

Becoming a Cornerstone for Charity



Kennedy Jenks raised over \$10,000 for Water For People at its employee-led Pies for People fundraiser in October 2022, a pie-in-the-face charitable drive where colleagues donated money for the opportunity to pie one of the five volunteers in the face.

Kennedy Jenks empowers employees to give back to their communities

BY MICHELE MEYER



At Kennedy Jenks (KJ), you'll find rank-and-file employees who devote their time to bettering the world.

You'll meet Laura Weiden, a Seattle-area associate civil engineer who headed groups that planted vegetation or laid stones along pedestrian paths near Washington state's Green River and pumpkin patches.

You'll meet Jamie Kolkey, an operations vice president in Sacramento, California, who united colleagues to help University of California at Los Angeles engineering students to brush up their résumés and interview skills at an annual bootcamp.

Top leadership also participates in volunteer efforts—every board member and senior manager gives back—but they prefer to recognize staff members for their efforts.

"We give credit where credit is due," says Keith London, the firm's president and CEO, in Murrieta, California. "Our employees deserve the recognition."

Kennedy Jenks has 425 employees in 34 offices coast-to-coast. Founded in 1919, it became entirely employee-owned 50 years ago. Its engineers, scientists, and project managers design, build, and manage water and wastewater treatment plants and confront environmental challenges such as dangerous contaminants in soil and water.

CORNERSTONE STEERS GIVING

London says that Kennedy Jenks has had a long culture of community involvement. But in 2017, leadership decided that this altruism needed a defined purpose and a name. Enter the company's Cornerstone giving program.

"People already were donating," London says. "We just institutionalized it and gave it an identity they could rally around."

Being employee-driven is the key to Cornerstone's success, he says. A committee of 12 has complete autonomy of decisions, with a budget approved by company leadership. Committee members are spread from Hawaii to New Jersey.

"That's intentional and our strength," says Bronwyn Rolph, co-founder of Cornerstone and a project engineer in Seattle. "We represent different backgrounds and perspectives, which inspire different events. And wherever you are, you have a connection with someone on the committee."

Its members believe generosity grows when workers can choose to give to causes they are passionate about. Up to 50 percent of the staff volunteers or donates in some form during the year.

Some programs are typical for engineering firms: charitable matches, holiday gifts, tutoring, and food and clothing drives. Recently, Kennedy Jenks rolled out a plan to match volunteer time.

"We recognize some people have a lot of time to give but not a lot of extra money, whereas others have money but not much time," Rolph says. "Now we can support both."

Also new are enhanced charitable matches, where the firm doubles the amount donated by workers to tax-exempt groups such as Doctors Without Borders and World Relief, following a natural disaster or calamity.



Some members of KJ's Cornerstone group convene at KJ's TechEx 2022, a technical excellence conference designed to bring employees together to share technical accomplishments and more.



Kennedy Jenks regularly sponsors events like the Los Angeles Committee Water For People Luncheon.



General Counsel and Chief Risk Officer Jerry Cavaluzzi participates in a virtual fundraiser relay with his dogs Basil and Penny. These virtual events were one way KJers remained connected to one another throughout the pandemic.

"Everyone in leadership and on the board of directors is very much on our side," says Claire Gambrill, former Cornerstone committee co-chair and former staff environmental scientist in Princeton, New Jersey.

Counting employee gifts and the Kennedy Jenks match, Cornerstone expects to donate about \$120,000 in 2022, up from \$114,000 last year.

"We've worked toward maxing out the charitable budget," Gambrill says. "We're always proud and excited when we do."

FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO STEM

Considering Kennedy Jenks' work, three charities are natural fits: Water For People and Engineers Without Borders (both of which champion sustainable, long-term safe water and sanitation where needed worldwide), as well as the Plastic Free July eco-challenge.

"I think most of us joined KJ because we care about the environment," Rolph says.

She and Cornerstone committee co-chair and Seattle resident engineer Bobbie Gilmour are among the many employees who visit schools and encourage students to pursue science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes and careers.

"It makes total sense as an engineering-based firm to pass along our enthusiasm," Rolph says. "People like me had teachers and professors who went above and beyond to support and inspire us."



