

Lessons on Disaster Giving With Patty McIlreavy

Phil Buchanan: Hi everyone. Today we're bringing you one of our favorite interviews from a previous season of the show. It's with Patty McIlreavy, president and CEO of the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. Even though this episode is almost 3 years old, the relevance of this conversation high, in the wake of both natural and man-made disasters, like the wildfires in L.A., flooding and hurricanes in the US and the Caribbean, and also in brutal conflict zones across the globe, makes this an important conversation to bring back into your feed.

Grace Nicolette: We got to ask her all our tough questions about how donors should think about giving to disaster relief in a time where disasters seem to be more frequent, widespread, and unpredictable. One more thing, the Center for Disaster Philanthropy recently [received a \\$60M gift](#) from MacKenzie Scott, which is notable on the heels of the recent dismantling of USAID and with the funding and leadership challenges for FEMA, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency, a timely infusion of resources for this moment. Here's the conversation we had with Patty McIlreavy.

Patty McIlreavy: All too often, our philanthropy is equated with charity. It shouldn't be charity; we should be helping communities build, build better, to be resilient and to develop, not to see as doing something on the cheap.

Grace Nicolette: 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 Buchanan: And I'm Phil Buchanan. Disasters happen all around us, sadly. In the last two years alone, we've witnessed a global pandemic, the ongoing war in Ukraine and resulting humanitarian crises, flooding in the Gulf Coast, wildfires in California, and the list feels endless. So how do we, as donors, take on and address disasters? How can we help prepare for, protect against, and provide support during times of crisis?

Today's guest, Patty McIlreavy, is president and CEO of the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, or CDP, and she has a lot of wisdom to share from her decades of experience in international humanitarian relief and recovery.

Grace Nicolette: CDP is one of those organizations where now that you've heard of them, you will likely see them everywhere – in news articles about disasters, they are really the experts. And for me, personally, I really struggle with knowing when to give to a disaster, because it just feels like this endless need, but I think I need to be challenged on that. And so, I'm really excited to dive in today and really understand, like, what is the best way to be involved and still be strategic about it.

Phil Buchanan: We're going to jump in. If you have feedback, as always, shoot us an email at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

Patty McIlreavy, so good to have you on the podcast.

Grace Nicolette: Welcome.

Patty McIlreavy: Thanks for having me.

Phil Buchanan: So many donors want to be responsive when there's a disaster, but let's start at the very beginning before we get to how to give in a disaster well, mistakes to avoid – how do you even define what is disaster philanthropy?

Patty McIlreavy: Well, I think you have to first back that up, Phil, and ask “what is a disaster?,” because I think what happens too often is folks focus on the funding side of disasters and then they think, but that's not my thing. I don't do disasters. And that stops a lot of people from recognizing that they are already actually probably philanthropist into the disaster realm just in a different way, because what a disaster is, is when a hazard meets a vulnerability. It's very simple, straightforward: if there's a large event, like a hurricane, and it happens in the Atlantic Ocean, and it's a class five or category five – you don't even know its name, nobody talks about it, because that hazard hasn't met to vulnerability. It's only when it comes to land, and it meets a community, or it meets an economic center, or it meets something – it creates a destruction, or it challenges a community – that it becomes a disaster. Within our work, we're trying to educate people that if you're caring about social justice, if you're caring about a community's recovery, a development, even voting rights – if you're caring about any of those issues – you have to look at the vulnerabilities that exist within your community and how that positions them for a hazard when it arrives. Because if you're not looking at that, there's an Achilles heel that you're leaving unguarded.

Phil Buchanan: Implicit in what you're saying, Patty, is that donors should not just think about giving in the wake of a disaster, but rather giving in order to prevent a misfortune in the first place. But that's a hard case to make, right? Because we're motivated by the images we see on TV or what we read about in the paper. So how do you convince donors to care about what I think I hear you saying, which is preventing a bad thing from happening, as opposed to responding emotionally in the wake of a bad thing that has happened?

Patty McIlreavy: Again, it's, what do you have control over? We don't necessarily have control over stopping hazards entirely, right? They will come, they will exist. They are sometimes outside of our power structure, but we can do things to decrease vulnerabilities.

