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ADVANCED SEARCH

# Connecting With a Cause

Charitable giving usually starts with a personal experience.

By Robert Sberna

In the early 1980s, Edward (Ted) Frost was at loose ends. A recent widower, he was winding down his business career and unsure of his life's direction. "I just knew that I didn't want to sit around feeling sorry for myself," Frost recalls.

A lifelong art enthusiast, the Cleveland Heights resident decided to apply to the Cleveland Institute of Art. "I was a pretty good photographer, so I submitted my portfolio and I was fortunate enough to be accepted," he says.

At age 63, Frost joined CIA's freshman class of 1982, graduating six years later. "Having the opportunity to attend CIA gave me a new lease on life," he says. "It was a very significant time for me."

Frost's positive experiences at CIA have fueled his continuing relationship with the institution. He has been an active supporter of the school's programs, including the establishment of the Ted Frost Scholarship for Travel, which funds the expenses of CIA students who pursue foreign study.

Amy Bartter, CIA's director of annual giving and alumni relations, says Frost is representative of most donors in that his charitable giving is driven by a personal connection. "For the majority of people, giving stems from an emotional attachment," Bartter says. "In our case, we have a built-in connection with our alumni, because this is where they started."

An increasing number of Americans of every age and income level are contributing to charitable causes these days. While many donors structure their philanthropy so that it dovetails with their tax and estate planning, the primary motivator for most givers is the passion they feel for the cause.

"For a charitable organization, cultivating donors is really about forming relationships with people who have an affinity with its mission," says Deborah Shub, of the March of Dimes, Central Ohio Division. "From our point of view, we try to find people who have been touched by our organization. Maybe they had a child who was born prematurely or they suffered the loss of a baby. But at some point later in life, when they think about charitable giving and how they want to make a difference, they'll look at the March of Dimes."

Founded 70 years ago, March of Dimes works to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth and infant mortality. "If I attend a March of Dimes event, I can assume that people are there because they care about babies and they want to make sure they have a wonderful life," says Shub, who serves as the organization's statewide director of major gifts and annual giving. "At that point, it becomes an educational process. The more they know about our organization and how their money is going to be used, the more likely they are to make a gift — and make a bigger gift."

For Chris and Cari Gerren, a Columbus-area couple, the birth of their daughter Gracie in October 2004 was both a joyous and anxious experience. Born 14 weeks premature, Gracie spent the first part of her life in a neonatal intensive care unit.

During Gracie's hospitalization, Cari found support and information at the March of Dimes' online community for NICU families. Nearly four years old now, Gracie has minor developmental delays, but she's very healthy, says Cari.

Grateful for the support they received through the March of Dimes, the Gerrens have donated time and financial gifts to the organization, with Cari serving on the board of directors of the Central Ohio Division.

"About a year after my husband and I made it through our experience with Gracie, we decided to do something to assist others who were going through the same situation," Cari explains. "Our choices were either volunteering at a hospital or becoming involved with the March of Dimes. Ultimately, our hope in supporting the March of Dimes is that the day will come when no other parent will have to leave the hospital without their child or experience what it's like to be in the NICU with their baby."

As a board member, Cari's duties include the recruitment of March of Dimes volunteers. She says many of her volunteers are individuals or families who have had a personal experience with the organization. "Anytime that someone is touched by a disease or life-threatening situation, they feel an emotional attachment to a charity or nonprofit agency that helped them through their situation," she explains. "They want to give back to others who may need support."

## Making a Difference Tomorrow

While many of today's donors are choosing to make a difference through volunteerism and annual financial gifts, others are opting to leave a legacy by taking advantage of planned-giving strategies such as bequests and trusts.

"People have become more educated about their money and they are looking at the tax benefits of charitable giving," Shub says. "Whether it's including us in their wills or setting up charitable trusts, more and more donors want their giving to be a part of their estate plan."

Although it's common practice for charities to publicly acknowledge their donors, not all philanthropists are interested in recognition, notes Shub. "Each year, we get bequests from people we don't know. We never know why they left money in their wills for us. What we do know is that the March of Dimes was started in 1938 as an organization that was trying to find a cure for polio, and many people who may have had polio or were helped by us as a child are now at an age where they are doing estate planning or are dying. Their decision to remember us in their wills goes back to their emotional connection with us."

## Creative Corporate Giving

For most individuals, a personal connection to a cause and the availability of tax-advantaged giving strategies tend to be strong drivers of philanthropy. In the business arena, charitable giving is often based on pragmatic reasons.



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Imaginative executives such as Scott Mueller, CEO of Dealer Tire in Cleveland, are finding novel ways to integrate philanthropy with their firms' corporate missions and values.

"When we expanded our operations in Cleveland, we needed art for our corporate headquarters," Mueller says. "We had the idea that we could help the Cleveland Institute of Art and its students by sponsoring an art contest. We wanted the students to create pieces of art that highlight or reinforce our values as a company. One of our core values is innovation, which is one of the things that the CIA stands for."

Mueller says the art contest, which was held earlier this year, was a winning proposition for everyone. "The CIA received financial support from us. The students benefited by getting exposure to a corporation and having the chance to win scholarship money. And for us, it was fun and a great way to meet the young artists. We enjoyed interacting with the kids and explaining how a business operates. And we also get to see the results of our patronage when we walk through our hallways and see their works."

As director of corporate, foundation, and government relations at CIA, Richard Konisiewicz works to create philanthropic linkages with a wide range of organizations. "We're just trying to get the story out that our students can impact the world in so many ways," he says. "The fact is that donors have very personal reasons for supporting a particular charity. Some people are excited by what an organization does to empower at-risk kids, while others will appreciate the medical care that a loved one received from a particular medical institution. And there are those philanthropists who value education and the arts. All are important causes, especially to those who benefit from the philanthropy."

### Checking Out Charities

So, let's say you're charitably inclined, but you're undecided about which organization or cause to support. Or you've targeted a charity, but you want to check its financial history to make sure that your donation will be put to good use.

One of your first steps might be to consult a Web-based service that objectively evaluates the fiscal operations and performance of charities. One of those portals, Charity Navigator ([www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org)), has information on more than 5,300 U.S. charities.

"We're a donor's tool," says Mike Smith, the Web site's chief operations officer. "Everything on our site is geared towards helping donors make good decisions when selecting charities."

When evaluating a charitable organization, Charity Navigator examines how responsibly it functions on a day-to-day basis, and how well positioned it is to sustain its programs over time. Each charity is then awarded an overall rating, ranging from zero to four stars.

Charity Navigator is a free service, but accepts donations from users. The site is easily navigable by charity name, location or type of activity, and also features donor tips as well as Top 10 lists of high-performing and low-performing charities.

"The majority of charities are attempting to fulfill their mission, but there are bad apples among them," Smith says. "Unfortunately, those are the stories that donors read about and it impacts the entire industry. We spotlight those bad charities and tell people to avoid them."

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