

Blairstown Museum raises funds through Facebook

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Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald - The Blairstown Museum in Blairstown is continuing its fund drive through Wednesday.

BLAIRSTOWN -- The Blairstown Museum has something to be thankful for, having raised \$600 on Thanksgiving Day during its "Blairstown Museum #GivingTuesday" campaign that began on Nov. 21.

The museum is continuing its fund drive through Wednesday, Nov. 28, including during Facebook's Giving Tuesday event on Nov. 27. Facebook and PayPal have committed to matching up to \$7 million in donations made on Tuesday through Facebook campaigns to 501(c)(3) non-profits like the Blairstown Museum.

Fundraising opportunities of this caliber as well as federal grants were previously elusive to the museum, when it experienced a snag during the application process for its non-profit designation. The museum learned in October that it will now be eligible to apply for four federal grants in 2019.

"This (the ability to fundraise and apply for grants) has been really big for us," said Jeanette Iurato, museum owner and curator. "We couldn't apply for federal funding before our 501(c)3 status. Fundraising campaigns and grants can help us to purchase more artifacts and to protect these items, in order for generations to come to enjoy the museum."

Although it opened its doors to the public at 26 Main St. on Oct. 1, 2016, and quickly gained a following, the museum questioned if it would be able to keep the lights on less than a year after opening. A delay within the IRS to process the group's application for non-profit 501(c)3 status nearly shuttered its operations.

Iurato said the museum's application for not-for-profit status was submitted through its attorney a month prior to opening, who continued reaching out periodically to the IRS for status.

"Every time she (the attorney) did (reached out the IRS)," Iurato said, "she was told the case was 'pending' and 'unassigned.'"

Iurato said there was no issue with the application, but had heard the IRS was backlogged due to a shortage of agents.

"We were told it can take up to 18 months to process an application," said Iurato, "but there is one organization locally that it took almost two years."

Iurato said it would have been financially difficult for the museum to carry on; although the visitor count at the venue was high, the donations were low. Without the non-profit status, potential donors were then reluctant to give. In spite of the funding shortfall, the Blirstown Museum continued as best as it could have.

Iurato had heard contacting a member of Congress might be an effective way to facilitate the process and reached out to U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer's office in August 2017.

"His office was very quick to respond and asked me to fill out a form to permit them to make an inquiry to the IRS on our behalf," Iurato explained. "His office contacted the IRS, advising that a non-profit in his district was suffering without its 501(c)3 status."

Within a week after contacting Gottheimer's office, the Blirstown Museum received correspondence from the IRS approving its 501(c)3 application.

"If I had thought about contacting his office sooner, I would have," Iurato said.

Iurato said since receiving non-profit status, she has seen the museum's donations skyrocket. Another bonus -- the IRS backdated the museum's 501(c)3 status to enable monies received before August 2017 to be counted in as donations.

"People like tax incentives," said Iurato. "This helps us financially and legitimizes us."

"The Blairstown Museum has boosted the local economy by bringing in tourists from around the world and is preserving the history of the Blairstown area for future generations to learn from," Gottheimer, D-5th Dist., reported to the IRS.

"Sometimes, you need someone at a higher level to cut through the red tape," said Iurato.

Iurato said the museum celebrated its second anniversary on Oct. 6 and Gottheimer wished to attend the celebration, but was unavailable. He followed up with a private tour on Oct. 11, sharing with Iurato the news about the federal grants the museum is eligible for in 2019.

"While the museum doesn't endorse political candidates, it was neat for us to have Josh Gottheimer visit," she said. "He was the first representative to visit the museum. We didn't want to say 'no' to a sitting congressman."

Gottheimer presented the museum with a certificate during its visit, recognizing it for its efforts in preserving local history.

Iurato said prior to applying for the 2019 federal grants, the museum has first been required to register with the federal government. Gottheimer's team, she said, also assisted with the registration application and said it would intervene should Iurato not receive registration confirmation when she is expected to by mid-December.

Iurato said representatives from Gottheimer's office have also volunteered to review the Blairstown Museum's grant applications before they are submitted.

The federal grants for which the museum is now eligible include one for fire suppression, one for security and one to help purchase a new computer. While the Blairstown Museum does not have rent payments, alleviating other expenses with grant monies could greatly help, Iurato said; the liability insurance and insurance for the artifacts alone runs about \$1,000 monthly. Iurato added that the museum has a "zero dollar payroll and zero tax burden to taxpayers."

"Whether a grant is \$200 or \$500, a grant opportunity is exciting," Iurato said.

Additionally, Iurato said, the 501(c)(3) status has opened doors for the museum to now apply for corporate grant monies through companies like Staples, Walmart and First Energy. She said these potential corporate donors would not even review a grant application without a non-profit designation.

Although Facebook permitted the museum to fundraise before it received its not-for-profit designation, Iurato said the group lost 6 percent of its donations to Facebook fees. Those Facebook fees are now waived as a non-profit and the Blairstown Museum is now in the running for matching donations on Giving Tuesday.

"To raise \$600 in one day is big for a small-town museum," Iurato said of the Thanksgiving donations.

Blairstown has gained a following with "Friday the 13th" and the local ties to the film franchise, which the museum has been an integral part of. Due to space limitations, the "Friday the 13th" artifacts have not been on permanent exhibit. Iurato said that will change in January 2019, when a permanent space is allocated for the relics and according to the current Facebook campaign, funds raised are earmarked for the permanent Friday the 13th exhibit.

Half of the visitors to the museum have been from Blairstown and surrounding areas; and half from out of state, she said. "It's a nice mix of people," said Iurato. "Many come through Blairstown and visit the museum before or after visiting one of the Warren County vineyards, the Lakota Wolf Preserve or an orchard for apple picking."

Iurato said the museum cares for about 5,000 artifacts, including items that belonged to the township's founder, John Blair.

To donate to the Blairstown Museum #GivingTuesday campaign, visit: www.facebook.com/pg/blairstownmuseum/posts/.

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