

Creative Ideas for Giving

Giving away money is a serious business; it should also be fun. In the course of our work all over the country, we have encountered donors who have done many creative and interesting things with their gifts. One started a retreat and writing center. Another established a volunteer corps of professionals to work with small-budget nonprofits. Others established awards and memorial chairs in honor of their parents, created newsletters to keep a group of friends in touch, and started or seeded numerous nonprofits.

Here are some examples of creative givers and creative giving. We hope they stimulate your own creative thinking.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Michal Feder is an entrepreneurial donor and community catalyst. Some of her major gifts have been in the form of great ideas that have moved and sparked others' actions and mentorship, and she has nurtured them with expertise and guidance at critical junctures.

"I want to make the world a better place," says Michal (pronounced "Michael"), now an eighty-one-year-old retired consultant. "But I'm an entrepreneur, a starter, not a holder or maintainer of projects. Knowing that about myself has given me great freedom and clarity to make better decisions."

Michal likes tangible results, lots of people physically involved, and, finally, a sense of completion. Her own assessment of the goals of some of her public service efforts is, “I look for projects where everyone benefits. I look for ideas whose time has come. I use my powers of persuasion and my abilities to make myself useful. And I hang in, within a reasonable time frame, to get the project done. That’s my version of commitment! It’s not about how much money or time I give, it’s about using what I have in a timely, strategic, and creative way. Being entrepreneurial is part of it, but it’s also about noticing opportunities, making connections, and taking action.”

Here are two examples of Michal’s creativity through public service activism in some of the places she has lived.

The Foster City Library (Foster City, California)

Recognizing the need for a larger library in her community, Michal chaired a three-year effort by Foster City Friends of the Library to convince their city council to build a new facility. She then became actively involved in raising additional funds to help equip it. Michal’s roles in the project ranged from catalyst and fundraiser to advocate and organizer.

The Pocket Park (Boulder, Colorado)

Michal heard that there was a plan to add expensive play equipment to a pocket park. Local homeowners were bemoaning the proposed \$9,000 cost. Michal pulled from her magazine pile a recent copy of the *Smithsonian* magazine with an article on what children really want from parks. She copied the article for the association in charge of the project and lobbied the leadership. They settled for a large sand-box and some rocks to climb on—a cheaper and more attractive solution.

ENDOWING ADULTHOOD

The Jewish Fund for Justice (JFJ) is a national foundation that funds organizations addressing the causes and consequences of poverty. Their program includes a Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) that gives young people an opportunity to become involved in thoughtful philanthropy. At the time of a young person’s Bat or Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen, family and friends often establish a fund with YEF in that person’s name as a way of accompanying the celebrant’s entrance into adulthood.

These gifts denote strong support for the individual to make personal commitments to social responsibility. Monetary gifts to the fund can also mark or honor other events, such as a birthday or school graduation.

Once a year, YEF honorees receive a ballot describing groups working with low-income youth that JFJ supports. They are encouraged to select which organizations will receive the interest earned on their individual endowment account. When an honoree turns twenty-one, he or she designates the fund's principal to go either to JFJ's general fund or its Family Endowment Fund.

A newsletter written by and for YEF honorees keeps kids up to date on what's happening with the groups they've been supporting and tells them how they can get involved in social action and service projects. The newsletter introduces and connects YEF participants to each other, providing them with a forum for their ideas on social justice with peers who share their concerns about helping create a better world.

SPARKING AN IDEA

When Marvin and Kathleen Factor retired from careers as trial lawyers they started a business running the Inn on Locust, a twenty-four-room hotel for business travelers in Philadelphia. As an amenity for the clientele they were hoping to attract, they decided to offer a chauffeured courtesy car for trips around town and to and from the airport, using Marvin's lovingly cared-for 1983 Jaguar sedan (with himself as chauffeur). The service is without charge, but they ask guests to make a contribution directly payable to a rotating list of local arts organizations.

The idea emerged as a natural extension of the Factors' longtime enjoyment of the city's arts organizations as well as their conviction that the arts are generally poorly supported. They felt they could expand their own personal contributions to include donations from their out-of-town guests. Marvin's ultimate goal is to influence other, larger hotels to follow their example, to allow a lot more money to be raised.

Response at the Inn on Locust has been overwhelmingly positive. In the first month they raised \$400 for the Philadelphia Ballet. Though they have the option of not disclosing their addresses, people have been enthusiastic about including their contact information, which gives the recipient organizations a chance to follow up with these donors.

