

What Happens When Donors Trust? Giving Cash with Jesús Gerena

Jesús Gerena [00:00:01] What we see as when we invest in people is that they do more. They generate more income. They stabilize their housing as well as invest inside of their community. All of that generates more impact for those communities and for our government than everything that we have to do when we deprive people and they don't have enough.

Grace [00:00:24] Welcome to Giving Done Right, a show with everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:30] And I'm Phil Buchanan. Today we are excited to welcome Jesús Gerena to the show. Jesús runs the nonprofit Up Together, which provides direct cash transfers to individuals and families in the US. Jesús serves on the Center for Effective Philanthropies' board. He's someone we know well. He's very knowledgeable about poverty alleviation and what actually works.

Grace [00:01:00] We had ended season two with an interview on direct cash transfers in an international context with the co-founder and chairman of GiveDirectly, Paul Niehaus. And we wanted to bring someone in to talk about the domestic context. And really, there's no one better to discuss this with than Jesús.

Phil [00:01:22] Welcome, Jesús.

Jesús Gerena [00:01:23] Oh, thank you so much. I'm really excited to have this conversation and get to share a little bit more about our work.

Phil [00:01:30] What's your story? Jesús. How did you come to this work?

Jesús Gerena [00:01:33] So I've been doing this specifically with Up Together for the last 14 years and have served as the CEO now for the last seven years. Prior to that, I had the privilege of working with an organization called the Hyde Square Task Force in Jamaica Plain for about ten years. And I mentioned the task force first, because my roots started in organizing in Boston with young people and specifically looking at the different inequities that existed between those wealthier neighborhoods in Boston versus the more impoverished and less invested communities, and for putting young people at the center to be able to move and drive that change. And for me, that was really important as I left college. I share a little bit of my trajectory here. I was born in the island of Puerto Rico, and my parents, who were 19 when I had my brother, and I'm the youngest of three and I'm 22 by the time I came along. And that meant that they struggle. But I didn't know that struggle because we had a really vibrant community of folks that really care for us and provided for us. And when my parents divorced, all that fractured and we sort of fell in a spin right where my mom, as she was our full time caretaker, also was trying to go back to school and working part time. And those things that struggle, was not working. And so eventually she followed her sister and brought us to Amherst, Massachusetts. And so the stark difference of being in a community in Puerto Rico where there was a great need, very little resources and opportunity, to being brought to Western Massachusetts, to a community that had great resources and very little need, fundamentally changed our trajectory as a family.

Phil [00:03:22] So you're ten years old and you'd show up in Western Mass? Yeah. Small town.

Jesús Gerena [00:03:26] That's exactly right. Yeah.

Phil [00:03:28] Quiet place. I've spent a lot of time there. Not very diverse. That must have been a huge transition.

Jesús Gerena [00:03:34] It was. It was absolutely huge. And it was also February. So within I think a couple of weeks, we got our first major snowstorm.

Phil [00:03:41] That's a shock to the system.

Jesús Gerena [00:03:41] Yeah. I had no idea what was going to happen. But, you know, I will add, soon after that, the little Puerto Rican community that we had in Amherst came through our doors and were really welcoming and what we had lost in Puerto Rico, we began to gain back.

Grace [00:03:58] One of the reasons why we wanted to have you on is you've done so much thinking about, talking about, and working on the unexamined assumptions that donors and, you know, us in society, we often make about the poor and what they need. And I just was worrying, if you could just tell us a little bit about what you see as the disconnect.

Jesús Gerena [00:04:19] People think about those who are struggling with financial hardship and are living in poverty, that somehow there's fault for those conditions. And we have to do something to help them and correct them so that they can better thrive and, and meet opportunity where, you know again coming back to my own story is like well hold on. Are we creating resource rich environments? Are we investing in people? Are we recognizing their abilities or strengths? Then ask the question if they need something else, right. But recognize that there are system failures at play that continuously put people in that position of struggle. That's a huge myth. But then they also are like, oh, and we can help them, right? Like people can help themselves and we can help them. I think, like my own experience in this work has been that acknowledgment that people actually have great abilities. If we put them in a position to be able to do something is always where we should start, rather than what can we do to fix them.

Grace [00:05:25] Right? So we often, instead of having like an asset based framing towards people in communities, we have a deficit framing.