"I'm shocked by the amount of commitment and passion they have. Seeing their passion reignites mine."

BOBBIE GILMOUR
CORNERSTONE COMMITTEE CO-CHAIR
RESIDENT ENGINEER
KENNEDY JENKS



"Our staff comes together and builds bonds that will stay with them for the rest of their lives."

KEITH LONDON
PRESIDENT AND CEO
KENNEDY JENKS

4 WAYS TO EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO GIVE BACK

TRUST YOUR STAFF TO GALVANIZE GIVING. KENNEDY JENKS SHOWS HOW THIS LEADS TO SUCCESS.

1. Empower your employees. Leadership can give the green light but should allow employees to make a program of their own and to choose which organizations to fund.

2. Be open to ideas and different forms of volunteering. A diverse committee can lead to varying perspectives and bold pitches.

3. Make it a joy. “It’s not hard to convince people when you turn it into a fun event,” says Rita Newman, staff engineer. Kennedy Jenks’ whipped cream pie-throwing benefit rewarded top earners with pies in their faces. “The more money raised, the more pies we got to throw at them!”

4. Start small, with achievable goals—and be patient. When rooted in good practice and values, volunteerism grows with time. “Maybe everyone doesn’t go to each meeting, but if a few share the word, that brings in more people,” says field engineer Bobbie Gilmour, co-chair of Cornerstone’s committee.

For many employees, giving efforts have a personal meaning. The Princeton office “adopted” two local kids during the holidays to provide gifts and gear, as Gambrill and her mother did when she was young.

Employees get excited when they choose a nearby food bank or the school that their children attend, Rolph says. “It’s exciting for them to see the impact in their local community.”

Even Kennedy Jenks clients get a say. As part of the company’s annual holiday card, clients can vote on which of three charities the firm should donate more to. All such groups receive money, but one gets extra. Last year’s winner was Water For People.

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

In part to enable weekday time for charity, Kennedy Jenks offers flexible work hours. “As long as we can accommodate clients’ needs, it’s good,” London says.

Volunteers don’t often boast how much time they give, Gilmour says. But Cornerstone regularly cites individuals’ generosity at staff meetings, and a yearly President’s Award also is bestowed on an employee.

“I’m shocked by the amount of commitment and passion they have,” she says. “Seeing their passion reignites mine.”

Like many of her colleagues, latest award recipient Rita Newman, a San Francisco staff engineer, volunteered during college.



“It’s exciting for them to see the impact in their local community.”

BRONWYN ROLPH
CORNERSTONE CO-FOUNDER
PROJECT ENGINEER
KENNEDY JENKS



“I realize how vital the work I do is for people’s lives.”

RITA NEWMAN
STAFF ENGINEER
KENNEDY JENKS

With Engineers Without Borders, she installed rainwater harvesting systems in rural Guatemala, an experience that has driven her career path—and altruism—ever since.

“Women and children walked for hours to get water,” she says. “I experienced firsthand the impact of not having safe water. I realize how vital the work I do is for people’s lives.”

At Kennedy Jenks, Newman was recognized for her fun, inventive, and frequent fundraising efforts for Water For People. When the pandemic was at its worst, she helped Water For People organize virtual happenings including wine tastings; trivia contests; virtual escape rooms; and yoga, meditation, and cooking classes.

CREATING A LASTING IMPACT

Kennedy Jenks’ environmental, social, and governance efforts often attract talent to the company.

“People who are eager to contribute to their communities want to be at KJ,” London says. “They see here a higher purpose than themselves. The generation coming out of high school and college is purpose-driven. They need to know an organization gives back.”

Once people are at Kennedy Jenks, Cornerstone helps breed loyalty.

“Our staff comes together and builds bonds that will stay with them for the rest of their lives,” London says.

“The fact that our company supports you as a whole person and not just as an engineer or scientist speaks volumes about the culture we’ve built,” Gilmour says. “I’m proud to be part of KJ. I feel connected to the company, and it makes me excited to come to work every day.” ■

Michele Meyer is a management and marketing writer based in Houston. She has written for Forbes, Entrepreneur, and the International Association of Business Communicators.