

**Interview Summary: Alexa James, Founder and CEO of Blanket Fort Hope**  
**Date of Interview: April 10, 2025**

Alexa James, Founder and CEO of Blanket Fort Hope, shared her powerful journey from education and business to nonprofit leadership. Her motivation to help others runs deep—she described it as part of her DNA, a natural calling to serve. That calling became especially real when, during her time teaching, she recognized signs that a second-grade student was being trafficked. That moment sparked a life-altering realization: while she couldn't change the entire world, she could make a dent. In 2015, she founded Blanket Fort Hope, an organization dedicated to child survivors of human trafficking.

Alexa's background in business—owning a company for 10 years and working in large corporations—was instrumental in building her nonprofit from the ground up. From fundraising to bookkeeping, marketing, and writing state-approved training materials, she has worn every hat. Under her leadership, Blanket Fort Hope raised \$3.2 million, built and opened a home for child trafficking survivors, and received licensure to certify foster families. The organization also engages in legislative advocacy and has helped pass three state bills related to trafficking and child welfare.

She spoke highly of corporate partnerships, like the one with RxBenefits, emphasizing how vital they are for executing the organization's mission. These partnerships bring expertise and financial support that make the work sustainable, although nonprofits still need strong internal systems and teams to make it all work.

When I asked what advice she would give to a college student entering the nonprofit world, she emphasized resilience: "Bring a good, thick pair of boots and thick skin." She stressed the importance of collaboration over competition in the nonprofit space, building a diverse and mission-driven board, and maintaining transparency through consistent financial reporting and documentation. Above all, she encouraged entering the unknown with courage—and always staying mission-focused.

**Interview Summary: Jordan Hill, City Leader at RxBenefits**  
**Date of Interview: April 14, 2025**

Jordan Hill, a City Leader for our Community Engagement team at RxBenefits, shared thoughtful insights on service, leadership, and company culture. His passion for volunteering stems from a core belief that those who are able to help others have a responsibility to do so. He emphasized the value of experiencing different cultures and the reality that hardship exists not only abroad, but also in communities across our own country. "Why shouldn't we help these people when we're fortunate enough to help make a change?" he said, framing volunteerism as a civic and moral duty.

Reflecting on RxBenefits' culture, Jordan noted how volunteering has helped him stay connected to the company's roots. While the organization has grown and become more structured, he sees volunteer opportunities as a meaningful way for employees to reconnect on a personal level. These moments, he said, allow people to feel seen and valued—restoring a sense of community.

He credited Kasey with helping to spread this culture across RxBenefits' broader footprint, calling her "the bow to their arrow" and describing service as part of the company's DNA.

As a City Leader, Jordan serves as a vital link between RxBenefits' local team members and its broader mission. By putting a "name to the face" in each area, he helps build engagement and encourages employees to use their paid volunteer hours. He's helped foster smaller community connections that are especially important in a remote or geographically dispersed organization. For Jordan, the city leader role is about more than logistics—it's about fostering real connection, purpose, and belonging across the RxBenefits team.

### **Interview Summary: Kelsi Nuttle, AR Lead – Accounting at RxBenefits**

**Date of Interview: April 14, 2025**

Kelsi Nuttle, AR Lead in the Accounting department at RxBenefits, spoke passionately about the importance of community and authenticity in her decision to get involved with the company's volunteer initiatives. For her, what stands out most is how RxBenefits doesn't just talk about community values—they live them. From offering paid time off for volunteering to matching employee efforts, she's seen firsthand how the company backs up its words with action. She came into her role with prior experience launching a volunteer department at her previous job, so she immediately recognized the value of structured opportunities that engage employees, especially those working remotely.

Though her first volunteer activity with RxBenefits will be a Birthday Project letter-writing event next week, Kelsi is already looking forward to more. Volunteering is important to her personally—she has a goal to volunteer at least once or twice each year alongside her family. She believes starting this habit early in life helps build a long-term sense of compassion and social responsibility. In fact, one of her past contributions included preparing meals for disaster relief, showing her commitment to both hands-on and high-impact service.

