

Giving Done Right, Season 6, Bonus Episode - A Special Goodbye from Grace

Phil Buchanan: Hey, everybody, Phil here. Super excited about season six of Giving Done Right coming in September, but right now we have something special for you.

Grace Nicolette: Welcome to Giving Done Right. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil Buchanan: And I'm Phil Buchanan. Today, I'm so pleased to have this very special episode of Giving Done Right, Grace Nicolette's last, and it's just an opportunity for us to talk with her a bit in-between season five and season six. Grace has been at CEP for 15 years. She has co-hosted more than 50 episodes of this podcast with me, and I just wanna talk with you a little bit, Grace, because you're always asking the questions over the course of those five seasons. I'd like to ask you some questions, because I know our listeners have grown to really appreciate you and know you and respect your point of view, and I am so grateful, obviously, for everything you've done for this organization over those many years, and we'll talk a bit about that. But I wanna start with what brought you to CEP in the first place anyway?

Grace Nicolette: Well, first, thanks for having me, and I'm happy to be a guest on the show for once. Kinda weird to think that that was my last time saying, "Welcome to Giving Done Right." So yeah, what brought me to CEP? Well, if we go way back, before I worked at CEP, I was actually living in Shanghai and working in philanthropy. And back when Twitter was a thing and I was on it, I followed you, Phil, on Twitter.

Phil Buchanan: I'm so sorry.

Grace Nicolette: And quickly found that I really resonated with a lot of what you were saying and felt like you had a really strong point of view, which I really appreciated. And so when I ended up moving back to the States to get married in 2011, and I had to find a job, I saw an opening at CEP, and I thought, "Oh, wait, I know CEP because of Phil," and I applied for a job on our colleague Kevin Bolduc's team, and, uh, the rest is history.

Phil Buchanan: So it's interesting that you say that because I distinctly remember my wife Lara saying, "Does anybody see what you're tweeting before you submit it? Do you have anyone review it?" She's like...

Grace Nicolette: Oh, does anyone vet them?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. Yeah. Do you need somebody, like, you know, sort of parenting you?

Grace Nicolette: No, no

Phil Buchanan: Was what she was suggesting to me, but I'm glad that it was not a repellent. So you joined CEP leading client engagements with foundations for us. A couple years in, I begged you to take on this interim role, which became a permanent role, leading our development, our communications, and our programming conference, webinars, all that kinda stuff. You obviously have a particular perch over that decade and a half to look out at philanthropy broadly. And I'm curious, as you think about your time in that role with that visibility into what's happening- What's shifted that you think is particularly significant? Has anything changed?

Grace Nicolette: Definitely. I still remember leading, you know, my first grantee perception report. So basically, it's when a funder asks us to survey all their active grantees, and then we do the benchmarking and this really helpful report about what the strengths and opportunities are. I was so struck by how earnest in learning that the foundation staff and board of this particular foundation were. I thought, "Wow, this is so great that they really want to listen well to grantees, and they really wanna do better, and they really wanna understand how they can make the most difference with the funding that they give." And I have to say that over the years, I've just seen that part of our work just grow and grow and grow. And so I think that, you know, we're much larger now than we were when I first joined. And so that really has meant that more funders are having that conversation. Like, more funders are being willing to go through the process of gathering feedback, which, you know, can feel a little vulnerable at times but also can be so rich. And we hear this all the time, that folks are just like, "Gosh, I can't believe how rich that was. We're so grateful." And so I do feel like, you know, in a time when things can feel like the world is not going as well as we'd hope it would, I do see that more and more funders are trying to listen to their communities and trying to listen to the folks they seek to support in order to do better. So I'm really encouraged by that. Now, are there more opportunities? Absolutely. Especially this moment just revealed a lot of the challenges that face the sector and the things that still need to be addressed. But I would say that on the whole, I'm really grateful that conversations around, for instance, multi-year general operating support are more every day now. And I would say that CEP had a big part in that.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. I hope so. I hope that's true. I think it's true. And then also the other part of this moment being frustrating, I also, you know, feel. I mean, I read a piece in *Inside Philanthropy* recently about just the level of anger and frustration that folks have toward foundations right now. And I have very mixed feelings about that piece because I feel very conflicted. I've been really impressed by the way some funders have responded to the challenge of this context. And then if I step back and look at what our research says about the scale of what nonprofits are facing and what the communities they serve are facing, and I look at the sort of overall foundation response, I don't think it's enough. That's my take. And I, I guess all of that can sort of simultaneously be true, that there are an increasing number of funders that are committed in the ways that you describe; to listening, to supporting organizations in the ways that they need to be supported, and then also that it's not enough and that we need more...What's your take on that?

