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Community

'Tis the season to give

By MARIANNE HORTON

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As the holiday season approaches, many people are starting to think about giving back to local charities. But with more than 10,000 nonprofit organizations in greater Houston, choosing which ones to support can become more tedious than trimming the tree.

That's where Inspired Legacies comes in.

Philanthropy Advisor Tracy Gary helps match charitable donors with organizations or causes that are right for them.

"Many people are concerned about giving back, but they're not sure how to find groups," said the Montrose resident. "There's a lot to choose from, so we do the research, take (clients) onsite and give them a feel of some different nonprofits."

Gary founded an organization that became Inspired Legacies about 25 years ago and opened a Houston office, at 1722 Haver St., last spring. Gary first got involved with philanthropic giving when she was 14. At that time, her parents set aside a "giving account" for her to decide which philanthropies she wanted to help.

"They told me to find some groups and study them," she said. "For the last (number of years) I have visited one charity a week."

So when she inherited \$1.2 million during her early 20s, she knew she wanted to donate \$100,000 for the next 10 years. Since that time, Gary said she has worked with more than 6,000 philanthropies and continues to give away 50 percent of her annual income and assets.

"I live simply," she said. "But I've been even happier because I've been engaged in my community. There are a lot of wealthy people who are quite miserable because they're just not engaged in their communities."

According to "The Generosity of Rich and Poor" at www.newtithing.org, "middle rich" Americans, those with incomes from \$200,000 to \$10 million, donated less than .5 percent of their wealth to charity in 2001. However, Gary said lower class families give an average of 4 percent, "because they see poverty and its effects every day."

But that's not to say middle- to upper-class Americans do not want to give more.

"A lot of people don't know where to start," Gary said.

She added that potential donors often seek advice from bank managers, who might have ulterior motives to keep accounts high for higher percentage fees. Gary, who is not a financial planner, said she can offer more objective opinions as to where clients should donate.

Inspired Legacies offers free services to donors and will meet with clients three or four times a year over their giving plans. She starts by asking clients what is important to them.

"I'll ask a donor what they would want to change during their lifetime," she said. "I asked my niece when she was 25 how old she thought she'd live to. She told me 95. So I told her that's 70 years that she could be giving."

Gary also offers advice at various workshops throughout the year. For National Philanthropy Week this week, she traveled across the country.

"Our (Inspired Legacy's) goal is to unleash generosity by encouraging people to give more and get more involved," she said.

For information about Inspired Legacies, call 713-527-6761 or visit www.inspiredlegacies.com.

Ways to unleash your holiday generosity:

Set aside one hour a week to plan your year-end giving.

Don't wait until Dec. 31 when you are tired.

Consider what you want to change or preserve during your lifetime. Think big and practical.

Assign percentages to areas you want to prioritize (such as youth empowerment: 50 percent, arts: 25 percent, environment: 25 percent).

Review your giving and make a list from the last two years. Then code the percentages using your top issues. Consider changes you may need to make and also note which nonprofits you want to keep on your list.

Make giving and volunteering a regular family event. Set up a giving account for your kids or relatives. Make gifts to nonprofits instead of buying too many presents.

Online sources for nonprofits are: networkforgood.org, globalgiving.org, wisegiving.org, [guide star.org](http://guidestar.org) or [charity navigator.org](http://charitynavigator.org).