

# Season 3, Episode 8: MacKenzie Scott's Lessons on Giving with Phil and Grace

**Grace:** Welcome to Giving Done Right, a podcast on everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

**Phil:** And I'm Phil Buchanan.

**Grace:** In July 2020, MacKenzie Scott shocked the philanthropic and nonprofit worlds with the announcement that she had given \$1.7 billion to 116 nonprofit organizations. That's billions with a "b." These gifts came in the form of massive grants, with a significant proportion targeted to organizations focused on issues of equity, and they were made with no restrictions, only an expectation of an annual three-page letter back to the donor for the three years following the receipt of the grant.

In a Medium post she wrote at the time, she said, "Like many, I watched the first half of 2020 with a mixture of heartbreak and horror. Life will never stop finding fresh ways to expose inequities in our systems; or waking us up to the fact that a civilization this imbalanced is not only unjust, but also unstable. What fills me with hope is the thought of what will come if each of us reflects on what we can offer."

Since then, she's continued the approach, giving nearly 13 billion as of spring of 2022. Just to put that in context, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made 6.7 billion in grants in 2021.

So, MacKenzie Scott's grants are frequently the largest ever received by recipient organizations, and they're made without a formal proposal or application process. Often a nonprofit receives the word of the grant completely out of the blue.

Today in a special episode of the podcast, we want to explore what donors at every level can learn from MacKenzie Scott's giving, and so we don't have a guest today. Instead, we'll be pulling back the curtain on new CEP research, the largest scale effort yet, to understand Scott's giving and its effects on the nonprofit sector.

Phil, I'm so excited to discuss this with you. Can you start by taking us back to why we undertook this effort?

**Phil:** Absolutely. So, in the late spring of 2021, we, as you will vividly recall, received a \$10 million gift ourselves from MacKenzie Scott, and we'd already been discussing the way in which her giving was upending conventions.

I didn't believe it. You know, like a lot of folks, when I got the phone call, I was like, "What?" And I kept saying, "For real? For real?" to the person who was telling me about the gift. And I was working from home that day, my wife thought somebody had died or something because I was crying when I got off the phone.

And then we, as you'll recall, we scheduled a Zoom with our board to tell them. Of course, I didn't give any context, so everybody thought that I was about to tell some terrible news, you know, I was sick or whatever. I was like, "No, no, no, it's a good thing." And they were thrilled, and a couple board members said, "Wait, we should study this. This is a really interesting experiment."

**Grace:** I remember, Phil, when you called to tell me the news, like you, I was walking around sort of in a stunned stupor for the next few days, and of course, we had to keep it secret as well until she announced it. And so that was one of the hardest secrets to keep. But obviously always great when it's good news.

It's been really interesting that there have been a whole range of reactions to these gifts. A lot of people are obviously praising her, I mean, this is such radical generosity. And then there are actually some who are quietly criticizing the way that she's gone about it or actually worrying about the implications.

**Phil:** Yeah, that's right. So, the praise I think comes in the form of, like you said, such generosity, trying to give her billions away quickly, doing it in a way that's unrestricted, that's enormous relative to the size of the typical gift. So, let's actually take a second on that. In the universe of organizations that we studied, which is her first year of giving, the median grant size was \$8 million. The median grant size of a typical foundation, like in our data set for the work that we do on our Grantee Perception Report, \$100,000. It's like an order of magnitude different, right? So, people are like, yes, this is trust based. It's putting the nonprofits front and center. I think some people see it as almost like a repudiation of a top down, controlling, you know, "you can use it for this, but not that" kind of mindset of other donors.

On the critique side, I think, when we hear this, usually a little more quietly, right? Often from some of our friends at foundations, like, this is not going to work. They don't have the absorptive capacity to handle these gifts. Things are going to implode. They're going to go badly. Other funders are going to pull back, and then these organizations are going to be in deep trouble. So, there's those kinds of questions. And then there are also, I think, in my view, legitimate questions about a relative lack of transparency. So, you do have this whole issue of organizations that maybe are in fields or communities that are getting support, but they didn't get support and they're like, "Where do I even go? What is the process?" We didn't study that, that was beyond the scope of this study. But what we wanted to look at is, let's explore what actually happens to these organizations when they get these resources. How do they use them? Does it create unintended negative consequences? Does it allow them to achieve things that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to? And so that was just a feeling that we could bring data to bear on some of these discussions and debates that were happening.