You're helping a community with the education at your school, your local school – that is decreasing the vulnerability of those children. You are looking at voting rights, or you're talking about, you know, a food pantry – those are all decreasing a community's

vulnerabilities. If you're decreasing vulnerabilities, you are decreasing the risk of the disaster for that community because they are better prepared to mitigate, to be resilient during that disaster.

What happens is when that hazard arrives and it hits their vulnerabilities, they fall further behind. And it's a lot harder for them to come back from that. But if you've given them the tools to weather that disaster, to weather that hazard, they are then able to, you know, mitigate it and be better prepared.

If I may, just to be illustrative of an example, look at during the pandemic, the early days of the pandemic, we knew kids were going to be out of schools, and a lot of districts, even mind you, you know, DCn Public Schools, they were challenged: how do we get programming, virtual programming? How do we get equity in terms of digital access? Materials? All of these were challenges.

Partly, they were challenges, though, because for years we've been saying “we can't do that. We can't teach online. We can't have, you know, digital equity because of the cost that it would bring to communities. We can't be sending every child home with a computer because of the costs.”

Well, guess what? We did it. So, at what point is it that we have a “can't” attitude about something that would actually have built resilience, mitigated the impacts of that disaster for this community. But because the approach was, it had to be inside a brick-and-mortar school to work, education has to be inside a brick-and-mortar school, you know, we were left struggling to come up with solutions in the midst of the crisis itself.

Grace Nicolette: I think in addition to the prevention piece that we're talking about, I think, oftentimes the categories that we have around disasters are: there's the initial relief, right? Where we're responding immediately to a humanitarian crisis. And then there's sort of medium- to long-term building.

What's your take on how donors can best effectively respond? I mean, it sounds like prevention is sort of the best bang for the buck, but short of that, you know, a disaster has happened—how should donors think about at what point, should they wait? Should they act immediately?

Patty McIlreavy: Every donor is going to make a decision based on their own personal mission, their own vision. I mean, you know, you talk about philanthropy and always, there's always—organizations think they have to have a large strategic plan, but let's be honest, at your family level, you already have a vision of how you give. You know where you give, you've made decisions in your giving. And I think for part of that, in terms of how do you bring that disaster lens in, is are you asking questions of the nonprofit you're working

with about how they're preparing for this? I'm not a huge fan of this cycle mentality because it allows people to feel like there's a timeframe when it's over. That is very individual.

Every community, every family, every household, they will all be impacted differently in a disaster and where they need that help will vary. Some people will need very much that immediate relief. They're going to need that warm meal, that place to bed down, and then they're going to be okay, they'll figure it out. They've got, you know, money in their bank account, or they've got insurance, or whatever they may need. There's other people that maybe are going to be okay during those initial phases, because they are used to, you know, living hand to mouth, but that longer term now is going to be a crisis for them because the flood has, you know, wiped out their car and now they can no longer get to work.

Grace Nicolette: I think the fundamental tension I feel is that, in terms of how to be involved, the answer just seems: “yes.” Like at every level there needs to be involvement and maybe there's a false dichotomy in our minds that being responsive like that is at odds with being strategic. So, like, I have my giving buckets, and maybe I will ask the question about resiliency, but, you know, for instance, when Russia invaded the Ukraine—I don't have a bucket for giving to Ukraine personally, but I want to respond to the humanitarian crisis there, and so maybe I will give, you know, but it doesn't feel as strategic. Could you speak to that?

Patty McIlreavy: I think that people give for three reasons. They give because of proximity. Right? It's close by. You see it, you can feel it, or it's a community with which you have a connection.

They give because of scale. It's such a massive scale, you can't turn away. And Ukraine fits into that example. Right? Or even the tsunami, you know, the boxing day tsunami that had occurred.

Or they give because the media drives them there.

Now some of those they're not ors, they could be ands, right? They could be close by, it could be large scale, and the media could be all over it. But that is why people give for the most part, they want to be seen to give. They're empathizing with the situation. There's a lot of drivers that bring people into that giving. And that immediate response, I think it's human nature. We want to give when we think we can make a difference. It's why people do the canned good drive or why they go off to get their coats that the people of Haiti don't need. You know, they want to try and give something, they want to be helpful.

And one of the things we try and do at CDP is try and encourage people to channel that empathy into an educated, knowledgeable energy. So it's not to say

it's wrong to give, it's good to give in the early days, but give flexibly, trust your organization, give to organizations that have a long-term mindset and that with flexible dollars, they can transition from warm meals to a food pantry. They can transition from cash to, you know, job creation. Give it to organizations that know how to work with those communities and are able to listen and transition.

