



the
best
things
in life
are
free

the power of one

Brooke Griffin had an ambitious goal: She wanted to raise thousands of dollars for a local homeless shelter. Inspired by philanthropist Malaak Compton-Rock's new book, *If It Takes a Village, Build One*, Brooke asked her aunt and a friend to help. Then they all recruited friends, who involved their neighbors, who called upon local businesspeople—and soon their entire Northern Kentucky community was participating in a charity cocktail gala that raised nearly \$40,000 for needy women and children.

By Lindsey Palmer



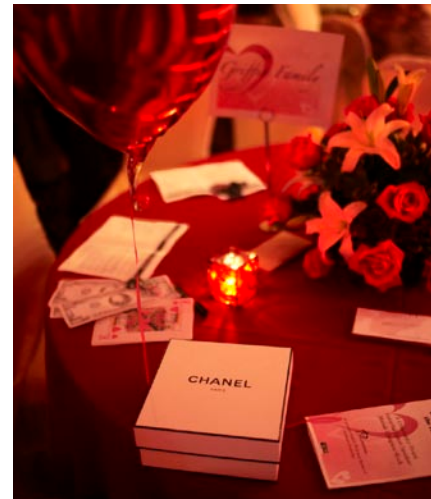
In a crowded ballroom decorated with red and white flowers, heart-shaped Mylar balloons, and crisp white linens, Brooke Griffin looks around at the dozens of tables of friends, relatives, and neighbors, her heart racing with nerves and excitement. The 27-year-old lets it sink in that *she* is the reason these people have gathered on a bitterly cold Saturday night, to raise money for the women and children of Welcome House of Northern Kentucky, a local homeless shelter. The evening's emcee, WCPO-TV chief meteorologist Steve Raleigh, introduces Brooke to the room, and she smiles shyly as the crowd breaks into applause for the woman who managed to throw together a charity cocktail gala that raised almost \$40,000 in a matter of just four weeks. Moments later, Steve and his wife, Julie, kick off an action-packed live auction of donated vacation packages, concert events, sports tickets, and more, and Brooke sits down next to her husband, Chris, allowing herself to drink in the fun spectacle. "This is truly one of the proudest moments of my life," she says. "I feel a huge sense of accomplishment and togetherness with all the people from my community who helped me make it all happen."

"I had many ideas of how to help, but I didn't know how to start."

When Fort Mitchell, KY, resident Brooke Griffin wrote to REDBOOK about her desire to support Welcome House and the comprehensive services it provides to help homeless families get back on their feet, her passion shone through even as she admitted she didn't exactly know where to begin. As the former captain of the Cincinnati Bengals cheerleaders, Brooke had volunteered at Welcome House events through the team's service work. "I'll be honest: I always imagined homeless people as the stereotypical men panhandling on the street," she wrote. "But when I toured the Welcome House and met the residents, it opened my eyes to see that the homeless include women my age who live in my area and who are very similar to me. But through different life circumstances, they've ended up in a tough spot." Especially in this weak economy, when donations have dropped off just as need is rising, Brooke knew she had to do more. "I felt overwhelmed by the women's need for things like tampons and diapers, items we all take for granted," she wrote.

Brooke's enthusiasm and drive to help dovetailed perfectly with the message in humanitarian Malaak

It takes a village: Brooke coordinates last-minute details hours before the event (opposite page); Brooke and her community of supporters celebrate their success the night of the fund-raiser gala.



All in the details:

Brooke and Ashley put finishing touches on signs; the pink cupcake tower was the centerpiece of the dessert buffet; some guests bought a table's worth of tickets; Brooke poses with her mentor, Malaak; Brooke arranges the \$100 fund-raising balloons.

Compton-Rock's new book, *If It Takes a Village, Build One: How I Found Meaning Through a Life of Service and 100+ Ways You Can Too*. Malaak has spent a lifetime bringing together communities to help others, and her powerful book aims to inspire readers to embark on their own journeys for change. The message: that giving back in meaningful ways is easier than you think, and that it makes you feel amazing. REDBOOK connected the two women so Malaak could advise Brooke on how to build an inspirational fund-raiser for Welcome House.