Jesús Gerena [00:05:32] That's right. And and I think that part of that is that that constant feeling of wanting to help, which I think a lot of people in this sector coming, wanting to be able to help and seeing people from this deficit mindset reinforces sort of their own mission and their own personal want to be able to fix people right and help them. I think we need to begin to push at that concept and begin to help people first understand, hey, who are these folks? You know, again, what are their abilities and what can they do for themselves? And how can I be a supporter of their abilities and the way that they want to be able to create change in their lives and in their communities?

Phil [00:06:15] It's interesting. It challenges a lot of assumptions that people bring to the effort to help. Or to their work at a nonprofit. It might be a little threatening in a way, right? Like, you don't actually need me. You know what you need? You just need resources.

Jesús Gerena [00:06:32] Early on in my work with Up Together. What's the biggest challenge? People always be like, who gives you a hard time about this? And the truth is that everybody has a hard time for their own personal reasons. But overwhelmingly, I think for those people who can be seen as more progressive and are philanthropic is the ask of saying, stop helping. People don't need you. Find a different way to support these communities that becomes really threatening because we built an industry around that. That doesn't mean that it's going to change overnight because people are still being hurt by systems challenges. The question is, how do we begin to undo those systems challenges in a way that we're not asking the same questions 20, 40, 50 years from now, which has been the case as it relates to the war on poverty as it was launched in the 60s and where we are today. Right?

Grace [00:07:30] But let's get really practical. I mean, if I'm a donor, how do I make sure I'm not walking into some of those same pitfalls? Right? Like how do I ask what they need?

Jesús Gerena [00:07:41] We start with putting people right back at the center. And maybe by way of introducing a little bit about Up Together's approach, how I started here. So I'm based in Oakland, even though my roots lie in Boston and Puerto Rico, I've been here now for almost a decade and when Up Together launched here, then known as the Family Independence Initiative, our founder basically had no answer about how to be able to change the mentalities and the systems that have been created to affect poverty and his symptoms. And he came back and he was just like, well, I'm not going to get in the way. Let's invest in people directly in those communities and just learn from them and see what they tell us when we put them in a position to be able to be seen as the experts with their abilities, as well as bringing the investment to them for their time and energy and helping us learn. And that simple act for us as an organization and I think, now, today across the country, we see so many more related efforts in regards to direct giving, just changed our trajectory in a really meaningful way. But it was that simple approach of 'I'm not the expert. They are.' Let me learn from their communities and their connections. Let me invest in that learning. And it absolutely all of a sudden huge things were being able to be illuminated. But also I think for the people, they began to participate in a new culture that they just weren't used to. And it's that culture that we're trying to help others really understand and I think from a donor perspective, if you start with saying, I don't know, and it's okay, I don't know because I know that people who are affected by this know, let me go there. They're the experts.

Phil [00:09:28] So give us some of the like, facts and figures in terms of how it works. How much money are you getting out the door? To how many people? How do you know it's making a difference in their lives? Help us understand you know, for those who really don't have any idea how up together works.

Jesús Gerena [00:09:45] Our approach again is centered around community, choice, and capital. And the community component is yes, money is valuable, but the social connections that we have, strengthening those, those networks are always going to resource us as well to sustain us long term. And understanding that is really important. Number two: choices...that again, people are experts and they should be able to identify their own goals and pursue them as they see fit. And third... capital is cash as direct investment. So we have our Up Together Fund which essentially is set up for 18 months, \$500 a month for individuals to be able to receive. We have an online platform that you can see it up-together-dot-org, and essentially people can create a basic profile, be able to

surface who that community is and be connected through the platform as well as link whatever their financial institution is, so that they can, on a monthly basis, receive that direct deposit into their account if they choose not to or are unbanked, for whatever reason, they can also receive a prepaid card that they get in the mail, and it's re-upped every month. Over an 18 month period of time, people receive about \$9,000. Sometimes we extend it to 24 months and it's 12,000. We've gone up to about \$1,000 that certain donors will know that by giving more, more happens. And so we're able to to change either time or dollar amount variables as our partners think best to their being able to give. All of those pieces help us continue to build on the field of the impact that these dollars have.

Grace [00:11:26] And what do you folks usually spend the funds on?