Phil Buchanan: That's really important what you said, and it brings me back to your example of the pandemic, where we saw that it was often small and community rooted organizations that were best positioned to have that understanding that you spoke to of what is needed by different families or different individuals who are affected.

But so often in disasters, what we are told is to give to the big brand name, you know, national or global organization or relief fund. That's what's flashing across CNN. So, how do you guide a donor who, let's say that the disaster is not proximate to them? They've been motivated either by scale or media, to your other points. They want to do something. They know nothing about which organizations have those community roots that might make them particularly knowledgeable about what is needed and also, to your other point, are there for the long haul. What do they do? How do they find those organizations?

Patty McIlreavy: I'm always hesitant to try and create this competition between the big organizations and the small organizations or the United Nations versus NGOs or even governments. Because we all have a role. There's an ecosystem within the response. And the strong organizations, the big ones, the ones that, you know, run across CNN—they should know when they're needed or not. And not all of them are necessarily going to step back, but there will be some, and they have proven themselves over time, to step back, or to stop taking funding, or to work through local partners.

So, you know, one is being an educated donor and understanding who those organizations are. But that puts a lot of pressure on the individual in the midst of that moment. And I recognize that. So, I think there are intelligent intermediaries out there such as, you know, CDP itself or Global Giving or others, who work and help donors find a conduit to those smaller organizations, help them identify those smaller organizations.

So, there are different ways that you can get the funding into the area without having to do all that research of, “who are the individual smaller organizations on the ground?”

It also really depends, Phil, on the context. What is the crisis you're responding to? You don't want someone flying in to respond to Ukraine. You know, there are organizations who have worked there for a decade. The current attention that that's being brought to Ukraine, the current invasion by Russia, is not the beginning of Ukraine's problems. It may be the beginning of the media bringing it to the attention.

You know, those organizations can be pre-vetted can be pre-identified. So, when you're looking at who to help, see if they have a presence in that region before. But if you're looking at, you know, your local community disaster, you probably already know the organizations that are helping, so you don't need to give to the one that's got headquarters far away and that's going to fly in. You can give to those organizations who are on the ground already, who you know.

Grace Nicolette: That reminds me of a conversation I had with my parents recently about Ukraine. Apparently, they had gotten connected with someone who knows, like, a pastor on the ground there. And they were wrestling with, should I give to, like, the Red Cross or to this pastor? And they ultimately decided to give to the pastor, and it was just interesting helping them kind of weigh, “well, this person probably can buy some supplies on the ground” and then ultimately it's a decision they just had to make the call on.

Can you talk a little bit about what donors should be giving people in the wake of a disaster and what they shouldn't? I mean, I think that this has become more of a conversation recently, like, with food banks, you should just give money. Don't necessarily bring your about-to-expire cans. What is your take on that?

Patty McIlreavy: There's very different situations, right? I mean, a food bank in your community is probably set up for the day-to-day management of poverty that exists in your community.

That's a disaster of a different sort. It's not the one we would necessarily call attention to or put into, you know, the type of thing I mentioned with the vulnerability and the hazard, but it's the vulnerabilities, right? These are communities that are already underserved. So, giving food to a food bank, if you're following their instructions of what to give, that's probably fine.

For me, what's important is not dumping. You shouldn't look at charity as a way to get rid of stuff you don't want or that you know no one really needs. If they have a list of what you can give--and they say they want it clean, in good order or new, newly boxed, that's up to them. They've made that decision. That's part

of their model. They will have budgeted to manage whatever you're giving them.

What I think the challenge really becomes is when you talk about shipping items far away, and the fact that, the drain that that place is—imagine, again, that you're on the receiving end of this. You're in Haiti, you're at the airport or the port, after the earthquake, and what's coming in is not the supplies you desperately need to hand out to the community that's been identified with the community, and you have a clear distribution plan. What's coming in instead is a load of Teddy bears and coats. And suddenly all that stuff has to be stored

somewhere. Warehouse space is taken up. You don't have the ability to distribute it. It's a glut. There's no other word for it, but it's when people have the best of intentions, but they're not thinking through, is this really what is needed?