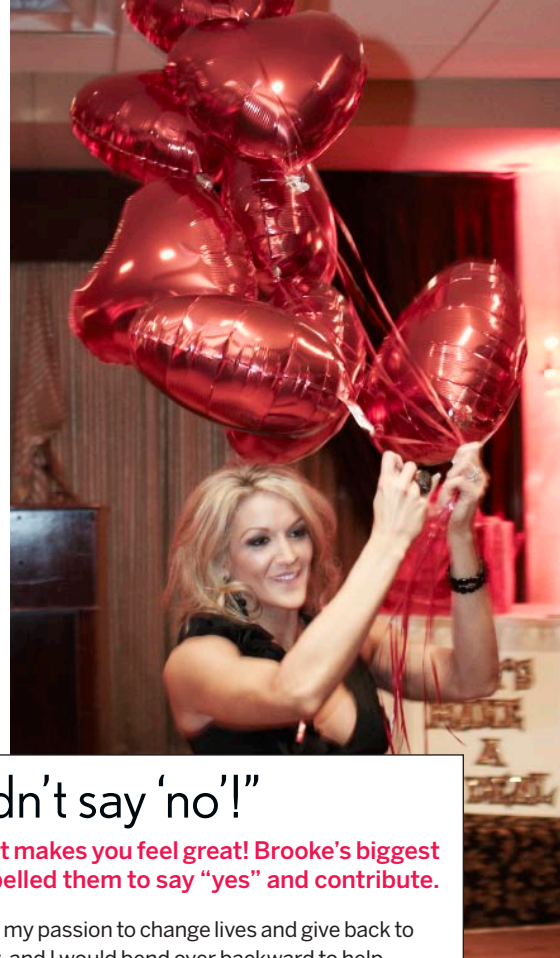
"Malaak wrote about how she's inspired others to make a difference, and I thought, *Well, she's a famous person, but she's still just a person, and look what she could do*," Brooke says. (Malaak starred in *Oprah's Big Give* and is married to comedian Chris Rock.) "The book outlined how I could use my passion to get people on board and make something happen. It gave me the confidence to turn to my husband and say, 'Okay, I can do this.'"

"On a cold winter night, we knew people would love an excuse to get dressed up and go dancing."

Brooke passed her copy of Malaak's book to the two women she knew would step up as her main

supporters: her aunt Juanita Griffin, who's been a Welcome House Outreach volunteer for 20 years, and Ashley Anderson, Welcome House's development coordinator. After getting advice on first steps from Malaak (see "How to harness the power of many," page 168), Brooke gathered her team in a coffee shop, and together they devised a plan: They would throw a fund-raiser gala with live and silent auctions and plenty of food and dancing. "We bounced around different ideas for themes, and Malaak helped us settle on 'Home Is Where the Heart Is,'" Brooke says. "It felt perfect because the event would fall near Valentine's Day, and Welcome House's mission is all about providing shelter." Then Brooke's team set an ambitious goal: to raise \$90,000, the total donations Welcome House needs in operate its women and children's shelter for one year. The race was on to make it all happen.

Malaak provided Brooke with a four-week planning timeline and suggested she immediately focus her energies on the key components that would make her event a success: an attractive, popular venue and a dynamic emcee who could really sell the live auction. Says Brooke, "I honestly wasn't sure if we could pull the event off in just a month. It was totally overwhelming." With such a tight schedule, Brooke would need to recruit a large



team of volunteers. “I knew I’d have great help because I live in a close-knit community with lots of loving people who chat after church and gather for Sunday football games,” she says.

“At our weekly meetings, we discussed fun ways to help out—whether it was to sell tables or to tap a friend to bring next time.”

Malaak and Brooke hooked up frequently for conference calls. When Brooke admitted she was nervous about the many aspects of planning—invitations, donations, food and drinks, entertainment, and more—Malaak stressed the importance of regular meetings to keep everyone organized and on task, and to motivate the team. So Brooke asked Juanita to involve the Welcome House Outreach, a group of 20 women who had been volunteering for years, and they began meeting on Tuesday nights. “Elizabeth Gray agreed to format event e-vites, Allison Kennedy stepped up to organize the silent auction, and the others then went out to restaurants and spas to solicit items,” Brooke says. “It was so encouraging to get so much help from women who were total strangers to me just weeks earlier.” ▶

“We just couldn’t say ‘no!’”