**Grace:** So how did we approach the study?

**Phil:** So, for the first year, which is what we've done, we surveyed the organizations that received gifts in one of the first three rounds. So that was from summer 2020 when she first came out of the gate, like you described, to the summer of 2021. So, in-depth survey about their experiences, and we got a strong response rate. And then we had in-depth interviews with a subset of those who responded to the survey—40 folks where we explored their experience.

**Grace:** And just to be clear, she has not been involved with this project.

**Phil:** Oh, thanks, Grace. Yeah, that's right. We informed her family office that we were doing this. They sent us a cordial, succinct note back, acknowledging receipt. That's been the extent of our interaction. Our hope is that this is useful to those folks who are working with her, whether at her family office, which is called Lost Horse, which is an LLC, or at Bridgespan Group, which is doing a lot of the vetting. But we wouldn't have done the research for that reason alone. We're doing this research because we think it has implications for donors more broadly, and not just big donors.

**Grace:** And also not with the expectation that we ourselves will receive another gift.

**Phil:** No. And we were explicitly told it was a one-time deal.

**Grace:** Mm-hmm.

**Phil:** But I mean, it's interesting there was a question like, don't you have a conflict of interest if you're doing this study? You got a gift. Our response was, look, we're going to be fully transparent about the fact that we got a gift. There are basically two kinds of nonprofits in the world: those who've received a gift from MacKenzie Scott, and those who haven't but desperately want to. Arguably, we're in a better position to speak the truth about what we learn because it's already over, we got our gift, there's nothing more as we understand it. So even though we ourselves had received a gift from MacKenzie Scott, I just want to be clear about a couple things: one, we didn't answer our own survey; two, we secured funding from other sources for this study just to try to make sure it was independent and just to give them the credit they deserve—the Hilton Foundation, Barr Foundation, Ford Foundation, Houston Endowment, Raikes Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation, Skoll Foundation, supported this.

Then there was a group of us at CEP, Ellie Buteau led this effort, Maria Lopez, Katarina Malmgren, and Christina Im worked on the project along with me, and we're the co-authors of the research. And so, we spent a lot of our time over the last year doing this work.

**Grace:** So, I'm excited to dig in, what have we learned so far?

**Phil:** Well, let's start with the first finding, which is basically that these gifts have been transformatively positive for the organizations that receive them. And the quotes, you know, are incredible. Like just the way people talk about the experience of receiving these resources is really, really powerful.

One nonprofit said that their reaction was “disbelief, amazement, then a sense of humility and duty, that we were going to be able to help our communities through the pandemic. That we could do big things with this scale at such a critical time. And we did.” Another person said, “I had not been aware of her previous philanthropy. I was Googling her name while on the phone. At the end of the call, I hung my head and wept. This was truly a transformational gift that our organization and I will be forever grateful for.”

What we see is the leaders say that the gifts have been incredibly important for strengthening their organization's ability to achieve their mission, ability to achieve financial stability, ability to shore up long-term organizational capacity. *And* that they've been transformative for them as leaders, that it has helped shift their mindset from scarcity to abundance, that it has given them a sense of personal relief and breathing room, allowed them to think about being more

innovative, taking more risks. And maybe the only sort of negative one here was it gave them a real feeling of self-imposed pressure, like, I've got to rise to this challenge and make the most of these resources. So those are some of the things that came through in terms of just high-level findings about the way the organizations and the leaders experienced receipt of this gift.

**Grace:** I can see why receiving a very large gift could be just really transformational in that way. So, what else? I mean, how exactly are the nonprofits using the money? So, you're saying like on their mission and also to shore up their organizations, what does that mean?

**Phil:** The biggest way in which folks are using the money is to expand their programmatic work, right? Like just to do more of what they do.

It's worth noting that for the group that we looked at, almost half are direct service organizations, which is a much higher percentage than the percentage of nonprofits that are direct service overall, which is a little bit under 20%. And I think that's partly because the giving started in the middle of the pandemic and there was so much need. So, we're talking food pantries, you know, organizations that are on the front lines—and they just did more of what they do. They fed more people, they registered more voters, they helped more young people. You know, that kind of thing. So definitely just more programmatic work.