Looking ahead, Kelsi hopes the volunteer program continues to expand, especially by offering more group-based virtual opportunities for remote team members. She's also enthusiastic about tapping into local events and ideas like the "30 Days of Kindness" campaign to keep service top of mind. For her, these efforts don't just strengthen team bonds—they help reinforce a culture that truly values people and purpose.

### **Interview Summary: Jackie Grothe, Director of Corporate Communications and Marketing at RxBenefits**

**Date of Interview: April 14, 2025**

Jackie Grothe, Director of Corporate Communications and Marketing at RxBenefits, shared her deep appreciation for the company's authentic approach to community service. One of her early standout experiences was participating in RxB Gives Back Month, which offered a vivid introduction to the company's values in action. From helping create the Community Impact video to participating in a matching gift fundraiser, Jackie has seen how RxBenefits moves beyond words—truly living out its commitment to service. She noted how rare it is to find a company that not only encourages volunteering but also provides paid time off to do it. For her,

this kind of tangible support sends a clear message: RxBenefits isn't just encouraging philanthropy, it's actively enabling it.

Jackie believes the PTO program for volunteering plays a key role in shaping RxBenefits' culture. "It's a demonstration that we stand by our values," she said, pointing out that giving employees the flexibility and time to serve their communities shows a deeper level of commitment than most companies are willing to make. She added that it's not just symbolic, providing these resources is a real investment that reflects the company's priorities. RxBenefits, in her view, does an exceptional job of not only talking the talk but walking the walk when it comes to social responsibility.

When I asked about how marketing and community engagement could work more closely together, Jackie emphasized the powerful storytelling potential that lives within the company's culture. She sees a strong emotional connection between RxBenefits' philanthropic work and its brand identity—"our brand is a result of our culture," she explained. Highlighting employee voices, volunteering stories, and authentic moments of impact is essential to effective internal and external communication. Community engagement, she believes, is not just an initiative—it's a central part of who RxBenefits is, and something that deserves to be seen and celebrated.

**Interview Summary: Jessie Smith, Sr. Manager of Benefit Configuration at RxBenefits**  
**Date of Interview: April 15, 2025**

Jessie Smith, Sr. Manager of Benefit Configuration at RxBenefits, shared both her professional experience and deeply personal journey that led to founding a nonprofit with her husband. While she had been involved in the nonprofit space during college—serving on the junior board for The Bell Center—it was the birth and tragic passing of her daughter at just 26 weeks and 4 days that changed everything. Their daughter spent 28 days in the NICU before passing away. Friends created a GoFundMe in support of the family, but Jessie and her husband felt called to use those funds for something greater. That selfless decision led to the creation of the **Peyton Smith Memorial Foundation**, launched in 2024.

Their nonprofit focuses on providing support and resources to families experiencing the loss of a child in the NICU. Through *Peyton's Purpose* resource boxes, grieving families at Grandview and three other hospitals in Birmingham and Huntsville are connected to community resources, grief support, and a sense of solidarity. Jessie noted that there was a gap in the system—families didn't always know where to turn or what steps to take after experiencing such a loss. By filling that gap, she has found healing in the process of helping others walk through the pain she knows all too well.

Jessie and her husband were able to establish the foundation with help from Holcomb Ministry, which was introduced to them through a nurse who had witnessed their journey. That connection, combined with their vision and passion, led them through the steps of building something lasting and meaningful.

Volunteering has always been an important part of Jessie's life, and RxBenefits has played a big role in encouraging that passion. She initially joined The Bell Center's junior board through

RxBenefits, and praised the company for creating space for employees to give back. She's even had managers allow her to attend volunteer events when she was out of PTO—something she says shows the company's true commitment to community involvement.

Jessie also believes the city leader role at RxBenefits has been instrumental in expanding engagement and inclusion across geographic areas. She recalled how excited a nonprofit was to have their local RxBenefits group involved and how meaningful it was for them to return. To her, this demonstrates that the company values all the communities their employees live in—not just its headquarters.