A benefit of doing good? It makes you feel great! Brooke’s biggest helpers share what compelled them to say “yes” and contribute.



“It’s my job and my passion to change lives and give back to our community, and I would bend over backward to help Brooke. The two of us divvied everything up—reaching out to restaurants and vendors, creating the e-vite and the program, and coordinating all the little details—learning and growing the whole time.” —**Ashley Anderson, Welcome House development coordinator**

“I was really impressed with Brooke’s initiative and effort. The Welcome House is a great program; providing homes and a fresh start for people is really what appealed to us. We were happy to become the title sponsor of the fund-raiser.”

—**Chris Kennedy, owner of Kennedy Homes**



“I’d been volunteering at the Welcome House for 20 years, and when Brooke told me she was planning this event, I immediately called on the Welcome House Outreach committee. I’d hardly used a computer before, and suddenly I was emailing like crazy to help plan. Brooke has succeeded in bringing in a new generation of volunteers, which is so important.” —**Juanita Griffin, Brooke’s aunt**

“At first I couldn’t believe that Brooke wanted to pull together this fund-raiser so quickly, but ultimately her drive persuaded me and the board to back her efforts 100 percent. I am a big proponent of the village of support that Malaak talks about. It is the village that can keep someone from becoming homeless. Brooke has rallied our community to step up and contribute.” —**Linda Young, Welcome House executive director**



“I feel passionately about helping kids, so when Ashley called me, I told my boss how great it would be to donate our space. It’s been exciting to work with such an appreciative team.” —**Emily Kramer, corporate sales manager at The Madison**



Brooke's A-team: Bengals defensive end Frostee Rucker donated a signed jersey to the live auction; Brooke persuaded a few Bengals cheerleaders to don their uniforms and sell heart-shaped balloons in the lobby.

"I had no idea how generous people would be in giving their time and services and talents."

Brooke was new to soliciting donations and pro-bono services, and she was pretty nervous about it. "Malaak gave me a script for how to approach a vendor with 'the ask,' which I practiced ahead of time to build up my confidence," Brooke says. "I tried to motivate myself by thinking that the worst that could happen is that I'd hear 'no'—and I knew it would feel amazing if I got a 'yes.'" Malaak advised her to start by asking friends and acquaintances, who would be eager to help someone they knew. While planning her wedding last year, Brooke had grown close with her designer, Kevin Ford: "So I approached Kevin to donate flowers, linens, and decorations and to handle setup for the fund-raiser, and he agreed immediately," Brooke says. "He also connected me with a local restaurateur whose wedding he'd designed, and she signed on as our first donated food station." Next, the bakery that had created Brooke's wedding cake volunteered to provide cupcakes.

Not every vendor Brooke approached was willing to help. "I visited four downtown Cincinnati hotels, and all four turned me down," she says. "I was getting discouraged. One local former sports star told me there was no way I'd pull off the event, especially in January, which is the worst month for fund-raising. But I just tried to keep a positive attitude, and soon after, Ashley contacted her friend at the Madison catering hall, and they agreed not

only to donate the space on a Saturday night, but also to contribute hors d'oeuvres!"

Brooke faced other setbacks as well. When Ashley told Welcome House's executive director, Linda Young, about the plans for the fund-raiser, Linda wasn't convinced it was a good idea. "She was reluctant to plan something so quickly," says Brooke. "But then she saw how dedicated we were and how hard we were working—and when I met with her two weeks before the event, she was excited for what she had nicknamed the 'Welcome House Prom!'"

"I quickly learned to match the volunteers' personalities with the tasks that were right for them."

As a former NFL cheerleader, Brooke knows plenty of high-energy, outgoing women—and she knew exactly what jobs would suit them best. She asked former Bengals cheerleader and longtime philanthropist Julie Raleigh to run the live auction along with her husband, Steve, a local television meteorologist. Steve also agreed to publicize the gala on-air during his broadcast—a huge coup. "I put volunteers with good people skills in charge of greeting guests and taking tickets, and I assigned the less outgoing ones to handle behind-the-scenes tasks," Brooke says. "I called on a few people I knew were super-reliable to oversee the big details of the evening." Six cheerleaders agreed to wear their uniforms and sell heart-shaped balloons at the



Motivated to donate: Julie Raleigh riles up the crowd at the live auction; Steve Raleigh congratulates Brooke.