Another area was shoring up financial sustainability, putting some resources into endowment or reserve funds to strengthen themselves for the long haul.

And then a third area was really investing in operations. And some of that was about nitty gritty things like, we're not paying our workers enough or we've got pay equity issues and we want to address that.

And it's important to note that it wasn't hard for these organizations to figure out what to do with the resources. They knew what the needs were. They've mostly figured out how they're going to spend the money, and they're doing all of these things, in general, it's not like they're just putting it all in one bucket or another. They're being smart and using their resources in a variety of ways that are really important.

**Grace:** One question I had is, I can imagine some listeners might be listening to this and saying, well, objectively, are those good ways to spend the funds? And Phil, I mean, your last comment is really interesting, right? So, these were smart steps for nonprofits to take.

**Phil:** I mean, obviously our research doesn't answer the question, how smart were these steps is. So now it's me talking, my opinion. This distribution of the resources across different areas of need represents a sort of thoughtful approach where there's a balance of short term, medium term, long term.

So, it seems smart to me, and when I read the interview transcripts, the survey comments, I was really struck. I mean, I hope folks go and read the report—it's inspiring. I mean, you can't help but come away impressed by the thoughtfulness of these leaders. People do not take this stuff lightly. We talk so much about trust on this podcast, and MacKenzie Scott, I think, has been described as sort of the ultimate embodiment of trust-based approach. So, I think that there is some evidence here that the trust has not been misplaced, that people are being very thoughtful. Now, that's my subjective judgment on the data that we've gathered, but I think that's the case.

Another thing I just want to bring up is that people critique her sometimes for being “unstrategic” in her approach, and I think what they mean there is that she has not articulated end outcome goals that she's trying to achieve, like reduce homelessness, eradicate poverty. So, I guess if those are the only goals that count in your book, then maybe that would lead you to the conclusion that she's not being strategic. But I think if her goal is at the level of strengthening key organizations that have been carefully selected, working in particular areas that matter to her. Well then this has been a strategy to do that, and by that measure it is strategic. Even though she's not seeking to define the end outcomes, what she's saying is, if I select these organizations that are highly effective working in these areas, and I help them to be stronger, I believe that will ultimately lead to good things.

**Grace:** I'm just reflecting on our own journey with, so far, figuring out what to do with the funds that we received. And you know, there was really no small amount of hand ringing, in a good way, right? This is possibly the best problem that a nonprofit could have. And to your point about the pressure, we really have felt that we want to steward this as best as we can. And obviously we feel that way about all of the donations and gifts that we receive, but there was something in particular about just the large, all-at-once-ness of this gift that has created an extra strategic thinking and kind of process for the way that we're going to spend it. So that, I think, has been really healthy for us.

**Phil:** And it's liberating, right? When we learned about the gift, I think I said to our colleague, Alyse d'Amico, this is what has happened. And she said, that's like a retreat icebreaker that you would never think is real. You know, what



would you do with \$10 million, right? And you're then able to think in this freeing way, and that really comes through from the leaders we talked to.

**Grace:** Yeah. So back to the research, what else did you learn?

**Phil:** Well, another area we want to explore is, are there unintended negative consequences? And this is year one of a three-year study. So, I just want to introduce like all the caveats about the limits of this research. It was a moment in time. It was the people we surveyed and interviewed. It was people who, after all, are pretty happy about getting a gift. But we really pushed for negative unintended consequences, and we didn't really see any. The biggest worry, I think, was that other funders would pull back. We heard some anecdotes about that, but folks were more likely to see the gift as having strengthened their fundraising and signaling other funders in a way that attracted them to support their organization than they were likely to say, oh, a funder pulled back. So net, it has been positive for these organizations' fundraising, and that's the way they feel.

**Grace:** Why do you think that is? I mean, is that because this was MacKenzie Scott? Does this happen with other donors where large gifts actually reinforce the reputation of a nonprofit?