Jesús Gerena [00:11:29] Overwhelmingly, people spend the money on basic needs, their utility bills, food, care for their children, being able to purchase a car. You name it. Actually, it's pretty diverse. But again, if you are struggling with being low income, with sort of the hardship that that brings in a city that is expensive, such as Oakland, and you're making 30- \$40,000 a year or even less, right? What you're doing is negotiating on a month to month basis how to be able to make those dollars stretch in a way that can support you and make ends meet to the best of the resources that you're receiving. So all of a sudden, if you got \$9,000, an extra \$500 a month, you get to negotiate a little differently, and it begins to create a space for people to start saying, okay, now I can pay my bill here. Oh, now I can actually get fresh vegetables in my household because their cost is not prohibitive. But it also creates the additional space for you to start thinking, now, how do I make this last? What do I need to do to be able to improve my economic condition long term, and use this as that opportunity to be able to change my life in the positive?

Phil [00:12:43] I would imagine that you encounter from donors or prospective donors a fair amount of cynicism and a desire to say, well, how do I know that that's really going to happen? Right? Like, how do I know that this isn't just a band aid, it makes 18 months better...

Grace [00:13:00] Right or that someone's going to use the money to buy a TV or something, right?

Phil [00:13:03] So how do you counter that? Is there evidence to suggest that there's a long term impact beyond the discrete period of time where they're receiving the funding?

Jesús Gerena [00:13:14] So we collect data over that time from the individuals, and we've partnered with researchers from across the country, whether it's the Urban Institute, UC Santa Barbara, Center for Guaranteed Income at UPenn, and the work that they're doing to be able to evaluate a lot of the guaranteed income pilots across the country. And again, like our data consistently tells us about 90% of the dollars are going to those basic needs, right, like that people are meeting. So we have the proof behind it, and we're contributing to a field that has over 300 studies already, that over and over again and Grace, as you mentioned, being able to speak with the president of GiveDirectly, right? Like they also have been contributing as others to the consistency that if you give people money, they not only do the right thing, but they begin to stabilize and think about how to be able to move forward. And also they may need a TV, right? Like it's okay if they buy a TV. Like, that's not right. Everybody has a TV, right? Like those are not our judgment calls as much as it is to really understand in that trajectory how they continue to be able to move forward.

Grace [00:14:24] Say more about that, because I think donors can sometimes have a sense of paternalism towards communities or even nonprofits in terms of what they can handle or what they deserve. Yeah. How does our attitude need to be adjusted?

Jesús Gerena [00:14:38] To think that for somebody who is a parent, who is working diligently to be able to, again, overcome whatever challenges, but also meet the opportunities in their lives that somehow they're broken because of their economic condition. And I shouldn't be allowed to make choices as their expertise and live experience informs them. I think is exactly right, Grace. Like it's robbing that knowledge from folks. So there's that piece. I also, when you ask that question, you know, like in my kid's school, there's a big sign that says, 'if your revolution doesn't include dance like I don't want it' or something along those lines, but like a part of what we're all trying to do is to be able to enjoy one another, enjoy our public spaces, our common spaces, enjoy our free time, while also positively making an impact, a positive impact inside those communities as we choose our work and others have other jobs. And and I say that because like, just because we live in poverty doesn't mean that you shouldn't have joy in your life. And I think that that's a really important point of view to be able to hold.

Grace [00:15:49] And what do you say when folks come back and say, well, shouldn't this be the government's role? You all are on the front lines, and obviously there's a lot of really deeply problematic systems that have kind of brought us to where we are. And so is this just a Band-Aid? And like, how do we think about what's the role of the government versus what's the role of donors in philanthropy?