JOINING CLIENTS IN THEIR GIVING

Eli Walker owns a small financial services firm in Minneapolis. He noticed that many of his firm's clients either don't make charitable gifts or give at a level that is below their capacity and tax advantage. To spark his clients' giving, Eli developed the "We Care Fund." With this fund Eli commits up to 8 percent of his firm's annual pretax profit to match his clients' giving to community nonprofits. (The fund matches up to \$50 for each new gift a client makes to a nonprofit and for each gift that is \$50 more than a previous gift.) At the end of the first year, more than forty clients who participated in the "We Care Fund" match had made nearly two hundred new gifts, for a match from the fund of nearly \$10,000.

INCENTIVE GIFTS

Peter Chin decided to give his children, nieces, and nephews incentive gifts to encourage their philanthropic activity. For every hour they volunteered to work with a nonprofit each summer, he contributed double the number of hours, in dollars, to their college fund. For every \$25 cash gift they donated or every four hours they volunteered for an organization before they turned twenty-one, he gave each child or young adult \$25 to be used for tickets to arts, theater, and music events. By the time they were twenty-one, many of the kids had been to six or eight concerts or plays that they would never have been able to afford to attend otherwise.

GIVING COLLABORATIVELY

Giving collaboratively not only leverages individual dollars and time, it also helps reduce the sense of isolation and fear that can sometimes mark the experience of giving away money. Here are some examples from across the country of collaborative philanthropy.

Birthday Party

As part of celebrating her fiftieth birthday, the late Phoebe Valentine, a woman with inherited wealth, gave each of ten close friends a check for \$5,000 to give away within the year to nonprofits of their choosing. At the end of the year, the ten friends got together with Phoebe to share their experience. All the donors were delighted with the exercise, and Phoebe was pleased that she had multiplied her giv-

ing community and expanded her philanthropic reach. The new donors gained empathy for their philanthropist friend as they got a taste of the challenges of making choices in the face of tremendous need. They also noted that the act of giving—even someone else’s money—changed the way people related to them (suddenly they were perceived with influence) and changed the way they perceived themselves (they began to want to be more involved in helping nonprofits).

Note: This “Birthday Party” model has been modified or replicated many times. Try giving five friends each \$200 or whatever amount you choose, or jointly give away \$1,000 with a group of friends on your next big birthday.

Possibility Sundays

In early 1995, Mike and Janet Valder began a tradition they called “Possibility Sundays.” First, they invited about three hundred people they knew from all different aspects of their lives—politics, church, work, neighborhood—to join them in building a new fund that not only would give money to great projects but would help build caring community among “givers” and “receivers.”

The response to their invitation was tremendous; it launched what they named the Arizona Social Change Fund. To minimize administration they arranged it as a donor-advised account with the Arizona Community Foundation. (See Chapter Ten for more on donor-advised funds.)

Contributors are encouraged but not required to give a minimum of \$1,000 per year; among the most dedicated participants, however, are those who give far less. Everyone who contributes to the fund is invited to help direct the money. At a recent grantmaking meeting, thirty-six of the contributors met for three hours and decided by consensus on grants to three organizations. Everyone has learned by listening to each other and discerning the overall group’s wisdom. In its first year and a half the fund gave away more than \$37,500, with an average grant size of \$5,000. Their goal is to build up to giving \$40,000–\$50,000 a year.

On the four months of the year that have five Sundays, the fund sponsors a Possibility Sunday event at the Valders’ home. After a catered brunch, there is a welcome, a prayer, and a half-hour celebration of the nonprofits being funded. The grants are awarded, and participants are invited to contribute toward the foundation’s future grants to social change organizations in the community. About a hundred people have attended each Possibility Sunday, including at least ten participants from each nonprofit showcased.

The Valders say, “The celebrations feel like ‘church after church,’ because they give the gathered participants a taste of the grace involved in committed social change work. When people share their deepest goals, it opens hearts. This is new to many of our friends, who had never before connected to social change non-profits. This fund has become one of the most meaningful projects of our lives.”

Directed Abundance

Flow Funding is a way to empower social innovators and visionaries who have never been philanthropists to spontaneously place strategic grants that are meaningful, heartfelt, and effective. This collaborative giving program began in 1991 when Marion Rockefeller Weber decided to spread some of her wealth through others out to the world. She chose twelve people whose worldview and life work she respected and whose leadership and perspective she trusted. She gave each of them \$20,000 each year for three years to give away. Through the years, over one hundred more flow funders have been added, and the fund has expanded to include flow funders from around the world. Eighty percent of the money has flowed outside of the United States. Marion launched the Flow Fund Circle with this prayer:

*May the rivers of wealth be undammed and flow freely over the earth.
May the gifts move through increased hands
until all people experience the abundance of life.*

Here are some comments from Flow Funders:

“I was surprised by the rarity of this process. In families and in friendships, you give things to each other without expectation of reward. But it’s unusual to have that experience outside of intimate relationships. Being part of this was like introducing the characteristic of familial life into the wider world.”