Grace Nicolette: Totally. I mean, two things come to mind. One is I feel like a funder's posture in normal times actually has a really big impact on how they respond in moments like this, right? So obviously, you can be really open to gathering feedback, but also be incredibly risk-averse and incredibly controlling about the outcomes that are around the funder. And all of that is just laid bare when there's a crisis. That's the first thing that comes to mind. The second is I feel like funders really don't ask the question enough of what is the risk of not acting, right? It can be very understandable to know what the risks are of speaking up. I mean, those are knowable in some ways, some ways unknowable. But we don't really talk more about, well, we could also just lay low, but that also brings its own risks to our grantees, to the sector, to the long-term health of our civil society. And so I'm not saying that everyone needs to play from the same playbook, but I think that they need to ask themselves the questions of what's their lane and where can they make the most difference?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. And I think to combat, and this is true for individual donors, it's true for foundation staff, to combat the sort of sense of fatigue or powerlessness that can lead folks to just say, "I'm just gonna compartmentalize and go on with my own life." And I don't know how to combat that. I mean, I think part of it is folks acting collaboratively together, getting energy and support from each other. But you know, that fatigue is real. I mean, as you know, we've been spending a lot of time trying to just raise the visibility of our periodic check-ins with a representative group of nonprofits about how they are faring in this time. And I've been interested to see how many funders have basically said, not in these words, like, "They're tired. Well, we're tired, too." And I gotta admit, I do it sometimes, just sort of like roll my eyes, like, okay, you're at an endowed foundation. You don't have to worry about meeting payroll. But actually, they feel besieged by requests, and I think individual donors, too, because of the, like, ripple effects of the federal funding cuts and the way that that's increasing demand. So there's some psychological piece here of how do we get people to get off the couch, do something, and not disconnect? And sometimes it actually is just a sense of overwhelm, like, "There's nothing that I *can* do." I wonder how you think about that even for yourself in your own life?

Grace Nicolette: We've talked about this a lot at CEP, which is whenever a crisis happens in the broader world, so for instance, like the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw this, it's really the folks at the farthest margins of society who start feeling the negative impacts first. They're sort of the canaries in the coal mine. Like, they really start being persecuted, or they start having people go after them. And then it really is this spectrum where it starts with them, and then it actually comes, eventually, for everyone.

Phil Buchanan: Right. It's the first they came for, dot, dot, dot.

Grace Nicolette: Exactly. In the authoritarian playbook. And I... So I feel like the fact that we ourselves, whether donors or people who are not on the front lines working at a nonprofit, are experiencing these things, how much more are people at the margins feeling them? So I think that we can walk and chew gum at the same time, as you often say. We can be tired and seek comfort, resolution, rest, and fight for those whom we know are struggling even harder than we are. It's not either/or. In

fact, one has to feed the other and vice versa. So that's how I think about it. I think that when we're tired, it's actually not the time to throw our hands up basically.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. I think that's it exactly, and it's like progress isn't gonna be linear. You're saying motivation in part out of empathy for those who are dealing with more than we are, and then also I think about the people who came before us historically and what do we owe them? Like not to give up on whatever they did.

Grace Nicolette: And those who come after us as well.