Jesús Gerena [00:16:12] So we recently have embraced being a systems change organization. You know, I think Phil to your question about 'is this last?' We try to help people understand that, yeah, the 18 month period of time. And I'll share the story of Aisha, who is one of the recipients of a guaranteed income pilot that we did here in Oakland. And she always was like, 'I've won the lottery in a sense, right? And then I've been \$12,000 over two years. I want to make sure I do something that is impactful to our household,' and she was a grandmother who had custody of her grandson, 'as well as my community. Right? Like I see this as a really critical opportunity in that sense'. Today, she is working full time now and is in the process of hopefully getting some professional development to get a promotion inside of that job. You know, her story is not unique in that when people are given these opportunities, they begin to reevaluate and think and again, that that they have the space to do it is really important, right? Because they're not being crushed by the pressures of not having enough. Of scarcity. But I also caution, right, with Aisha, because not everybody is going to do that. For some people, they may extend it and go back to school so that they can do better in the long term. Right. That the trajectory for everybody is going to be a little bit different. And that's what's important in that way to be able to do. And then to your question in regards to government's role. I think we need an absolutely new social contract. We've stopped being able to provide some common goods that benefit everyone. And so when people ask me about what systems change means to me as first, as changing the mentality about who doesn't benefit from an economy in an equitable way today. Right? Our wealth redistribution is centered on the top tier of our society, and it doesn't it's not equitable across the way. So we need to make that equitable and the way that we can do that, and the role that government can play can be an increase of a child tax credit like we did in 2021, in July, and took 3 million kids out of poverty overnight. Poverty is a policy choice. We could do that. But then we ended it at the end of the year and put those kids back. And that divide continues to grow because we're not acting to be able to make these policies that have a positive impact on these metrics permanent. I think that the other problem is universal health care, universal child care,

right. Like there's these components that we know can be conducive to welcoming families, to caring for us as individuals. And yet we continue to like, speak and say, well, no, that's not our responsibility. I would challenge, I think it is our responsibility. I think it is something that we want from one another to be able to care for one another in that way.

Grace [00:19:11] Don't go anywhere. More after this break.

Phil [00:19:25] I'm having so many feelings about this conversation because what you're saying is so powerful, right? It's about, like, human dignity. It's about decency. It's about who we are as people. It's about trusting people. It's about not thinking we know what's best for others. Thinking we have the answers is not assuming that somebody is in a situation because of mistakes they made, that they should be punished for. Right? Like just challenging all of this really, really negative stuff that permeates our society, I think. But it also brings me back to the time just before the pandemic, when there was all of this critique of philanthropy. And from the left, actually, folks like Anand Giridharadas and Rob Reich at Stanford and this guy Rutger Bregman, who's a historian who had like a famous kind of meltdown at Davos, where he called the billionaire's philanthropy stupid. And now he said he changed his mind and philanthropy is actually good. And the thing that drove me mad about that whole conversation was this sort of either or simplistic nature of it. And what I love about what you're doing, Jesús, is that you are both dealing with the present day realities that our society, our voters, our electoral system, like it hasn't made the right choices. Here we are. Let's not just turn our back on the folks who need stuff and say, well, the taxation system should be different, so suffer while we go work on that. But let's neither just do that and not also try to change the system. You're trying to do both, and I assume they inform each other in a virtuous cycle kind of way. But I find so many of the conversations about these issues, it gets boiled down to 'it's about this' or 'it's about that,' but it's about holding both those ideas in your head at the same time, I think.

Jesús Gerena [00:21:15] Yeah, absolutely, Phil. I think that our demonstration work, which is our Up Together approach in action, right, and those specifics that I shared, before, where we're able to make that direct investment is absolutely right. It creates an immediate alleviation to some of these systems, pressures. Philanthropy plays a critical role, but it's not a sustaining role. So if we don't lift that evidence, if we are not helping share the stories of that impact, if we are not targeting long term what our society can strive to be, and support policymakers and government to be able to change, yes, the virtuous cycle will continue, but it will sort of be limited to its impact. And what we want to do is, hey, come learn. Yes, if you really need this evidence, we have it. If you want us to demonstrate it in your city or your state or county or whatever, yes, we'll do it. But you're on the hook now. Like there's something that then you have to do after those two years, right? Our families will do their part, right? Our membership will do their part. They will act in their lives. Then it's up to you. And that action piece to that vision is really important, right. Like is exactly I think in a sense like what ties us and yet we're not doing a great job of articulating a time. And I feel like I said, organization, we do have clarity as to know, actually, we can be better people in the way that we care for one another. What's stopping us from being able to do that?

Grace [00:22:43] I'm curious. Like, I think a lot of donors are much more familiar with the evidence base from work abroad with direct cash transfers. How is direct cash transfers in the U.S. the same or different than in an international context? Like, how would you advise donors how to think about the like mix, or what are the similarities or differences?

