

Welcome Remarks: Why We Chose AI

Joan Machlis-Crasemann, Lago Alianza — September 18, 2026

Welcome to all of you, and thank you for being here.

A healthy society depends on more than government and business. It also depends on people coming together to solve problems, care for one another, preserve culture, educate, advocate, and build stronger communities. Nonprofit organizations occupy that essential space. Our communities are defined not simply by what they produce, but by what people choose to do for one another.

Here at Lakeside, we have a remarkable number of organizations doing just that—supporting people in need, children and youth, the environment, animals, the arts, and many other parts of community life.

Lago Alianza was created to honor and strengthen this sector. We create opportunities for nonprofit organizations to get to know one another, exchange ideas, find resources, learn new skills, and collaborate. We also recognize that organizations are at very different stages and face very different challenges. Rather than assuming everyone needs the same thing, we have tried to offer practical tools and opportunities that organizations can use where they are.

Our first intensive training program focused on AI for nonprofits. I want to tell you why.

The nonprofit sector is, at its heart, a relationship business. Trust must be earned, donors cultivated, volunteers valued, communities heard, and people treated as individuals. At first, that may seem at odds with artificial intelligence. In fact, we believe the opportunity is just the opposite.

Used thoughtfully, AI can take on some of the repetitive research, writing, organizing, and administrative work that consumes scarce staff and volunteer time. That frees people to spend more time doing what only people can do: listening, connecting, building trust, exercising judgment, and caring for one another.

The goal is not less human contact. It is high tech in service of high touch.

Futurist John Naisbitt introduced the idea of "high tech/high touch" in his 1982 book *Megatrends*. His point was simple: as technology becomes more prominent in our lives, our need for meaningful human connection becomes even more important.

That is why we chose AI. We saw it as an affordable tool with the potential to make a significant difference, particularly for smaller organizations with limited staff and resources. Used well, it can free you to spend more time doing the things that brought you to nonprofit work in the first place.

We see five particularly important opportunities: communications and marketing; fundraising and donor relations; administration; understanding your results; and accessing and storing information.

We have provided a handout today with more detail on each of these five areas.

Together, they amount to something very practical: AI can help a small nonprofit do more of the work that matters while spending less time on the work surrounding it.

But we all are struggling to figure out the risks of AI. I worry about cognitive surrendering—unlearning how to think for myself. One place where this debate is raging is on university and college campuses. Anita Sarma, a professor of computer science at Oregon State, said, "It's almost like sex ed. They will do it anyway. How do we teach them responsible use?" At minimum, we nonprofits need thoughtful policies about confidential information, donor and client privacy, accuracy, and human responsibility for final decisions. The goal is not to use AI everywhere. It is to identify the places where it can safely and usefully make your organization stronger.

When we decided to offer this training, we looked for the right partner and eventually found Fernanda Ramirez and her company, PILU.

Fer started PILU for some of the same reasons we started Lago Alianza. She was personally interested in many of the causes nonprofits address, but she also recognized that it is the entire nonprofit ecosystem that helps make a community more viable and caring. She wanted to support the sector as a whole.

AI is only one area of PILU's expertise. James Turner stood out as both an AI expert and a natural teacher at the introductory session we offered in March 2026, and PILU subsequently formed a collaboration with him.

Fer, her team, and James went on to deliver a bicultural, bilingual training program that included 22 live Zoom sessions, 11 workbooks, 10 specialized workshops, learning circles, and one-on-one consultations.

I have witnessed the amount of work this required, their willingness to adapt the program to the audiences here at Lakeside, and their enthusiasm for helping organizations learn to use these new tools.

The pilot hasn't been perfect, but it has been remarkable.

Today we will hear from some of the brave organizations that took the plunge into what turned out to be an intensive and challenging learning experience. It is also a chance for all of you to consider how AI might benefit your own organizations.

We hope this is only the beginning and that we can build on what we have learned to offer additional training in the future.