How do you feed a village with 16 different types of canned goods. What are you going to do with that? It might not even be culturally appropriate food. You know, what we eat is not necessarily what people in other countries are eating or able to prepare a meal with. That's why you'll hear this campaign of cash is best. Because it is, first off, incredibly nimble, we can do what is needed with it. We can change it on route. Maybe we initially thought we needed, you know, shelter. But then we get in there and we're like, actually the biggest need right now is, you know, healthcare. But if you've already given all the support for shelter, and you've sent nothing but plastic sheeting, and you've used all your money to import that, now you're stuck with that program, even though that's not what the community needs.

Phil Buchanan: This reminds me of when I was working on Giving Done Right, the book, and I was doing research in Houston, and I was talking to a foundation leader who told me about some of her experiences with the response to Hurricane Harvey, including donors who were insisted that they wanted to do this and not that, despite the fact that this colleague of mine was saying, I was explaining why that's not needed, right? But it was so much about the donor, but also described, literally opening a box with stiletto heels in it for I don't know what reason, right?

Grace Nicolette: Don't send heels.

Phil Buchanan: Hard to fathom the thinking there.

Patty McIlreavy: I'm sure it was a tax break for some company or something, right?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, right, right. So how do we put aside our own sense that we know what is needed, when we don't?

And that relates a little bit also to this question of, like, which disasters we respond to and how do we make sure that we're thinking about not just what the media is paying attention to, because it isn't necessarily the case that the natural disaster in East Africa gets the same attention in the Western media as the disaster in Europe.

So, all of these, kind of, biases or instincts that affect how we give, how do you think about that? And does CDP try to help with that by drawing attention to what is really needed or ensuring a more equitable response to disasters that happen in different parts of the world?

Patty McIlreavy: I mean, that's such a great question and so timely now with what's going on in Ukraine, right? I mean, there's over a billion dollars of philanthropic donations to

Ukraine already. And I can tell you, the people in East Africa would be jumping for joy over half that number coming into their region to help with the current drought and famine that's breaking up.

I think you definitely have a challenge in equitable approaches and it's something, you know, CDP is very focused on, is trying to bring attention to inequitable recovery. But at the same time, it's not our money. So, we don't always get to decide where that funding goes. If donors give to our more general funds, we have prioritizations, we try and bring those to crises where they are underfunded, where there are bigger needs. But that's not always within our control. But we do educate, we do try and ensure that people are aware of these other disasters and how they can help.

I want to comment though, Phil, on what you said about, like, the donors knowing better. I think that is a complexity that just exists everywhere. I mean, it's not just in the individual donors—it's foundation donors, it's governmental donors. The arrogance of the donors, like, "I have, and you don't, and that must be because, somehow, you're at fault, right? You're to blame. So, you should trust me that I know better what to do with that money." And somehow the nonprofits and the other operational agencies, we get stuck in the middle of that conversation. I'm always kind of like, oh wait, was that covered at Wharton based school? Was that part of your degree? Because I'm not sure it was. And I, I have full amounts of respect for you and your ability to create the empire that you've created, your own, you know, personal finances, kudos! But others of us have a different experience, and we have our expertises, and let's be mutually respectful in the same way that I will challenge nonprofits to be mutually

respectful of the communities we're serving, the community knows themselves best. And they will tell you best what they need.

Phil Buchanan: You are preaching to the very enthusiastic choir

Grace Nicolette: Speaking our language.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, because, I mean, this is, this is the central challenge, I think, of giving right, is the arrogance that gets in the way, the lack of understanding of what is not known by the donor.

Grace Nicolette: I think though, I mean, one note in a donor's defense is it does seem like, for disasters, the complexity of the situation is something to be reckoned with, right? Like, you have governments, you have perhaps corruption on the ground. And so, it can be really hard to know whether you're actually contributing to effectiveness or not. So, I'm curious as you think about disasters that you've seen a coordinated response to, or maybe that you've

been involved with coordinating, is there one that stands out as being more effective or actually a failure? How can donors kind of be wise as they think about how to give?

Patty McIlreavy: I guess I would challenge a little bit the, the idea that somehow people or countries that are undergoing disasters or communities that are within disasters are somehow more corrupt than the rest of society. That's again, an arrogance and assumption that they don't know how to do their job.