### **Interview Summary: Ashley McCoy, Community Development Coordinator at Children's of Alabama**

**Date of Interview: April 16, 2025**

Ashley McCoy serves as the Community Development Coordinator within the Foundation at Children's of Alabama. As part of the major events team, she plays a key role in planning and coordinating a wide range of large-scale fundraising events that support the hospital. These include hallmark events like the Children's Ball and Golf Tournament, as well as inpatient programs and third-party fundraisers such as Corporate Challenge, fishing tournaments, and the Birmingham Indy Grand Prix. All proceeds raised through these events help fund vital programs and services that are not reimbursed by insurance. Before transitioning into her current role two years ago, Ashley was a child life specialist at the hospital—giving her a unique and heartfelt understanding of the mission she now supports behind the scenes.

Ashley shared that companies like RxBenefits play a crucial role in the success of these initiatives. Through participation in events like the Corporate Challenge and direct involvement in programs such as the Sugar Plum Shop, RxBenefits provides both financial support and hands-on volunteerism that directly benefits the children and families served by the hospital. Their consistent presence and partnership are felt throughout the year, and especially during key seasonal events.

Ashley offered this advice: focus on work that truly helps the community and stay open to creative ways of building partnerships and expanding your impact. She emphasized the importance of community involvement and highlighted the hospital's collaboration with the Birmingham Zoo as a great example. Each month, the zoo brings animals to the hospital for children who can't visit in person, and they also provide tickets for patients' families—just one of many ways the community comes together to uplift children during difficult times.

Ashley's journey, experience, and insight offer a powerful look into how passion, community partnerships, and creativity come together to support one of Alabama's most important healthcare institutions.

**Interview Summary: Valerie Cunningham-Trainer, Vice President of Advancement at Make-A-Wish Alabama**

**Date of Interview: April 16, 2025**

Valerie Cunningham-Trainer serves as the Vice President of Advancement at Make-A-Wish Alabama, leading a team of seven and overseeing all fundraising efforts across the state—an operation that brings in approximately \$5 million annually. Her path to this role began in the classroom, where she started as a high school English teacher after graduating from Auburn University. She later transitioned into nonprofit work, starting as a marketing coordinator at Teen Home. When her supervisor went on medical leave, Valerie stepped up, taking on unfamiliar responsibilities that would set the stage for her career. She moved on to Grace House Ministries, where she gained valuable grant writing experience and eventually served as the Director of Development and Communications for seven years. Her current role at Make-A-Wish came after she was approached by a recruitment firm that had been hired to fill the organization's development leadership role. Today, she handles press releases, social media, grant writing, events, and donor relations for the entire state.

Valerie emphasized the importance of partnerships with companies like RxBenefits, noting that these relationships are most successful when they are mutually beneficial. She pointed out that understanding a company's objectives is key to crafting the right collaboration—whether that means using marketing or foundation dollars to co-host events or sponsor programs. These initiatives not only provide meaningful visibility for the company but also offer tax benefits and a deeper connection to the community.

Her advice for me graduating and entering the nonprofit sector is thoughtful and experience driven. Valerie encouraged me to ask questions, listen actively, and research thoroughly. When meeting with people—whether potential donors, volunteers, or partners—she recommends listening more than talking to truly understand what draws them to a cause. “I rarely ask people for money,” she said, emphasizing that enthusiasm and authentic storytelling are far more effective. She believes that when you share compelling stories about your organization's work, people naturally want to get involved. Finally, she encouraged me to lean into my strengths and not shy away from what makes me stand out.

**Interview Summary: Stacey Morales, Marketing and Development Director at The Bell Center**

**Date of Interview: April 16, 2025**

Stacey Morales currently serves as the Marketing and Development Director at The Bell Center, a nonprofit organization that provides early intervention services for children with developmental delays. Her journey into the nonprofit sector began as a volunteer—she had no formal nonprofit background but was deeply involved with the Service Guild of Birmingham, which eventually led to her serving on The Bell Center's Board of Directors. In 2015, she joined the staff team as a Marketing and Development Coordinator, taking on responsibilities such as social media management, monthly newsletters, and event planning. She later became campaign manager for a \$9 million capital campaign and, following its success, was promoted to her current director role.