7 ideas to inspire your community

Malaak Compton-Rock suggests different events you can plan with your neighborhood to support your favorite charity or cause.

- **CAR WASH:** If you can get the principal's support, plan this event at a school in order to inspire the whole student body and parents to participate—the kids will enjoy getting elbow-deep in suds. Or set up at a community center, a church, or a synagogue. Make it a real group effort by encouraging friends and neighbors to set up food stands.
- **WALKATHON:** Get everyone moving and they'll feel like they're really doing good. Get step-by-step planning advice—and a \$50 coupon toward the site's "DoJiggy Pledge" walkathon software—at dojiggy.com/redbook.
- **SCHOOL BAKE SALE OR CARNIVAL:** If your cause centers on children, connect with your child's school to plan an afternoon family fund-raiser.
- **FASHION SHOW:** Local retailers and boutiques will love the opportunity to showcase and promote their new looks, and fashion-conscious guests will have fun in the audience.
- **SHOPPING EVENT:** Connect with a local retailer or a national chain and plan a girls' night of shopping and refreshments; a certain percentage of sales will go to benefit your cause.
- **COMMUNITY YARD SALE:** Ask a group of neighbors to set up shop on their lawns in support of your cause: They can sell home goods, food, clothing, flowers, or whatever they can contribute.
- **SPORTS DAYS:** If your social circle enjoys playing golf or tennis, enlist a club to host a tournament and publicize the event, then solicit local businesses to sponsor the holes for a set price. A sports tournament encourages whole families—especially the guys!—to get in on the fun.

door the night of the gala to raise additional funds. "I also called upon Bengals defensive end Frostee Rucker and safety Kyries Hebert to lend their local celebrity status—and we'd have had even more Bengals players at the party if it hadn't been the same weekend as the Pro Bowl!" Brooke says with a laugh. Frostee and Kyries not only attended the event, but they also donated autographed team jerseys to the live auction.

Though Brooke tried to obtain a lot of the big-ticket auction items on her own, eventually she realized she needed help. She called on her father-in-law, a local businessman, and other family members to assist, and they helped secure tickets to a Taylor Swift concert and to the Masters golf tournament, plus a vacation getaway. Julie Raleigh stepped in too; because she is such a good customer of the Cincinnati Saks Fifth Avenue, the store donated a makeup party for 10.

"The coming together of my community in support of this cause is just beautiful."

After a month of rigorous planning, Brooke's benefit gala sold out—300 guests had seats and 50 more took standing-room tickets. The event was slated to begin on a Saturday at 7 p.m., but by 6:30, guests in cocktail attire were lined up outside



Spread the love: Brooke's husband, Chris, offers his wife a big, supportive hug; Brooke and Malaak pose with Welcome House executive director Linda Young and board member Crystal Hicks.

the Madison, eager to eat, drink, and dance with their community.

As guests filed in, Bengals cheerleaders offered the red Mylar heart-shaped balloons for \$100 each—enough to shelter a homeless woman or child for three nights in the Welcome House shelter. On the landing of the dramatic staircase that led to the main ballroom, guests were offered a Passion's Crush cocktail, the evening's signature drink, offered by Maker's Mark. Once in the ballroom, they were free to nosh on mini-burgers, chicken dumpling soup, homemade potato chips, and sushi—among other tasty offerings—while perusing the packed silent-auction table.

Soon emcee Steve Raleigh called guests to their seats and invited featured guest Malaak Compton-Rock to the stage. "Tonight, Brooke has proved that one person in a village of givers can galvanize her community in support of a cause and bring about change" she said, as the guests broke into enthusiastic applause.

Next, three giant screens showed a video featuring Welcome House executive director Linda Young and Crystal Hicks, a former Welcome House resident who now, 10 years later, is a social worker who also serves on the Welcome House board. Watching herself onscreen from her table, her husband by her side, Hicks remarked, "It's powerful to be able to tell my story of how far I've come—from being a victim of domestic violence and homeless with my 18-month-old daughter to



What the money will do

"The \$38,000 that Brooke and her team raised at the benefit gala will fund more than 1,200 overnights in the shelter, where our residents are always welcome to stay for as long as they need to," says Ashley Anderson, development coordinator. "The women and their families will receive employment and case-management services, and the assistance and guidance they need to get back on their feet and become self-sufficient."