Grace Nicolette: Mm-hmm

Patty McIlreavy: They don't know how to protect themselves. There may be more risks than in a normal day, but they also are prepared for that. They have systems and structures put in place to prepare for that. You know, in the early days of Ukraine, for example, I was saying to donors, these are the ones who actually know how to work around the sanctions, right? Which people need to understand these organizations. This is what they do. They know how to work in situations where there's, you know, they may run afoul of terrorism regulations. They work in situations where they have security concerns and that's again, why it's really important to trust those organizations and give them the funding to be able to protect themselves.

I would say though, not to put it all on the donors. The nonprofits have also done a disservice to themselves and to their communities by often not speaking enough about their own expertise, not speaking enough about the risks that they

face and how they mitigate against them. And by giving out simple stories that all too often put communities in what I would say is a negative light, you know, disaster porn as a way to fundraise rather than, you know, marketing despair versus marketing hope as a way to bring in money. I think, as well, there has been all too much around for the price of coffee, right? You know, your cup of coffee a day, you can feed this village. Well, I'd love to see the village or town that can eat off a cup of coffee a day, even a Starbucks Frappuccino. There's no way. We undersell the complexities of our work. We undersell the realities of our expertise. And I think that just further emboldens this mindset that, well, you don't know what you're doing, like, we need to help you.

Grace Nicolette: I would love for you to sort of share the examples of what you think has gone well, and maybe what hasn't gone well. I mean, the example in my mind, for better or for worse, is the Haiti earthquake relief, right? The stats around that, the billions of dollars that were poured into rebuilding that country that essentially evaporated.

And so, I worry that donors see an example like that—and I'm sure there are many other examples, you know, I don't mean to pick on Haiti—where it just gives donors pause. How would you explain, like, what happened there, and how should donors think about it?

Patty McIlreavy: Well, I think partly what happened in Haiti, part of the reason why the response in Haiti didn't go as well as could have, was its proximity to the United States. Because if it had been further away and the coordination mechanisms that the international, you know, actors have agreed upon were working effectively, because there would've been less of them. But what happened is you had a very, very crowded space. You had a lot of organizations that were just, you know, individuals, well intentioned, but had never been outside the country before, people flying into Haiti saying they could help.

And that created a lot of parallel structures. It overwhelmed a government that was already traumatized by the earthquake, traumatized in terms of, you know, personal trauma, but also, you know, sheer numbers of people who were lost. The UN was overwhelmed in its ability to coordinate those actors. And I think the way it's best demonstrated, Grace, was in, and I don't know the exact statistic, but Harvard did some research on this afterwards, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, the number of amputations that occurred in Haiti from well-intentioned weekend warrior doctors who flew down to Haiti, not understanding what it was like to work in a disaster setting, much less an impoverished nation, and who basically went to, you know, Civil War-style surgical approaches to trauma, because they felt like without the equipment they

would've had at their access in the US, they couldn't help people. That, for me, was mind blowing, like, how these individuals who wanted to help, who had skills to help, but who didn't have the understanding and the experience and knowledge of working in those conditions, actually did an enormous amount of harm. Now people who might have been willing to walk with a limp were disabled in a country that does not have easy access to assistance for them. Their economic future is damaged.

Grace Nicolette: Could you give the example of a disaster where you feel like the response was coordinated well?

Patty McIlreavy: My understanding is the disaster in Houston, the response to Houston went very well in terms of Hurricane Harvey. That response went effectively, and we're still actually supporting and working with communities who were responding to that. And so that was very Texas-led. A lot of organizations—the funding went in, but it was driven and designed and based on community approaches.

I mean, that's such a challenging question because what does success look like? In some of these countries, you are already facing extreme poverty. We are bringing them up to, you know, maybe their path on the sustainable development goals, but you're not necessarily going to bring them to the future of it.

Phil Buchanan: Coming back to Houston and Harvey and your example—that squares with my very anecdotal impression of the response. And I think a key player in that response was the local community foundation. And, so often, I think these kind of anchor institutions that have that knowledge of the other organizations that serve particular communities end up just playing a vital role. We saw that in the pandemic, of course, as so many community foundations stepped up in that way.

Those are intermediaries that are rooted in a particular geography. You at CDP are a different kind of intermediary between donors and the good that they want to do. I guess I'd invite you to explain how it works a little bit and how a donor can do good work through contributing to your funds.