“This process has made me very happy. My job has been to discern what the need is and what the impact could be over the long haul. I’m most interested in what seed could be planted and how it will grow over time.”

“This was the most innovative, cost-effective way of disbursing funds I’ve ever experienced. This process completely eliminates the bureaucracy. . . . there’s no cost involved in the administration, so 100 percent of the money gets to the people who are using it. There’s an American Indian tradition of ‘the gift that moves.’ What I

see as the brilliance of this idea is that an American funder can reach people in the most remote areas of the world, through a gift that literally passes from ‘warm hand to warm hand, warm heart to warm heart.’ There’s an intimate, personal relationship at each step of the process that links us.”

A new funder from Kazakstan writes, “It is very pleasant for me to feel myself like a part of one big circuit and to take part in one noble business under the name of philanthropy. The feeling of participation in this great business gives me force and confidence that common people can change the world. I am glad that gifts which pass through my hands to those who very much require them deliver to them true pleasure and gives force.”

TWO CHALLENGE GRANTS

Eve Stern first became involved in philanthropy in her teens as she participated in a family fund begun by her grandparents. That fund, she explains, helped pioneer the idea of challenge grants. In 1997, Eve learned that Grassroots Leadership, an organization she supported, had received a \$50,000 challenge grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. Eve decided to help it with a challenge grant of her own: she contributed \$1,000 to the organization for every contribution made by a new donor (she prefers the term “ally”) under the age of thirty, to a maximum of \$25,000 a year for two years. This strategy encouraged the organization to reach out to more young donors, which was part of Eve’s goal.

Catherine Muther, a graduate of Stanford Business School, worked for a computer networking company in the 1990s. When the company went public, she benefited and decided to make a targeted gift to Stanford to improve the position and number of women faculty at the business school. She committed \$100,000 and engaged the CEO of her company, also a graduate of Stanford Business School, as a giving partner. Together they proposed a gift of more than a million dollars for three specific uses: a Ph.D. fellowship for a woman; grants for junior women faculty; and a professor-level position for a woman. Cate was clear about her objective and the strategy. Focus, partnering, and leverage were key elements of success. She and her donor partner put the issue of gender equity on the table and offered economic incentives for institutional change. Four years later, 15 percent of the faculty at Stanford Business School were women, bettering a 13 percent average for the university as a whole.

AN ECLECTIC COLLECTION OF GIVING IDEAS FROM A TO Z

Ask friends to join you in volunteering.

Begin a new holiday tradition: With your holiday cards to friends and family, include a list of ten nonprofit organizations; ask each person to choose a group to which you'll make a contribution in their name. Include a response card and self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

Create a giving pool for your family to disburse annually as a joint project.

Designate charities of your choice for birthday or holiday gifts from family and friends.

Elicit public relations and media support to leverage your personal or family foundation gifts as well as an agency's achievements.

Fund the following (this will take more money):

An unknown playwright or artist

A chair (or leadership fund) named for a teacher or activist you admire

Your own nonprofit or for-profit enterprise to achieve your own dream

Representatives to attend conferences and meetings on your behalf

A giving circle and invite diverse friends to join you

Give the following:

Checks to friends to donate to others on your birthday

Career or leadership training, such as an experience in Outward Bound or management coaching

Hire the following:

Staff to facilitate your own dreams

A public relations consultant to develop a media campaign in collaboration with staff for one of your favorite projects

Inspire grantees by stipulating with your major donations that the organization have employee nondiscrimination policies that protect the civil rights of all.

Jump to lead a fundraising campaign.

Keep your highest intentions and passions in sight and align your time and money accordingly.

Lend the following:

Your house to an activist, artist, committee, or nonprofit for use for a retreat

Your expertise to an organization

Match the following:

Your child's volunteer hours with financial contributions to one of their favorite organizations or causes

Funds with other family members to make gifts larger

Gifts of donors to a nonprofit who have never given above a certain level if they exceed that amount

Network by telling colleagues and friends about groups you support.

Organize a group of friends into a giving group, with each person contributing and jointly developing giving guidelines; periodically select organizations to which the group will donate funds.

Provide an incentive for family members to give 5 percent to 20 percent of their income annually.

Query your peers about their commitments in the nonprofit sector.

Raise money for projects you love from people you respect.

Surf the Web for funding ideas and analysis (see Appendix I, "Resources").

Take a child with you to your next volunteer or service activity.

Underwrite or host a party or event for a valued group or leader.

Value your skills as a key influence of peers.

Witness generosity by asking guests to your home to bring canned goods, clothes, or other necessities in lieu of "hostess gifts."

exhibit leadership by giving an early lead gift to an agency's campaign.

Yield more money by taking a mortgage on your house to help a local battered women's shelter buy its home.

Zip through your mail with your giving plan in mind.