

phi•lan•thro•py
goodwill to fellow
members of
the human race

Cultivating a Culture of Philanthropy

by Susan Bonnett



RECENTLY, A BOSTON AREA homeless man made headlines when he found a backpack containing more than \$40,000 and immediately took it to the local police station to return it to its rightful owner. That man, Glen James, was given a commendation by city officials. His response was simply, “Even if I was desperate for money, I would not have kept even a penny of the money I found. God has always very well looked after me.” An extraordinary story, certainly, about honesty, integrity and faith.

What happened next, however, is more remarkable, as it speaks to what one man’s actions stirred in the hearts of thousands of others. Hundreds of miles away, another man read the story of Glen’s honesty and his situation in life. With a simple understanding of technology and a deep desire to help, that man started an online-giving webpage specifically to support Glen James and change his life. Forty-eight hours later, more than \$100,000 was raised by more than 4,100 people who wanted to touch Glen. Single moms offered \$5 of their already tight budgets; students sent the little they could afford; others gave more—whatever moved in them. Their spirit was stirred and they were called to give. And it felt good—really, *really* good.

And that, in its most simple form, is philanthropy.

Closer to home, it seems a little different, and that raises an uncomfortable question. Why is it that while our region continues to outpace the nation in our economy, our educational outcomes, our crime statistics and our quality of life measures, we struggle to keep up with other communities in our culture of philanthropy? We are a prosperous people with significant resources; we are a caring people who know our neighbors and look out for them; and we are a committed people who long to maintain the value of the communities we call home. Look around the rest of the nation. Everywhere you find thriving, vibrant places, I promise you that you will find robust cultures of philanthropy where giving back is so engrained that it is literally part of all they do. Why aren’t we there yet? More importantly, how can we get there?

This enigma has been the center-point of countless conversations I have had over the last seven years of leading our Northshore Community Foundation. As I spend my days focused on philanthropy in our region, I talk to anyone who will listen and I dig. I dig a lot—some might even say pry—into people’s attitudes, thoughts

and even secrets about sharing their resources. With all of my uncovered, albeit unscientific information, I have developed a few thoughts about why our sister communities like New Orleans and Baton Rouge have robust cultures of philanthropy, yet our giving net is loosely woven and the holes are broad.

WE ARE YOUNG

Until the last 30 years or so, we were a rural region. We gave money to our places of worship, and when our neighbors were in need, we took care of them. We made them a casserole, helped to look after the children and gave them a little extra when times were lean. Then, the people started coming. And they kept coming and coming. And without even realizing it, there were so many of us that it wasn't just our neighbor or our church anymore. We became more anonymous and the needs in our communities grew. Our hearts didn't change; our demography did. So organizations were born around common needs—social services, the arts, the environment, animal welfare—and we moved from an individual approach to an almost wholesale way of addressing the issues that faced us and our neighbors. And then those organizations needed to be funded ...

TICKETS AND TOURNAMENTS— THE EVENT EXPLOSION

When an organization needed funding and a committed group of volunteers agreed to raise it, the almost-automatic solution became an event. After all, it's Louisiana; a good party is always a good solution. So over the last 20 years or so, we have grown our community events calendar to resemble the to-do list of an over-achieving, type-A, stressed-

out superhero with no sidekick and no end in sight. The unfortunate and unintended consequence of this solution is that in many ways, we have morphed into a society of ticket buyers and foursome sponsors who often have vague information about or connection to the organization we are supporting. While the event pays the bills in the short term, it does little to connect the attendee to the true missions and needs of our communities. And even worse, it does nothing to teach the value of philanthropy.

BEST-KEPT SECRET IN TOWN

If we refer back to points one and two and accept that many of our long-time local philanthropists are private, humble people who might not be interested in sponsoring another table, a logical pattern occurs. When we give, and we do, we most certainly don't talk about it! We are not boastful or proud, and further, we don't want to get even more requests than we do now, because we already have to say "no" too often. So our giving is a secret, and we like it that way.

In other communities around our nation—no bigger or wealthier than ours—it is not uncommon to read in the local paper about a \$50,000 gift to this organization or a \$250,000 gift to another. On the northshore, that news story is rare, but amazingly, that gift is not! We have many donors in our region who generously support the people, places and missions they love, but it is done so quietly that no one even realizes it happens. One of the most kind and generous couples in our community sat across a table from me one day and asked me what they could do to promote philanthropy in our region. My answer to them was simple: "Let me tell people what you do! When your neighbors and

friends hear what you are doing, it will light a fire in them, and that spark is desperately what we need."

CONFUSING INVESTMENT WITH PHILANTHROPY

While our culture of philanthropy is perhaps underdeveloped, our pattern of what I call "investment philanthropy" is incredibly healthy. To assure the world that this is not an exercise in finger pointing, I will use myself as the example in this one. My husband and I have four kids in the St. Tammany Parish public school system. Like everyone else, our property tax dollars dedicated to schools are a significant investment in our children's education. However, because my family can see the direct result of a well-funded PTA at our children's schools, we happily "give" to support those efforts, and are equally happy to get the tax deduction in return. While I would love to defend this as generosity, the truth is, what I am really investing in is my children. For my contribution, the kids at their schools get better equipment, more books in the library, special training for teachers and a great deal more. So the test scores go up, the school gets rewarded and my kids get even better outcomes. Is that philanthropy or is that an investment in what is good for me? My sense is that, as a region, we are incredibly good at generously funding projects and programs that we use and enjoy. That in itself is a testament to the value of our community. While I am in no way discrediting this very important pattern, I simply offer that we should work toward thinking of true philanthropy as what comes when we give of ourselves and hold no expectation for what we get in return.



*Our hearts
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**THE SECOND-BEST KEPT
SECRET IN TOWN**

If true philanthropy comes when we expect nothing in return, then perhaps this point will discredit the one I just made. Because the next-best-kept secret in town is that true philanthropy feels really, *really* good. Generously giving of one's self and one's resources to impact humanity is one of the best feelings in the world. And once you feel it, you're hooked. Just like the 4,500 people found out from helping a homeless man in Boston, positively touching our world and the people in it stirs something deep inside, and, once stirred, it cannot be contained. That contagious spirit of giving is not only what the true spirit of philanthropy is; it is the roadmap to a vibrant and thriving future for our region.

A CALL TO ACTION

So the next time you are asked

to sponsor a foursome in a golf tournament, do it because it is a fun day off work that will ultimately fuel a critical mission in our community. And before you make the turn at the 9th hole, make sure you know what that mission is. Then, see if it matters to you. There are hundreds of organizations in our region meeting needs all day, every day. They do it on incredibly tight and efficient budgets. I challenge you to learn about them—not for them, but for you. When you find the mission that stirs in your soul, you will know it, and your checkbook will know it, too. Giving out of guilt or obligation is a limited, short-term action that pays few dividends in return. Giving when it touches a place in your heart is limitless, no matter your resources.

Find your passion; give generously, and yes, selfishly—because at the end of the day, it feels really, *really* good. 🌱