Patty McIlreavy: Yeah, I'd love to. So, I mean, first and foremost, I just want to highlight that we don't believe that you have to give through us to do good in disasters. Our mission is about elevating the leverage that philanthropy can play. Having them recognize that they have the ability to be a game changer in response and recovery work.

And we do that, you know, in a couple of ways—the first way is free. It's on our website. We we're there to inform you of what disasters are out there. What are ways that you can help? What are ways that you can be engaged? What are organizations that you can support, if you look at who we support? Those organizations have been vetted, are trusted and responsive in that disaster.

And so, we try and allow philanthropy, be it an individual, be it a family, be it, you know, a foundation, to look at what their giving strategy may be and to explore—is there something that resonates with them and what we're providing?

The second thing is if you really want to, like, strategize. You know, much more upping your game on what my strategy might be for just disaster giving. We can help with that. We have a consulting side where we'll help you think it through and plan it out.

The third piece is the funds. And I always list them last on purpose because the reason the funds have an effectiveness for us, in terms of getting to a really localized recovery with an equity mindset, is the expertise that we bring in and experience that we bring in from the other parts of the team, right? So, by knowing these disasters, by tracking them, by being attentive to them, by working with nonprofits on the ground, by speaking to communities, we have that triangulation of information, and we bring that into our fund making, we bring that into our disaster giving by saying, how local can we get? What is the actual response that's needed? And we give it time. We have a recovery mindset, and that, again, doesn't mean we ignore the response, but we want an approach—it's not a timeframe, it's an approach—we want an approach that's driven by the community. What is the help they

need to find recovery? For example, during COVID, you know, I've got over 25 years of experience working in disaster response and recovery, and I was still surprised at some of the grants that we made, you know, funds that we gave out during COVID. And that's because we were listening to the community, we were taking the time for them to educate us about what they needed and then being responsive and funding those things.

Grace Nicolette: I'd like to talk about the connection between climate change and disasters, because it seems like we are in this cycle. Like, we talk about Hurricane Harvey and Texas. There have been other hurricanes that have hit since Harvey, right, that have done their damage. And yet there's still going to be hurricanes there that may be disruptive to people's homes and livelihoods. Can you talk about that?

Patty McIlreavy: We all know that climate change is a game changer. The world is on fire, right, it's a code red alert from the United Nations. We have increased frequency, increased severity of disasters—of hazards. They are coming. So, we know these hazards are coming. And I think one thing that we need to recognize is it's going to take a lot to back that up. So, I want to also remind people that yes, you should be very attentive, but a lot of this is going to be political will. We're not going to change our current trajectory by the fact that, you know, Phil, Grace, and Patty are recycling. This is going to require a political will across the globe. So, I definitely think the disaster community, the people who work on disasters, we need to recognize that this is coming and it's going to affect our work, and that we have a responsibility to call it out. And it's why in part, you know, Grace, I started off with that, “what is a disaster” kind of discussion, because I think, all too often, we haven't given enough voice to the creation of vulnerabilities. What then has basically created more risk to certain populations. Report after report has come out that there are certain communities that are disproportionately impacted, and they are often the Brown and Black people in the United States. They are often in other countries, other tribes or clans or religious groups that have been purposefully isolated and underdeveloped.

So, we know that climate change is going to hurt these people even. And it hurts anyone else. So, I think one thing we have to do is we have to speak about it. We have to call it out. We have to deal with the root causes. We have to address it as much as possible. We have to call in those organizations who don't think of themselves as disaster philanthropists to recognize that their programs, which address root causes, are not going to help those communities as much as they'd like if they don't look at the fact that these people are in the path of hurricanes or in a flood plane or are in a, you know, high wildfire region. They can't just say, well, that's somebody else's responsibility. Because if they truly care about those communities, they have to look at what those risks are that are coming.

Grace Nicolette: And sometimes, you know, the impact of being prepared cannot be necessarily measured upfront now, right? Like the hurricane has not yet come. And I think donors need to have that longer term mindset and not say, like, well, I need to be able to measure the outcomes of the things that I put in. I mean, there can be this bigger picture that I think often gets neglected.

Phil Buchanan: I think that's such an important point, Grace. Because in the desire to know "what was my impact?" you can fail to address things for which the ultimate measure of impact is something not happening.