For more information on the Welcome House organization or to donate, log on to welcomehouse.org or call 859-431-8717. To find a shelter to support in your area, visit homelessshelterdirectory.org or womenshelters.org for women's-only shelters.

having a great job, a supportive husband, and a loving home. I'm blessed now to be able to give back." After the video, Linda Young took the stage to thank all the partygoers—especially Brooke—for their support: "Everyone needs money, but it's people who change other people's lives," she said. Her heartfelt speech was surely on everyone's mind a little later, when the Bengals cheerleaders rallied the crowd to buy the remaining 39 heart-shaped balloons. In a matter of minutes, every balloon sold.

The day after the event, Ashley called Brooke to tell her that they'd raised \$38,000 for Welcome House. "I'd been adding up the numbers in my journal throughout the process, so I had a general idea of how much we'd made," Brooke says. "But I was so excited to hear that final amount! Even though we didn't hit our initial goal of \$90,000, this is a huge accomplishment, especially considering the short time we had to plan it."

Through tears, Brooke reflects on her experience: "This journey of bringing so many excited and motivated people together to support something great has been so fulfilling for me. I can't wait to do it all again next year and continue this tradition of service." ►



Celebrating service:
Malaak Compton-Rock toasts Brooke for uniting so many to do so much good.

How to harness the power of many Malaak Compton-Rock shares 6 simple steps to build your village.

1 SET A GOAL. “The key to planning a successful event is knowing what you want to get out of it—financially or otherwise,” Malaak says. “Ask yourself, ‘What are my objectives?’ and write them down. Deciding on your goals up front will allow you to understand what type of event will best serve those goals and how to reach out to your community to make it happen.”

2 BUILD A DIVERSE TEAM. “To bring together a strong committee of volunteers, tap in to all of your social circles—your neighbors, your co-workers, the parents at your child’s school, and any other groups you’re connected to,” Malaak says. “Focus on finding a wide variety of folks with different skills. For example, the PTA president at your child’s school might have fundraising experience, an accountant could help you devise a budget, a graphic artist could design invitations or programs, someone in the business community could secure sponsors, and someone who just plain knows a lot of people will be an asset in terms of selling tickets and publicizing your event.”

3 PLAN WELL. “To stay organized and on track, create a detailed timeline leading up to the event,” Malaak suggests. “Make sure to give yourself enough time in advance to book the key components that will make your event a success, such as the right venue and a locally known personality to emcee.” Check out Malaak’s planning timeline at redbookmag.com/timeline.

4 DIVIDE AND CONQUER. “Break your team into committees, then assign a leader to head each one,” Malaak says. “Each committee should schedule its own weekly meetings to discuss their progress and figure out upcoming goals, and then the committee heads should convene on their own to exchange ideas, update people on their planning, and coordinate logistics.”

5 JUST ASK! “Most people want to give back to society, but they just don’t know how,” Malaak says. “So to get people and businesses to come on board in support of your fundraiser is often as simple as asking.” Malaak offers the following tips for making “the ask”: “If you’re approaching a retailer

you often frequent, just walk in and talk to the owner about your event and then explain how her flower arrangements or printing services will help the event and the community. Because you already provide her with business, you can feel confident in asking her to do her part. If you don’t know the vendor, draft a letter with the same information, then follow up with a call or in-person visit. And be sure to let prospective supporters and sponsors know about all the promotion they’ll receive if they pitch in—whether in your event program or in local news coverage.”

6 PROMOTE YOURSELF. “Engage your local media to cover your event in as many ways as possible,” Malaak says. “Draft a press release and send it to your local TV news stations, radio stations, and newspapers. Ask a local deejay to promote your event during his show or request that your paper run a story on the cause you’re raising funds for. And of course, get the buzz going through word-of-mouth, too, so your event can get all the attention it deserves.” Check out Brooke’s press release at redbookmag.com/pressrelease. **R**



Win Malaak’s book! 100 readers will each win a copy of *If It Takes a Village, Build One*, by Malaak Compton-Rock. Value of each, \$24. Enter at redbookmag.com/winit. See page 225 for details.

