

## THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

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Q&A

# Outspoken Donor Says Philanthropy Must Change — Both Fundraisers and Donors

*By Julian Wyllie*

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COURTESY LISA GREER

**After Lisa Greer announced to a charity she'd been involved in for years that she and her husband would be giving to the capital campaign, the nonprofit insisted on talking to her husband first. "It was so upsetting," she says.**

Lisa Greer, a businesswoman and philanthropist in Los Angeles, has a lot to say about philanthropy for a relative newcomer, and she's not afraid to say it to anyone who will listen.

Her rhetoric can be alarmist to some. She's worried that "[philanthropy is dying](#)," citing statistics about the decline in the number of household donors and [how much they give](#). Meanwhile, the [fundraisers](#) who keep nonprofits above water are expressing dissatisfaction with their jobs, and many are looking toward the exits.

About four months ago, Greer started a [newsletter](#) and [Twitter](#) account with the username [@Saving\\_Giving](#), where she speaks bluntly about philanthropy. Since then, she's had private conversations with nonprofit leaders and donors who say they agree with her but are afraid to say so publicly.

Some of her [tweets directly criticize development officers](#): "Got this email: 'We're short on making our goal — send money now!' What I hear from that: 'We don't have our act together enough to have planned appropriately, so you, dear donor, must save us.' Oh — I really really want to donate to an org like that."

Other tweets take a [swipe at donors](#): "What's up with board members refusing to donate to the charities they sit on the board of? And organizations too chicken to ask them to step off — and remind them that nonprofits need money to exist?"

Greer and her husband, Joshua, founded a home health care [company](#). She previously led a management consulting company and worked in digital media.

She has been a donor or board member at several nonprofits including the New Israel Fund and Cedars-Sinai Hospital. She says she's made two seven-figure gifts, along with dozens of smaller but significant contributions over the past seven years. She declined to discuss net worth.

The *Chronicle* spoke with Greer recently to get her thoughts on philanthropy from a donor's perspective and what she's hoping to accomplish with her public comments.

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This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.

**I get the vibe that you're not trying to be mean with your criticism in your newsletter. What do you think has gone wrong with philanthropy, and what do you want to see change?**

The newsletter is a way to get my angst and anger out by making people aware that there's a problem. Basically, I wanted to ring the bell and say, Hey, philanthropic world, you guys have to step out and realize that there's a problem here and you can't keep doing the same things over and over again. It might've been fine 50 years ago, but I don't think there's been any major changes in how philanthropy has been done in decades, other than bringing some digital media into it.

**Why do you think more donors aren't expressing their frustrations publicly? Are they afraid to say bad things about nonprofits?**

They think it's not worth their time. They say, "Why bother?"

I spoke to someone about it the other day and asked them how they felt. It was a very wealthy person who gives a lot of money. He told me that he just hangs up on everybody.

I've talked to many donors, young and old. All had pieces of the philanthropic puzzle that made them crazy or really angry, but they just didn't have a way to talk about it. They all had things on their minds about the way they're asked for money that pissed them off. Donors mostly tell me stories they've kept to themselves.

They also don't speak up more because they don't want to be seen as "bitching." They're worried people might say, "Oh, you have money. Just shut up already. You have no right to talk."

**What do donors not like about the way they're being approached for money?**

People can be super fake when they ask you for money. Just the other day I had someone call me, and I could hear her voice change and get higher when she got me on the phone. I couldn't understand why she couldn't just speak to me normally.

In those cases, I can tell the person calling that the sky is green today and they'll tell me how lovely that is. Their understanding is that they should agree with everything the donor says in order for them to give money. But that makes the whole process seem disingenuous, and that offends donors.

**Are there differences between the ways you feel women are approached for money as a major donor?**

These differences definitely exist. I wish they didn't. but they do. I've got so many different stories.

In one case, I made a large donation to an organization that I was very, very close to. I spent a lot of hours there for many years before I finally decided we were going to give to them during their capital campaign. But

they insisted that they speak to my husband before we made the gift, even though I was the one that told them I was going to give them the money. It was so upsetting.

### **What are other things donors don't like?**

Development officers sometimes think that because you gave money to one particular cause, you're expected to give to something else, too, and at that same exact amount. That makes donors nuts. One time I gave \$1 million to an organization, and after that a similar organization that I was giving \$15,000 to \$20,000 each year asked me to give them \$1 million because they found out about the other donation. That really became a problem because I became a \$1 million prospect even though I wasn't going to give that every time. So I understand donors who don't want their gifts to be public.

I've also found out that development officers are trained to make all these calls each day and that if a donor says they don't want to give somewhere but they've given to something else that's similar or has a loose connection, the officer is told to convince you to not give to them anymore. They'll say that you should give to this other group instead. Isn't that awful? I don't understand why you can't find donors that like what you do. Why do they have to trash other groups? That doesn't come up all the time, but it happens behind closed doors.

### **What do you think nonprofits can do better?**

My favorite pet peeve is that many of the organizations doing research on donors ask three questions. One, they want to know the value of your home, which tells you nothing because you don't know what their equity is. Then they also try to find out your political party. Then they want to know how much you've given to political campaigns, which is also stupid because there is a cap on it.

In my perfect world, there would be a database documenting the events you go to and the people you associate with. But those are considered second-tier questions in some data sets.

### **In your newsletter, you've written about wanting to see philanthropy stick around for future generations. How can philanthropy attract young donors today? What do you think development officers are doing wrong when they reach out to younger donors?**

We started donor-advised funds for our kids, and it's been fantastic. My twins are being bar mitzvahed in a month, and we actually asked for no gifts. Instead we asked them to give gifts to organizations or the donor-advised fund. Really, I think we need to do anything we can to educate kids and get them interested in philanthropy. We just need to come up with easier ways to get people to donate.

Over all, I do not believe fundraisers are respectful towards donors in general, but least respectful to millennials or young people. For example, to some millennials, the idea of taking them out to lunch to ask

them for money is a little bit crazy. I guess that’s an old-school thing, but engaging with millennials this way is weird. Also, I’ve seen one nonprofit at a dinner insist that they write checks, which probably isn’t smart. Why not give a simple alternative?

The newer generation also wants to know more about where their money is going. They want to know specifics, not just how much money is going to administrative expenses, for example. They want to know what a charity’s challenges are. But when the charity ignores those questions or flatly refuses to answer them, they lose trust from that generation of funders.

My point is that until fundraisers realize the tendencies of millennials, things won’t change.

**How familiar are you with other Twitter accounts about philanthropy, like the [Whiny Donor](#) , and what do you think about it?**

I’ve read a few of their tweets, and I didn’t think they were very helpful. It’s in the name, the Whiny Donor, which already starts off by branding you as a whiny person. It also connotes female, and that’s not a good thing. I would rather see an account called the “Helpful Donor.”

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