In her role, Stacey leads marketing and development efforts, helping to elevate The Bell Center's visibility in the community and secure the financial support necessary for their life-changing programs. Companies like RxBenefits are a vital part of their success. She highlighted RxBenefits as a key community leader in nonprofit support, noting that they serve as presenting sponsors for major events—including The Bell Center's annual cornhole tournament. She also emphasized how RxBenefits' strong internal and external communications amplify The Bell Center's reach and credibility, making a big impact on their ability to attract support. Having an RxBenefits team member on their junior board and seeing corporate volunteers in the therapy classrooms are further signs of the company's commitment to the organization.

For college students hoping to work in the nonprofit world, particularly those pursuing development roles, Stacey had encouraging and practical advice. She stressed the importance of being patient with yourself, especially during your first year on the job. Despite having the benefit of a nonprofit degree herself, she still found it necessary to be a “sponge”—soaking up everything she could about how the development department collaborates with marketing, executive leadership, and even other community institutions like the zoo. Her experience underscores how nonprofit success depends on being open to learning, adapting quickly, and staying mission focused.

### **Interview Summary: Kayla Owen, Vice President of Development at the American Heart Association**

**Date of Interview: April 16, 2025**

Kayla Owen is the Vice President of Development at the American Heart Association, where she leads community fundraising efforts and oversees major development initiatives. Her journey into the nonprofit world began at Auburn University, where her pre-law coursework included a heavy civic duty component that piqued her interest in community-focused work. While she initially considered a career in government affairs, she quickly realized her passion lay more in community development. This led her to pursue opportunities with large national nonprofits. Kayla began her career at the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, working on the Student Series campaign. From there, she helped develop a role for herself in the Light the Night campaign. She later joined the American Cancer Society, where she launched a campaign supporting the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer initiative, before landing her current leadership role with the American Heart Association.

Kayla highlighted the critical role of corporate partnerships in nonprofit sustainability, explaining that corporate support forms the backbone of their fundraising strategy. It enables organizations like hers to conduct life-saving research and community outreach—work that can be challenging to fund with traditional donor dollars alone. For instance, RxBenefits helps fund CPR training programs that the AHA offers in local communities and businesses. These partnerships are not only financially impactful, but they also expand the nonprofit's reach and relevance.

When asked what advice she would offer to a college student interested in working in the nonprofit sector, especially in development, Kayla offered a blend of inspiration and realism. She encouraged students to make the mission the “heartbeat” of their work to genuinely connect with

others and “sell” the cause. She believes that compelling storytelling and clear, emotional messaging are key to gaining support. Additionally, she emphasized the importance of giving yourself grace in the early stages of your career, reminding students that it's normal to be in "learning mode" for a while.

**Interview Summary: Hannah Birchfield, Senior Corporate Relations Manager at the American Cancer Society**

**Date of Interview: April 16, 2025**

Hannah Birchfield serves as the Senior Corporate Relations Manager at the American Cancer Society, where she focuses on developing and managing corporate partnerships that help fund the organization’s mission. A graduate of Auburn University, she majored in Communications with a minor in Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies—a combination that prepared her well for the nonprofit sector. Early in her career, she gained valuable experience working at the American Heart Association before transitioning to her current role. Today, she works with large-scale corporate campaigns, including retail partnerships where customers are prompted to “round up” their purchases for charity. Her role includes both maintaining existing corporate relationships and proactively seeking out new ones in the community.

Hannah highlighted the valuable role that companies like RxBenefits play in their work. RxBenefits not only provides financial support for local events in Birmingham, but also actively uses these events to engage their employees in meaningful ways. She described the partnership as a “give and take” relationship—RxBenefits gains a more connected, purpose-driven workforce, while the American Cancer Society receives the funding and visibility it needs to advance its mission.

For college students looking to enter the nonprofit world, Hannah offered practical and uplifting advice. She emphasized the importance of sticking with it, even when it feels challenging or uncertain. She encouraged new professionals to be bold putting themselves out there, trying new things, and learning as much as they can about their organization. Most importantly, she advised students to believe in the work they’re doing. There’s always room for fresh ideas, and while best practices are important, trusting your instincts can often lead to innovative, mission-driven outcomes.