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## The Last Asks: Fundraising Lessons from a Retiring Performing Arts Leader

Mike Scutari | May 27, 2026



After John Schreiber joined the Newark-based New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) as president and CEO in 2011, his board dispatched him to Florida to have a meal with investor and hedge fund manager [Leon Cooperman](#). The board's instructions? Ask Cooperman for half a million dollars.

Schreiber had never met Cooperman before. Dutifully following his orders, he made the ask. Cooperman "looked at me like I was crazy," Schreiber said. "I can't quite recall exactly what I said in response, but it must have been something to the effect of a quick apology for asking for a new gift without context. To Lee's credit, he forgave me before the lunch was over!"

Schreiber also credits Cooperman for his willingness to stay in touch. Over time, the two men built a rapport and in 2019, [Leon and his wife, Toby](#), pledged \$20 million toward the development of the 58,000-square-foot Cooperman Family Arts Education and Community Center, which will serve as the headquarters for NJPAC's arts education, community engagement, and arts and wellbeing initiatives.



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JOHN SCHREIBER. CREDIT: NEW JERSEY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Cooperman was just getting warmed up. Last September, the 83-year-old Giving Pledge signatory, whose net worth is approximately \$3.6 billion according to *Forbes*, announced a \$50 million donation to seed an endowment for NJPAC’s social impact programs. Speaking at the center’s annual Spotlight Gala, Cooperman told the crowd he felt compelled to make the gift at a

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time when the government is “malfunctioning.”

The gift, which is the largest in NJPAC’s history, encapsulates the big-ticket issues that have defined Schreiber’s tenure: delivering programming that engages diverse and younger audiences, expanding the center’s role in driving Newark’s revitalization and parlaying this work to secure consistent support. But like all tenures, Schreiber’s has an end date. He recently announced his retirement, and for his final act, hopes to raise \$100 million before his successor takes the reins in July 2027.

NJPAC has raised \$70 million toward its goal since last October and “we’re teeing up a whole bunch of asks to get us to the finish line,” Schreiber said. It’s incredibly rewarding — and exhausting — work. Fundraising, he said, “is integrated into my whole day,” and includes continually checking with board members, staff and volunteers, all of whom help him refine and personalize his interactions with donors. This engagement “has helped me operate the business better, and helped me be a better fundraiser.”

## How NJPAC came to embrace diverse programming

Schreiber grew up in Queens and spent his pre-NJPAC career as a producer, working with Newport Jazz Festival Founder George Wein, among many other luminaries.

NJPAC first opened its doors in 1997. Schreiber said that what attracted him to the role was the institution’s stated goal of not just being a great performing arts center — “New Jersey’s answer to Lincoln Center” — but an “authentically engaged community partner.”

Schreiber’s predecessor, Larry Goldman, established NJPAC as one of the country’s major performing arts centers and oversaw the development of its successful arts education program. However, the center was still clawing its way out of the 2008 financial crisis, so when Schreiber succeeded Goldman in 2011, his first priority was addressing the center’s structural deficit.

He spent his first three years working with veteran staff and new hires to reimagine the center’s programming. A key partner in this effort was David Rodriguez, who previously ran Harlem’s famous Apollo Theater. Schreiber named him as executive producer about six months into his role as president and CEO. In the early 2000s, when Rodriguez was Apollo’s CEO, Schreiber produced “Harlem Song.” It was the first sit-down musical in the famed theater’s history, and, by attracting diverse audiences, “helped diminish the invisible line between 96th Street and uptown” in New York City, Schreiber said.

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Schreiber recalled that after he joined NJPAC, “David said to me, ‘We have an opportunity to reliably attract audiences from 15 different ethnicities and nationalities if we are smart in the way that we program to them.’” That’s precisely what NJPAC did, rolling out extensive offerings to the area’s diverse populations — South Asian, Brazilian, African-American and others — and creating promotional partnerships with individuals attuned to those communities.

“To me, that was a revelation about what was possible if we invited more people in,” Schreiber said. “If we offered them attractions they loved, business would get better. And it did.”

## Tips for engaging donors beyond diverse programming

NJPAC’s embrace of community-focused programming has fueled a virtuous fundraising cycle. Individual donors like the Coopermans and Betty Wold Johnson, the matriarch of the Johnson family, whose [\\$20 million bequest](#) supported NJPAC’s Endowment Fund, came to appreciate the center’s work.

Schreiber noted that as a performing arts center, NJPAC casts a wide net with its programming, including “Star Wars: The Last Jedi” in concert, stand-up comedy, and educational offerings like “The Many Faces of Newark.” In contrast, historical single-purpose art entities, like museums and libraries, often lack a comparable breadth of programmatic flexibility. “The ability to offer and differentiate services that are aligned with our mission gives us the ability to better succeed as fundraisers,” he said, noting that while most donors give to a variety of programs, most of their funding flows toward either general operating support or the center’s endowment.

NJPAC’s financial trajectory points to another cardinal psychological rule of fundraising, which is that many donors feel comfortable cutting a check knowing the institution is on sound financial footing.