Grace Nicolette: Yeah.

Patty McIlreavy: I mean, that is exactly why disaster risk reduction is never funded because, you know, governments, who would be the largest donors to this, let's be honest, they don't want to be seen as like, "oh, we gave it the office," right, "we gave before," right, "we're not going to give now." They don't want to be seen as that. They want to be seen as having given at that moment.

Grace Nicolette: Yeah.

Patty McIlreavy: And that's where those hard choices are being made. And that's where I do think philanthropy can make a difference, because if we're pushing on these nonprofits and giving them the funding to be flexible and saying, we care about the root causes, and we recognize that if we don't address these, if we don't build these communities up, they're even more exposed to these disasters that are coming, and even if we can't change that hazard—I can't stop a hurricane, but I can help you build that house with, you know, hurricane proofing. What can I do to help, to be, maybe it's going to cost a little more, but I know it's going to be for the better of that community. And so I should do that. That should be how we help people.

Grace Nicolette: At the end of every episode, we ask each guest, the question, giving done right, to me, is about: fill in the blank. How would you answer that, Patty?

Patty McIlreavy: Giving done right, to me, is about being an informed donor who's willing to take chances.

Phil Buchanan: Patty, this has been really, really helpful. Enlightening. Really appreciate the conversation with you today.

Grace Nicolette: Thank you so much.

Patty McIlreavy: Thank you so much for having me.

Grace Nicolette: Phil, you know what's different about this conversation with Patty is that we often say that donors need to get really proximate to the communities that they want to serve. And yet, in her example with Haiti, donors got proximate in a really bad way, right? So, there's, like, a smart way to do it and a not so smart way.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, and sometimes, in that incredibly moving and sad story about the doctors, we remember that sometimes the expertise that you do have doesn't translate so well to a different context. You can't just go in and assume that you've got the answers, because you could do damage. And so, there's

something about getting your resources in the hands of people who are proximate, but not necessarily getting your own self in there.

Grace Nicolette: Yeah. Cultural competency is such a huge asset in times of disaster, especially internationally.

The other thing that stands out to me is that success is also when something bad doesn't happen, right? Like, and I think that sometimes we can really struggle with that as donors. We want the report that shows that this proactive thing happened because of our funding or our involvement. But really having that conversation with nonprofit leaders about, “how can we prevent disasters or vulnerabilities happening to your community?” can be just as powerful. And we shouldn't short-change that.

Phil Buchanan: Absolutely. I remember having a conversation with an executive at a major foundation that used to have a program related to nuclear threats. And she said, I have such a difficult time telling the board how we're doing. I just say like, okay, there hasn't been a nuclear war, so I guess we're doing all right.

I don't mean to make light of it; it's so important to prevent bad things from happening. But like you're saying, people don't know how to get their head around that in terms of the metrics or what was their impact.

Grace Nicolette: And related to that, I think we are naturally drawn to, sort of, the sad stories, right? The crisis, the disasters—our heartstrings are tugged, but maybe we need to think about how nonprofits can actually tell hopeful stories, like, viewing communities not from a deficit perspective, but from an asset-based perspective, something that Trabian Shorters in our sector often talks about. These communities can offer so much to the world, and why do we always fall into the trap of giving only when there's a really sad story?

Phil Buchanan: And I think Patty was maybe saying between the lines, or maybe she was saying it directly, that nonprofits that fundraise on the suffering, it might be effective, but that doesn't mean it's the right thing to do in terms of the story you're telling about people,

so I thought that was pretty interesting. And then of course she hit on some old familiar topics to us, like the importance of just humility and of really taking an equity perspective and understanding that something happens, and some people suffer more than others and that's rooted in systemic inequity.

Grace Nicolette: Thank you for listening to Giving Done Right. You can find more resources about effective giving and the podcast on 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.

Phil Buchanan: Listeners, we want to hear from you. Tell us what giving done right is about to you, what it really means, and we'll feature some of our favorites on the show later this season, just send us a short voice memo—one minute or less—to gdrpodcast@cep.org.

Grace Nicolette: Giving Done Right is a production of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. It's hosted by me, Grace Nicolette, and Phil Buchanan. Our executive producer is Sarah Martin with mixing and engineering by Kevin O'Connell and additional editing by Isabelle Hibbard.

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