Jesús Gerena [00:23:05] Can I lead with my own, I think, important point of view, which is and I love the evidence, but I want to constantly bring up that overwhelmingly the importance of acknowledging that people are worth investing in, because they'll always do something good for themselves is important to acknowledge that they exist. But it's also important to acknowledge that that question shouldn't require evidence. And if you do need that evidence, I'll demonstrate it. We built a wealthy class over the last four decades through direct investment, and they've been able to, over and over and over again, grow their assets in the way that they see fit. And again, like that equitable piece, I just want to continue to push that. So from an international place, I think a lot of the times a smaller amount of dollars, and it's usually around more on the farming or entrepreneurship. I think in the United States, you have much more broader sort of set of circumstances that people are trying to address to better improve their lives. And so I see housing is a huge one, right? Housing stability today in the U.S., I think in any major city, market forces are really pushing on people's inabilities and we've seen, like, the effects of that through a lot of the homelessness that has increased. The other part around meeting basic needs, whether it's food, right, like that, the dollar amount that it takes to be able to meet those basic needs, in international setting versus here is a lot greater. And so, like in all of that, I'm always saying, well, give us money. Like people will say, what's the magic number? I'm like, as much as you want, you're going to have an impact, right, in that way. And then on the other side, what people are building assets around? Yes, there's entrepreneurship, children are huge the way that people are. Immediately, if you talk to most parents, they'll be able to tell you what they're trying to do to be able to improve their kids educational attainment as a way to be able to support them long term. Housing, health, education for themselves and being able to advance. So like those are like the usual like big bucket items that people are thinking about building. And so when you make investments, you're usually going to learn about how people are building long term for those assets.

Phil [00:25:25] I feel like maybe the elephant in the room in this conversation given, you know, you're situated in the Bay Area and we're talking about international context and domestic. There's been so much discussion over the last few years about so-called effective altruism, which has been defined in a variety of different ways, but kind of connects back up, I think, originally to the philosopher Peter Singer. And the argument has been made that a hyper rational donor who has a fixed amount of money should spend that money internationally because of exactly the dynamic you're describing, which is that it's more expensive to make a difference, shift the trajectory of a life in the United States than it is, say, in sub-Saharan Africa. I got a lot of feelings about this argument that I'll try to keep to myself, at least for a second. But I'm curious, like, do you get that pushback from folks who you're trying to raise money from who say, well, I can make more of a difference in terms of lives affected if I gave elsewhere so I'm not going to give to you. And if so, like, how do you seek to counter that?

Jesús Gerena [00:26:36] Most international funders will stay away from the domestic so it doesn't happen that we have cross paths or with donors specificall. We've been asked historically and, and still to this day in regards to like, wait, why don't you do this internationally? And I think this gets to your question, Phil, which is I think it's actually a lot of that philanthropy is modeled based on here, right? A lot of the work and interventions continuously are modeled around the work that goes here. And I do feel like we have a huge opportunity to be able to begin to model something differently. And how to shift philanthropy away from those interventions, always. A way of trying to help and creating that paternalistic relationship in whichever area of work that you're doing, I think is really important. But I do get it much more in regards to like that financial literacy. Oh, what you're doing this work, how are you going to teach these folks how to manage their

money? And there's there's some similarities in regards to if we invest in people away from programs and services, it's a wasted investment, it's so much more bigger than what these individuals can do. And I think that is really eliminating an understanding of opportunity in individuals rather than opportunity and changing individuals. And that part of it, whether it's here or abroad, has to continuously be challenged. It's it's really is about being able to see these individuals for themselves, for their abilities. Right. It really like settles to me right back to that point.

Grace [00:28:22] Jesús, I love the distinction that you just made between changing someone versus asking them what they need. I'm channeling some of our listeners here. Donors really want to know, like, how do I know if this funding is going to be used? Well, I mean, I had mentioned in a previous episode about, you know, the fictional my cousin Ned, who, you know, we all sort of know, someone that we have invested in, and perhaps they didn't use it in the right way. And so dispel some of that fear for us.