**Phil:** I think it's partly the signaling, you know, that people in some cases feel they got attention they wouldn't have otherwise received. But the other part, which I think is maybe an unintended positive consequence, or maybe it was intended, we don't know, is they feel emboldened, the leaders tell us, to ask in a way that they haven't before, to be strategic in their fundraising approach, and to invest in the fundraising infrastructure. All of those things, I think, may contribute to these positive results, but it was really interesting to see the way in which leaders feel emboldened. Like, hey, I don't have to refrain from asking for what I need. I can go out there, and they have the security to do that, knowing that they have these resources.

**Grace:** Wow, that's a lot to digest there. I mean, I do feel like there is that counterintuitive aspect to the findings, right? That, one, I guess I would've expected that other donors and other givers might have pulled back because, hey, you don't need money now. I mean, I know I worried about that for us.

**Phil:** You did, I remember.

**Grace:** And then the second is that it actually emboldens them to ask more versus ask less.

**Phil:** Right. And, to be fair, I worried about that too, and we haven't experienced it.

There's something about the mindset shift that I think was really powerful, and we saw it in particular for leaders of color. The way in which leaders of color described feeling about receiving this gift—it was pretty powerful, there's some quotes in the report, because I think it just felt like such a different experience than what they had so often been through in terms of feeling like fundamentally, maybe they were mistrusted. And here was this incredible vote of confidence. And that was really, really powerful for people. Again, powerful for the organizations, but powerful for the people in these leadership roles.

**Grace:** Well, I'm obviously really eager to get into the implications.

**Phil:** Yes.

**Grace:** Right. So, it just seems like these findings are calling out in terms of possible recommendations for the way other funders or donors should be thinking about the way they support nonprofits. What should we take away from this? Like, what is applicable and what isn't?

**Phil:** I think that every donor can take away the realization that if you have chosen wisely—and that's a big if—if you've chosen wisely in terms of the organizations you're supporting, don't restrict your gift. Let those organizations' leaders figure out how to use the dollars. Don't get caught up in these bananas distinctions between quote/unquote “overhead” and quote/unquote “the cause.” Let these organizations use the resources to strengthen themselves.

Another thing: give big whatever that is for you. People can be real cynical and say, yeah, but she's still worth \$35 billion or whatever. But she does seem on a mission to try to distribute all of these resources in short order, and that's not necessarily the norm. And I think people can be inspired to give bigger. I think that also can raise some really interesting conundrums about, should I give more to fewer organizations, rather than a lot to a bunch? So that's the second thing.

Third thing that that occurs to me is something I think we see in her choice of recipients, but we also see it in the use of resources by the organizations, which is the importance of the short term and the long term. The importance of alleviating suffering and dealing with root causes. You know, and so many of these organizations are using the resources both in short term ways and then trying to strengthen themselves for the long term and dealing with systems. And I think if you look at the list of organizations that MacKenzie Scott has given to,



you've got folks who are feeding the hungry, and you've got folks who are trying to make sure that not so many people are hungry, you know, in 10, 20 years. You've got folks dealing with racial equity in a sort of short term, on the ground, you know, walking with you kind of way, and then others in a policy kind of way. And I think that's really important.

But if you step way back and you just look at, what are the norms even among big donors? I mean, this is upending those norms. And people will say, oh, none of these things are in and of themselves new. Other people have made enormous gifts before. Other people have made enormous unrestricted gifts before. Other people have made surprise gifts out of the blue. But nobody's put it all together in this way. And it is a really interesting challenge to some of the default ways of working for donors big, medium, and small.

**Grace:** I think one of the themes we talk about a lot on this show is the relationship that a donor can have with nonprofits. What's fascinating to me about the way she's giving is that she doesn't have a relationship with them, and in other shows and places we have talked about how that relationship can be so vital. That's also, to me, a huge distinction about her giving. What do you have to say about that?

**Phil:** So that's an interesting question, Grace. I think it gets to this area that she's been critiqued for, which is a lack of transparency and this sort of lack of, even, availability. And I think this has been a particular source of frustration. And you and I both have friends who run organizations that work in areas where other organizations have received gifts from MacKenzie Scott, they haven't. And they're like, what? And their board is like, why didn't we get one? And they don't know where to go.