As NJPAC expanded and diversified its programming, Schreiber built out new earned revenue streams. In 2012, a year into his tenure, the television show *America’s Got Talent* was based at NJPAC for 12

weeks, attracting tens of thousands of new visitors to the center. It hosted and licensed performances like stand-up specials and [dance programs](#) for outlets like PBS. Its “Hip Hop Nutcracker” production toured the country and aired on PBS and Disney TV.

NJPAC erased its operational budget deficit three seasons after Schreiber’s 2011 arrival and, with the exception of fiscal year 2021, in the midst of COVID, has remained in the black by expanding its revenues from \$23 million in 2011 to over \$70 million today. It spends almost \$8 million a year on programs devoted to community, education, community engagement, and the [arts and wellbeing](#), and offers 400 free events a year spanning artistic genres in Greater Newark, Asbury Park and Atlantic City.

Schreiber has also overseen NJPAC’s efforts to position its 12-acre campus as a cultural anchor in downtown Newark — a move that’s resonated with place-based donors committed to revitalizing New Jersey’s most populous city. Last May, the center opened its redesigned Chambers Plaza, named after founding supporter Ray Chambers. Work is currently underway to construct residential townhouses and rental units, rehearsal studios, and, at the heart of the reimagined campus, the Cooperman Family Arts and Education Center.

Like countless other arts leaders attuned to profound demographic shifts reshaping the donor population, Schreiber recognizes that greatest generation and [baby boomer patrons are gradually ceding the stage](#), and he’s always seeking new ways to engage younger audiences so that, over time, they can become supporters. One such example is the July 10th “Spoken Word Salsa,” an event combining poetry and salsa that features, among other performers, the Newark-born, Grammy-nominated salsa singer Frankie Negrón.

“If audiences love us when they’re 25 or 30, they’ll love us even more when they’re 50,” Schreiber said. “We’re playing the short and long game in terms of philanthropy.”

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## Differentiating between “good” and “bad” asks



JOHN SCHREIBER WITH NJPAC JAZZ FOR TEENS JAZZ VOCAL STUDENTS. CREDIT: NEW JERSEY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

As one would expect, Schreiber has rubbed shoulders with countless political, cultural and, perhaps even more importantly, *fundraising* legends through his tenure.

In one telling anecdote, he recalled meeting with former [Robin Hood Foundation](#) President Reynold Levy, who, at the time, was the president of the Lincoln Center. Levy showed up 10 minutes late and looked aggravated. “I said to him, ‘You seem really upset, what’s going on?’” Schreiber recalled. “And Levy said, ‘I’ve been up since five in the morning and I haven’t raised a dime.’”

Levy's frustration underscored "the perpetual nature of arts fundraising," Schreiber said. "It's the idea that if I'm not asking every day, then I feel like I'm not doing my job, and sometimes we spend as much time stewarding a \$5,000 donor as we do a seven- or eight-figure donor." (Case in point: During our Zoom conversation, Schreiber's cell phone buzzed. He looked at his phone, then said to me, "It's a donor; mind if I take this?" After I obliged, Schreiber muted our conversation, and for the next few minutes, chatted with the donor. "Thanks," he said after hanging up. "Now where were we?")

Schreiber went on to stress that a fundraiser who's been working the phones since 5 a.m. needs to spend their time wisely. "There's a 'good' ask and a 'bad' ask," he said. "A bad ask is, 'I'm X hundreds of thousands of dollars away from my fundraising goal. Please give me money so I can make that number.' It's bad because you're asking the donor to take pity on you. The donor thinks, 'Why would I want to give you money to cure your deficit?' It doesn't feel like a very positive caliber of philanthropy."

In contrast, a "good" ask recognizes that a donor isn't just giving to "the arts." "They're giving to community," Schreiber said. "They're providing opportunities that young people might not have otherwise, and that's our job, right? To make those opportunities available to children and families who deserve them."

Schreiber pulled from his "good ask" playbook when he approached Cooperman last fall. "I said to him, 'NJPAC is about to be 30 years old. I want you to consider a legacy gift that will propel the arts center to the next generation. The gift will be at the heart of the funding that will enable everything we're doing in [social action](#) to continue predictably into the future.'"

The pitch clearly resonated with the Coopermans, and the rest, as they say, is history.

A search committee will begin working in earnest in September to identify Schreiber's replacement, with the goal of having a new leader contracted by April 2027 for a start date. Schreiber will stick around as

an advisor to the new leader for six months and then step away from that role in January 2028.

With the final curtain descending ever so slowly, I found Schreiber to be in a reflective mood during our conversation, drawing parallels between his pre-NJPAC work as a producer and his current role.

“When [Newport Jazz Festival’s] George Wein sent me to markets to produce the festivals, I would make several multiday visits to individual cities each year to engage with community,” he said. “I did this so the festivals were authentic representations of the local jazz culture in each town. We were never a passing show. We were embedded in community. That lesson is the one we practice now at NJPAC with all of our social impact work.”

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