Jesús Gerena [00:28:53] Just great question. I would lead first with when it comes to individuals who already have assets and that we're investing in, we never ask that question

Grace: Hmhm

Jesús Gerena: And whether or not they use those dollars in a good or positive way or not, it doesn't matter, because we know overwhelmingly there may be a small set of bad actors, but the overwhelming amount of folks are going to continue to do the right things and care for the right things, and actually to the point that philanthropy has grown tremendously over the decades as we've invested in that right, as they've amassed wealth based on those principles that they continuously come back. And I think that, yes, there's going to be the, you know, the cousin Ned or whoever in your family who may squander that, but in a family of 40 or 50, you have 1 or 2 individuals. I would argue at all times, those other 48 are worth that 1 or 2 who may squander the opportunity in a way that you don't see fit. And again, overwhelmingly, our evidence has pointed to the opposite. That is, that people see this again, like it's it's incredible to think about the fact that gaining a small recognition, in my opinion, of like 9 or \$12,000 over two years for hard work, is seen as winning the lottery, right? Like that's how starved people are for any sort of resourcing to be able to do better. So there's that. The simple answer is, who cares if somebody does the wrong thing with it. In 2020, we put out as a result of the pandemic, mostly a one time payment of \$500- atotal of about \$130 million. And we had one case of fraud to 200,000 individuals.

Phil [00:32:36] This strikes me as exactly parallel and Jesús, you and I have discussed, this, to the way funders look at nonprofits and the sense that there is a tendency to generalize from the one brutal anecdote or bad actor. And we see this with Mackenzie Scott's giving. So she's given massive, unrestricted gifts, massive \$5 million at the median. We've been studying how organizations are using those gifts. You're one of only 13 organizations, I believe, that have received two massive gifts from Mackenzie Scott, which is awesome.

Jesús Gerena: Thank you.

We see all kinds of whispered predictions of problems. Nonprofits are going to misuse the resources. They're going to go off the financial cliff. Other funders are going to pull back. So far, early days, but we're into year three of data collection on this research, we see very

little evidence of that. We don't see evidence of the kind of problems that people feared or predicted. But of course, it's it's kind of like voter fraud. You know, it's like there's one incident and people say, oh, we have a problem with our whole electoral system, you know? No, actually we don't. And I see this from people I really respect who are like evaluation people, you know, at foundations who say, well, I heard this thing and I'll remind them very politely, yes, but if you look across the massive data set, you will know that that's an outlier, it's not a generalizable problem. And I don't know why we're wired to do this as people, but we just sort of whatever the worst thing is that happened, we assume it's a general problem and that we should make rules to address that worst thing. And I see funders do that in their relationship with nonprofits, just as we are talking about how we do it in our relationship with the ultimate intended beneficiaries of our philanthropy.

Grace [00:34:34] Well, part of it, Phil, is like also the role of the media, right? Like at The New York Times, the main nonprofit beat person is a nonprofit scandal beat. And so it's really good for us to interrogate, like, what do we actually believe and where is it coming from?

Jesús Gerena [00:34:47] Yeah, I really appreciate that and I think that the individuals such as Mackenzie Scott, who can be disruptors, like the status quo, all of a sudden it's like, well, how do we pull back? How do we hold it in a way that helps us maintain our perceived level of control about how this should continue to move forward? And I share that similarly with our work, because I worked again for an organization for ten years who was heavy on programs and services, and I just remember, like, we would level up and be like, 'oh, the kids need to go to college. Let's hire staff and like, help train them.' or 'they need support after school. Let's hire staff.' And and we would fundraise successfully to be able to support and grow those programs. And we would never stop to say, 'oh, the kids need support to get to college, who in their lives could do that and support them? What's blocking them from being able to do so, and how do we support them so that they better have the ability?' Rather than spend a half million in building programs and services, figure out, is it child care that they need? Is it somebody who who's going through the process, which we had access to tutors, to connect and volunteers? Right? Like it didn't always mean having to create an equation to be able to disrupt this inability for people to gain access to those higher ed institutions. Yet the system constantly says that's exactly the only way that you can do this. And so similarly, when you have developed that system through those equations, through logic models, right, that are constantly asking you to be accountable, to deliver, to have this impact against these great odds, then the disruptor becomes threatening to that way of thinking and saying, well, are those logic models worth it or not? And I think similarly, going back to that direct investment to people, that disruption has to occur. The second piece is this constant thinking that we don't have enough, that there's a scarcity in resources for us to have a society that cares for people. That's an easy disregard of saying like, 'oh, you just want to be like high tax and you want to be able to bankrupt the government and continue to take on debt,' and that's just not true, because what we see as when we invest in people is that they do more, they generate more income, they stabilize their housing as well as invest inside of their community. All of that generates more impact for those communities and for our government than everything that we have to do when we deprive people and they don't have enough. And that change has to be acknowledged, right? Like, we've created this whole system to react to the scarcity that we've created in the first place and continue to concentrate on the behavior of a scarcity rather than the scarcity itself.