You know, I think people have raised questions, too, about the role of Bridgespan—we have lots of friends at Bridgespan, we think very highly of them. But I think there is this issue about the fact that Bridgespan is both consulting to MacKenzie Scott and consulting to nonprofits. And then people who haven't received the funding are like, what should I do? And I've had this conversation with people who have said to me, should I hire Bridgespan as a consultant or pretend like I'm going to so that they notice me? And I've passed that along to the folks at Bridgespan, I'm not saying anything here that I haven't said to them. And I think they're trying to sort through some of this and maybe make it a little bit cleaner, the distinction between the two sides of the work. But there's a lot there, I think, that worries people, and I understand that.

I mean, back in December she made—of 2021—she made a set of gifts without announcing who received them, and there was a lot of blowback. And then she did announce and then she said a website's coming with all of the, like a searchable database of all the grants. That's not up yet. So, I think there's a lot of questions here and legitimate concerns, I think, and critiques, as there is also obviously lots to celebrate.

**Grace:** It's interesting that some of the voices that are critiquing her approach perhaps are actually asking for some of the things that you find more commonly with traditional philanthropy. So, like, there's a process that you can apply to, or you know, there's a 990 tax filing that you could go to to understand where else they give. There's sort of that whole gamut of research that could be done. And maybe that's the backside of all of the positives, is that this isn't a traditional approach, and so it's not going to check all of those boxes.

**Phil:** Right. And you know, the last thing we want to be doing here at ever, I think, is suggesting that anyone's got it all figured out, or anything is perfect—nothing is. Everything's complicated. But what can you take from this? I think this is what we want folks to think about. We're not suggesting that every donor should operate like MacKenzie Scott. We're suggesting, I'm suggesting, there is interesting opportunity to learn from this natural experiment that has occurred in which this philanthropy is being done in a really different way than sort of the conventional approaches.

**Grace:** So, I think another area, in addition to not having a relationship with nonprofits, is that we also talk a lot about consistent funding to nonprofits, right? And I know that some of her nonprofit recipients, like some HBCUs, got more than one gift—but by and large folks are only going to get it once. So, what would you say to that? It sort of runs against, give consistently given a multiyear fashion.

**Phil:** Yeah, right. I don't know what I would say to that. I do think that's a really important issue. The gifts are so big, right, that in a way, they're almost like multi-year gifts, right? They're so big, like there's an opportunity to spread it over a long period of time.

But it is true. One of the few areas of critique that came up from the recipients who we interviewed and surveyed was that. I don't know, is it really just a one-time thing or like, what if I want to talk to somebody? And one of the worries that folks have, and it came through a little bit in the research, but also just folks watching this, is about going off kind of a financial cliff. If they've added staff

to expand their programmatic work or to improve their work, then what happens after five, seven years when the money is spent.

I think that if you're living more of a normal life in which, you know, you can't give as big as you ever want to, you can at least try to be clear and consistent, right? Say like, I'm going to try to continue to support you.

**Grace:** The other question that is in my mind is actually one that I got in New York City last week when I was speaking at this public forum, a donor asked, “When should I write that big, one check to an organization, let's say several million dollars, versus spreading it out among dozens?” And you know, my answer to him was, “like many things in philanthropy, it really depends on what your goals and strategies are.” But it also seems like our bias and perhaps what we can take away from MacKenzie Scott's giving is that the largeness of the gifts, the largeness of them itself was transformative.

**Phil:** Yeah, I think so. It is so tricky to get that balance right. And I love the way you said it depends. Everything depends, right? And you would never want to be dumbing it down and saying small gifts never matter, or that small organizations aren't really important. And at the same time, if you can be more focused and give in a big and unrestricted way over time to a smaller number of organizations, you will probably be able to have a more significant effect on those that you fund than you would if you spread it around to many more organizations. And I think it's important to push oneself on this because it's easier to say yes than to say no, but actually to be effective, sometimes you just have to say no to some in order to be able to do more for others.

**Grace:** Phil, I'm channeling some friends that I know who tend to be pretty skeptical about nonprofits and the way they're run, and their voice in my head is saying, well, of course these nonprofit recipients, they're so thankful, of course they're saying it was so transformational. And, yes, of course they spent a lot of it on their mission, but they also spent it on their overhead, on like building up their staff. And there can be this sense that nonprofits are bloated, not efficiently organized or run. And so does this just feed into this vague sense that nonprofits are this like industrial complex that can't be trusted? And I know you have an opinion on this, as do I, and so I just want to give you a chance to respond.

