

Find and focus on your charitable passion

Everyone's path to meaningful charitable giving is different. It's important to follow yours.

Most of us want to give back in some way to our communities, but we may be unsure where to start. Sometimes we give in response to real-time charitable solicitations, like dropping a few dollars in the next collection basket passed our way. Alternatively, we may strategize our gifts in advance, leveraging our funds with thoughtful and intentional planning, and developing strong and lasting bonds with organizations over time.

Some philanthropists are more on top of planning their giving than others, and they can achieve impressive results, even with modest means. We often read about individuals who started a fund to cure a disease or help children in school and wonder at the fervor that inspired them to do so much for the cause. Yet, they are not unique. Each of us has within us an issue or cause that matters to us. Where do we—donors who want to help their communities but lack a defining charitable interest—find this level of focus?

Vanguard Charitable talked to one individual who evolved over time into a dedicated philanthropist. His story, which begins like many of ours, shows that we may all find and give with passion by reflecting on the moments that shaped us and the values that are important to us.

A path to charitable passion

Education, wildlife, healthcare. If you ask Charlie Knowles, a Vanguard Charitable donor, what is important to him, these are the answers you will get. While he supports an array of causes, he found his giving niche with wildlife conservation efforts. Follow his journey, and then *find yours*.

Charlie grew up in a rural area of Illinois, surrounded by nature and animals "running around." This early exposure shaped an initial love for wildlife and an interest in protecting it. Charlie also lived abroad in the United Kingdom for part of his life, an experience he feels opened his eyes to international topics. After graduating college with a focus in engineering and business, Charlie started a career in Silicon Valley and soon founded his own software company (which he later sold). At this time in his life, Charlie was shaping his interests but focused primarily on his career.

Then, Charlie read an article about a woman who sold her possessions and moved to Africa to protect local wildlife with the Cheetah Conservation Fund. Drawn to this woman and her mission, he offered to help her raise money in the United States. His event, which included a cheetah as the guest of honor, was a success. From there, he began to learn more about the international giving space. "I tend to follow hard problems," he says, about the challenges of giving abroad, including language barriers, political instability, and corruption.

As he supported more causes in Africa, Charlie recognized that the scale of available resources must be proportional to the size of the problem tackled. A no-brainer, one may think, but something many donors struggle with in an effort to "fix it." Charlie believes all donors can have a tremendous impact, even with smaller dollar amounts, as long as they are addressing a specific need.

What is important to me? What do I value?

What has shaped my interest in this cause? Do I have a personal connection to it?

Where should I focus my giving within my broader interests? (greatest need, overlooked problem area, geographic region?)

He learned this along the way, though. When he first started giving internationally, he did not have an end goal. He traveled, talked with others, and made some mistakes with his giving. All of these experiences improved his understanding of the underlying issues in the communities he was serving. Over time, he could distinguish situations in which organizational development was needed versus straight financial resources. He could see where it was necessary to test drive a solution or scale up efforts to broaden impact.

What does the charity need? (resources, infrastructure, new strategy?)

One successful example of Charlie's philanthropy shows how adapting and evolving your focus can further your impact. In a rural region of Africa, farmers had developed a habit of trapping and killing cheetahs to protect their livestock from attacks—to the point they bragged about how many cheetahs they killed. To argue these farmers were negatively impacting the natural ecocycle would have fallen on deaf ears; their livelihood was at stake. After learning about the community and observing failed techniques, a nonprofit organization introduced the use of guard dogs to keep the cheetahs at bay. Over time, the farmers recognized the success of this initiative and became advocates not only for the dogs but for the preservation of cheetahs and other wildlife in the area.

What motivates me to continue supporting this cause? (long-term vision, urgency, results, honoring someone?)

Today, Charlie focuses his financial resources, as well as his time and skills, on the international wildlife space. He devotes much of his philanthropy to a charity he co-founded, the Wildlife Conservation Network, which has deployed more than \$60 million in 40 countries to preserve wildlife and places. What began as playing with animals in his backyard grew to a mission to protect wildlife all over the world.

This narrative is based on a 2015 interview with Charlie Knowles, a Vanguard Charitable donor and president and co-founder of the Wildlife Conservation Network.

CONCLUSION

Review the questions above and reflect on what your answers mean for your charitable path. Acknowledge what's important to you, and use that as a driver for your philanthropy. After all, passion is fueled by personal connection and greater meaning—not a taxable event.

Once you find a cause, focus on it and strengthen your understanding of it. This will help you foster a deeper connection to your philanthropy and ensure you play a role in identifying solutions to prevalent societal issues—meaning what's important to you aligns with what's important to the broader community.

Don't wait to get started.

- ▶ Experiment with various organizations. Be as committed to learning about the cause as you would be to furthering your education or building a company.
- ▶ Find a community of philanthropists that is interested in the same giving area as you. Bounce ideas off of each other and get feedback on your next steps.
- ▶ Take your learnings and evolve your focus to a specific area that truly resonates with you.
- ▶ Stay engaged; be willing to acclimate others to the cause, too.

For more resources on finding your charitable passion, visit vanguardcharitable.org/grantingtools