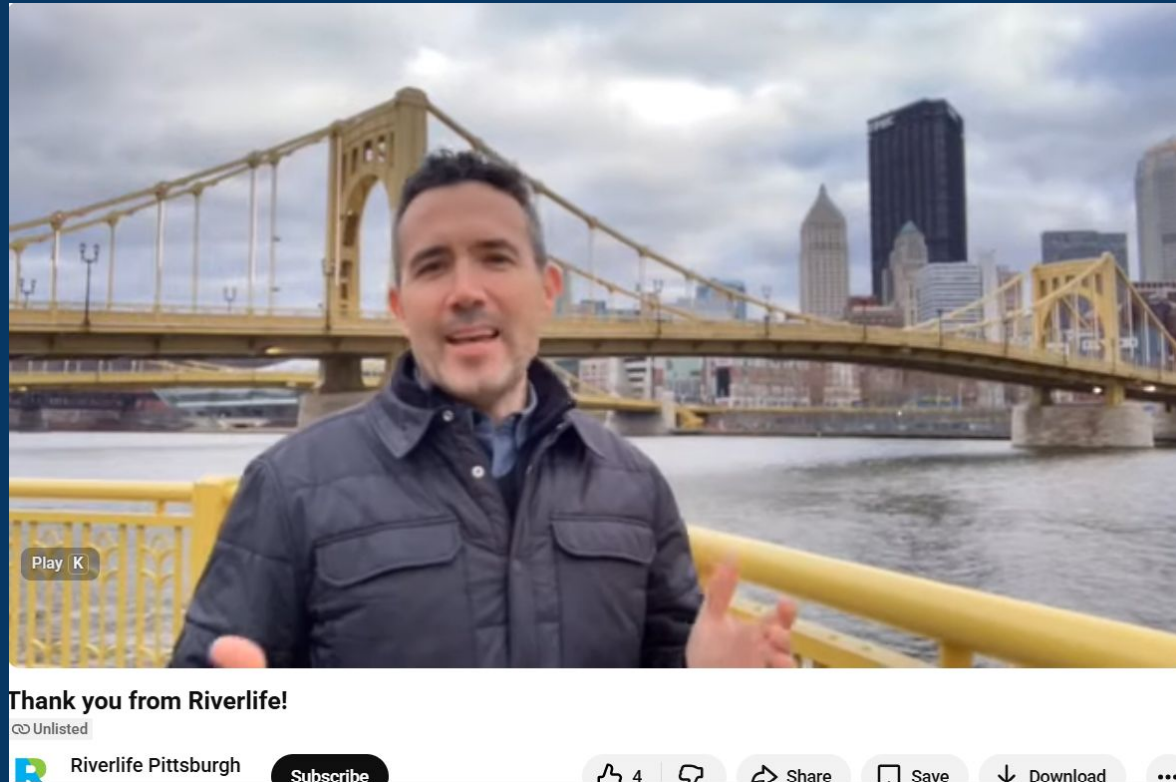
Your Best Tools are Often Free!

- Short, personal emails
- Thank you phone calls
- Photos from your programs
- A forwarded article of interest or quick update
- Remembering milestones

Authenticity > polish

- Invitations to existing programs and events
- Video content from program/project staff
- Use virtual tools
- Get creative!

Think frequent, creative, and light touches.



Riverlife CEO Matt Galluzzo shoots an “impromptu” video upon completion of our public boat dock



Riverlife Director of Planning & Projects provides brief, casual tour of a capital project via video for donors who are out of town

Sharing Responsibilities

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Deputize your staff and volunteers

Don't do it alone!

- CEO and leadership involvement
- Program staff as storytellers
- Board members as ambassadors
- Prioritize!

Activating Volunteer Leaders

- Annual Board (and staff) “Thank-A-Thon”
- Regular thank you calls
- Thank you notes at every board meeting
- Personalized email and event invitations

Activating your Entire Staff

- “Philanthropy Fridays”
- Thank you calls and emails
- Video content from your program staff
- Video or written thank you notes from clients and constituents as appropriate

What Does Success Look Like?

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- Donors responding to outreach
- Donors agreeing to meetings
- Donors attending events
- Donors choosing to volunteer
- Donors returning year over year
- Donors making repeat gifts in one year
- Donations growing over time
- Positive survey results
- Positive feedback

Retention is your biggest return on investment!

Metrics to Consider

- How many **meaningful touchpoints** did we have this month?
 - How many thank you calls did we make?
 - How many 1-1 emails did we send?
 - How many Board members made calls? How many calls did they make? How many conversations did they have?
 - How many meetings did we schedule?
 - How many guests attended our events?
 - How many donors clicked through our newsletter?

StewardshipTouchpoints



Activity Type ↑	Record Count
Call	72
Gift	28
Meeting	1
Other	2
Total	103

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Sample Calendar

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Jan-26

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
				1 Happy New Year Email	2	3
4	5	6	7	8 Thank-A-Thon instructions to Board	9 Philanthropy Friday Donor Survey	10
	Happy New Year Outreach >>					
11	12	13 Monthly Newsletter	14	15	16 Philanthropy Friday Board Thank-A-Thon	17
18	19	20	21 Thank-A-Thon Make Up Date	22	23 Philanthropy Friday Donor Survey Reminder	24
		Yetis in the Mail				
25	26	27	28	29 UpKeep Program Announcement Video from Matt	30 Philanthropy Friday	31

Example Donor Journey
(From \$1,000 to Transformational Gift)
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Entry point: Giving society donor at \$1,000/year with little to no engagement

Foundation built: Consistent, prompt thank-you letters and messages

Leadership touchpoints : Handwritten notes and phone calls from CEO; outreach from board chair

Relevant communication : Regular, targeted newsletters aligned with her interests

First engagement : Responded to a thank-you after several years

Deeper connection : Invited to a riverfront walk with her dog

Personalized stewardship : Follow-up gift of a Riverlife dog bandana with a handwritten note

Momentum : Increased annual giving

Partnership mindset : Included in early campaign planning conversations

Interest alignment : Understood and honored where her passions lay

The ask : Thoughtful campaign solicitation

Outcome : \$750,000 gift — largest individual gift in Riverlife's history

What This Teaches Us

Donor journeys take time (this was years in the making, not a single moment)

Consistency builds trust (regular, reliable stewardship mattered more than volume)

Leadership involvement is powerful (CEO and board engagement signaled importance)

Personalization doesn't have to be expensive, it just has to be thoughtful

Engagement precedes solicitation (relationship first, ask second)

Listening drives strategy (understanding interests shaped the right opportunity)

Stewardship doesn't end with the gift

Lessons Learned and Path Forward

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Lessons Learned

- Start small and build over time
- Strive for excellence in the basics
- Leverage what you already have
- Engage your entire staff and volunteer leaders
- Measure what matters
- Systems matter more than perfection
- Consistency matters

On a small budget, donor relations works best when you do fewer things well and scale up - timely gratitude, clear impact, and consistent connection.

Meaning beats fancy – Every time.

Path Forward

- Identify your baseline
- Choose 3-5 priority touch points
- Put it on the calendars (or CRM)
- **Be personal, be consistent, and be disciplined on the basics**

Questions & Discussion

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Thank You!



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