**Phil:** Yeah, I mean, I think we both agree—tell me if I'm wrong, Grace—that most of what you just said is just totally off base. You know, most nonprofits are under resourced relative to their mission and what they're taking on and do an incredible amount with very little. People don't go into this work, take on these jobs, if you look at the list of organizations and things that they're doing—

they're not, you're not doing this just to have a job. You're doing this because you believe in the mission, and you want to make a difference. And I believe that what we see in the reflections of the nonprofit leaders is that real sense of responsibility, and that sense of responsibility means, yes, we have to sometimes pay better than we were paying before because we want to retain good people and be a decent place to work. If that gets chalked up as bloat or overhead, that is a real shame because actually that's about executing against the mission and being effective. It requires good people to do that. All that said, it will take time to really understand what these organizations were able to achieve that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to achieve.

We got all kinds of great anecdotes in the report. One organization, they said they registered 2 million voters. Another organization said that said they fed countless people they wouldn't have been able to feed. They kept people from incurring medical debt that they would've otherwise gone on to—you know, on and on and on. The examples are there in the short term when even just a portion of the funds have been used. But the real story will play out in the long term, and I think, we'll ultimately, my belief is it will disprove this sort of naysaying of the kind of sentiment expressed in the setup to your question.

**Grace:** I'm so excited that we're actually studying this, right? Like I think that hopefully over time us and perhaps others, we'll have real data to bear to debunk some of those myths. I mean, it's fascinating because what I would say to those folks is, talk to anyone who actually runs a nonprofit about, you know, their views on overhead. I think that sometimes, we can think that the fundraising function of a nonprofit is sort of a forcing function for nonprofits to somehow be efficient and get buy in. And all of that is true on one level. I think, though, that we don't realize sometimes just how much pressure it is, especially for frontline nonprofits, to be fundraising and just having that space and that breath to take from these gifts is really transformational. And I guess I just want us to think about, even in much, much smaller gift contexts, can we be creating that kind of space as well?

**Phil:** Totally. And there's a paternalism, right, that is underneath a lot of the conventional ways in which many, some donors, institutional and individual, interact with nonprofits. There are biases, myths, and I think she's basically giving a middle finger to those myths and biases in her approach.

**Grace:** So, Phil, after all of this talk about how great and useful this report is, where can we find it?

**Phil:** Yeah, it's on our website, cep.org. I want to again, give credit to our colleagues, Ellie Buteau, Maria Lopez, Katarina Malmgren, and Christina Im, who did all the work, and also a big thank you to the nonprofit leaders who spent time completing our survey, which was really detailed about how they're using the resources, spent time talking to us—it's just been awesome to be able to learn from.

Also, by the way, Grace, I think it's our last episode—

**Grace:** It is indeed, of this season.

**Phil:** Yeah, right, thanks for clarifying that. It's been so fun, and it feels good to end on this note because this research touches on just so many of the topics that we've covered with our various amazing guests.

**Grace:** Yeah, I have loved the guests that we've had on all the seasons, but this one was particularly fun.

And in the vein of saying thanks to colleagues, I think we want to send a special thank you to our producer, Sarah Martin, who, without her, none of this would exist, and it's always such a labor of love for all of us, but in particular for her. So, a huge thank you to Sarah.

**Phil:** Yeah, Sarah's an incredible colleague and she edits out all the stupid things that I say, or at least as many as is humanly possible.

**Grace:** Me too.

**Phil:** And Grace, it's really great to do this with you. I learn so much from you every time we talk. I know we're going to have some, maybe—

**Grace:** Shhhh, secret.

**Phil:** —little morsels to send out extra special episodes perhaps between now and a next season. But in the meantime, we will miss doing this. And we really wish the best for everybody in the audience as they think about their giving coming into the giving season and they just make sure that they try to give generously, give effectively, give with your heart and your head.

**Grace:** Thank you for listening to Giving Done Right. You can find more resources about effective giving and the podcast on [givingdoneright.org](http://givingdoneright.org). You

can find us on Twitter, I'm @gracenicolette and Phil is at @philxbuchanan. And if you like the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts, it really helps.

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