Grace [00:37:54] Hmhm. I feel like there's like a what's the beautiful paradox in the work that Up Together does, Jesús because your values and the organization's values clearly

say that it's more than just the money, right? Like community and people have their own assets to bring to the table. And yet you are bringing pure hard dollars to these families as well. And so it's like a both and, that I think often times we have a hard time holding in our brains at the same time, but I love how holistic it is. Right? Because you see that cash alone is not enough and that people do know the solutions to their own problems and that they need to be in communities and that combination strikes me as being very rich.

Jesús Gerena [00:38:41] And I think about it in my own community in the way that I often point to that Harvard study that has been looking at now 70 or 80 years of individuals, how they're able to find fulfillment in their lives, what success means and at the end of it, overwhelmingly, it's always about those relationships. Everything else fades, right? The money fades, the careers fade. Right? Like the even the impact. But it's what people say, they continue to gain values from these relationships that support them...the personal, the friendships. And I think if we took that and began to apply it, as we look at communities, who struggle, how would we be different as a result? And so yes, money plays a part in that, but there's no way that institutions can support those relationships in the way that people support one another in those relationships, right? If we take that gain and that understanding and apply it with that lens, yeah, I think we can do a lot better.

Phil [00:39:51] There's been so much talk about trust in philanthropy, but you and your work, it seemed to me, are embodying trust to a sort of a radical degree. And you're making assumptions about the good in each person, about the decency and humanity of every one of us that honestly feel like they're kind of rowing against the current of our cynical and divided times. And so I think there's something very powerful and moving about the work, your leadership, and the way you describe it. But it is coming in a challenging context, a context of division, a context of inequality. So maybe as we wrap up here, I would love to just know for you, you know, what keeps you hopeful or optimistic, given the currents that sometimes it feels like we're swimming against?

Jesús Gerena [00:40:49] Yeah. And I just want to acknowledge, I think that especially in the sector, we're all exhausted, like there is a burnout that is occurring on top of the hard work that we all do on a day to day basis. There are other issues that are affecting us and the way that we live and think so we have to find ways to be able to sustain ourselves, right, for this work to hopefully have the impact that I know it can have. So my hope professionally lies in my continuing to be able to see what happens, like we had a gathering of probably about 60 families who have participated in our guaranteed income pilot here in Oakland, and the invitation was like, 'hey, we need pictures for our website. Would you be willing to take family portraits and then share with us some of those pictures so that we can populate our our website? And by the way, like you're the beneficiary of these pictures for yourself. And we are the beneficiaries of it for our media.' Right? And like, you know, it continues to travel true to our values. It's not the first time we've done this. And as people came in and began to share their stories about what happened, for being seen differently, the action of being seen differently through the dollars, following, through the connections that people make with one another. Like you sit there and you're just like, this isn't that hard, right? Like and that I'm struggling right as a sector and trying to, like, build this momentum and growing a movement and connecting with folks like, so I get that there is hard. But when you see those reactions and those connections. Yeah. No, it's actually not that hard, right? Like we have those answers. They're out there. They're hungry for it in that way. We need to get out of our own way. And then the second thing, and I'd be remiss since I have, 14 year old, an 11 year old and a six year old and an incredible wife who supports all of us, even when you were asking your question Phil, like we have hard conversations at our house. We live in Oakland. There's violence. There's

crime, right? They go to public schools here, and there's tons of challenges with that. And we have those hard decisions but then we also are like leaning back on people and the connections and the community that we've been able to build. And those things are the ones that sustain us. And so I, I would offer both, right, and the answer in each is the same.

Grace [00:43:22] Thank you so much for joining us today.

Phil [00:43:25] Thank you Jesús.

Jesús Gerena [00:43:26] Absolutely. Thank you guys. Really appreciate the conversation.

Phil: There are a ton of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

Grace: You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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