Phil Buchanan: Absolutely. Okay, switching gears a little bit, Grace. But maybe connected because I'm curious, thinking about the podcast, 50-plus episodes, is there something that inspired you or a conversation or a guest that has just stuck with you? I mean, I'm not asking you...Well, I am asking you to pick favorites. Like which of those conver...Cause we have really had a great opportunity to talk to people who are household names in the philanthropy world or even beyond in the case of someone like Jeremy Lin, your hero. But also to talk to people who, you know, probably folks have not heard of but are just really doing inspiring work. What sticks out to you from all those conversations?

Grace Nicolette: Boy, it's so hard to, like, pick just a handful of the ones that I liked because I think some of those conversations were just so powerful and really did change me. I think a couple themes jump out. Oftentimes, I think donors don't realize that when they are in the journey of knowing how to give and learning how to be better at it, that they themselves get changed for the better. I think that they often think that they're the one kind of acting on others with their generosity, which is definitely true, but I also think that there's such, like, joy and even, like, new community that comes out of this journey of giving. So I think about the conversation that I had with April Tam Smith that one time, I think you were away, and-

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, so your favorite time was the one that I couldn't join you for...

Grace Nicolette: No, no, no, no. It's not my favorite. But just as an example, you know, how she used to, she and her husband used to live on 10% of their income and give away 90%. And they started a restaurant that gave all its proceeds away, and during COVID, when the restaurant was about to default on its 10-year lease in Times Square, how people just came out of the woodwork, her colleagues, her friends and neighbors, to keep the restaurant going, and she had no idea that that was going to happen, and she had no idea that she was part of this thicker community.

April Tam Smith CLIP: A day or two later, one of my coworkers called and just said, "The last thing we want you to do is worry about this. So we talked among ourselves, and we all wanna chip in for your payroll." It was so beautiful. I was just sobbing. And they said, "Just tell us where to send the money."

Grace Nicolette: I just love that story. You do mention Jeremy Lin. That has to be one of my favorite in terms of just speaking to a hero of mine. And, um, so that was awesome.

Jeremy Lin CLIP: All the amazing successes, like Linsanity, like being the most popular person on the entire planet, even in the midst of that, I realized, oh, I would just set a new goal. There's always something more to chase after, something more to do. And I realized that if I'm not bringing other people up with me, and if I'm not serving people along the way in my career, no success or failure will really give me the satisfaction and fulfillment that I want. So that's when I started to really look at myself and say, "How can I go about my life to continue to radically love and serve other people and to give back to my community?"

Grace Nicolette: You know, the episode in my mind that always sticks out that I think, gosh, this would be a great episode to include in, like, a college curriculum that is just so engaging but also just, like, really summarizes so well what donors should know about giving to disaster relief would be the conversation we had with Patty McIlreavy from the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. Man, that was so good. I learned so much.

Patty McIlreavy CLIP: 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 gonna need that warm meal, that place to bed down, and then they're gonna 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 gonna be okay during those initial phases 'cause they are used to, you know, living hand to mouth. But that longer term now is gonna 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 kind of look at giving to disasters really differently now.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. I thought you were gonna say Paul Niehaus at GiveDirectly.

Grace Nicolette: Oh, yes. That's true. We got to debate effective altruism with him, which is something that I've always wanted to do. It's like we got to ask him all the hard questions.

Phil Buchanan: He had this notion that I've, I've heard other people say since, but it was the first time I'd heard somebody make this argument that the question you should ask yourself before giving to an organization that's serving people in some way is, is that making more of a difference than if I just gave directly to those people? And I thought, like, that is such a simple, practical, useful filter on whether to give to an organization that is doing something to help people rather than the alternative, which is to give directly to people who can do things for themselves. And both are important, obviously. You know, there's different times when each is the best way to proceed. But that question, I think, is the right one.

Grace Nicolette: Yeah. And also, he is, like, probably the best ambassador for effective altruism that anyone could find.

Phil Buchanan: They got a lot of bad ambassadors.

Grace Nicolette: Everyone else is a bad one. I think that, like, the humility that he brings...

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, he's amazing.

Grace Nicolette: and so, yeah, so that was lovely because I felt like we got to ask all the hard questions, but it wasn't, you know... I kind of imagined that we would be, like, debating a Silicon Valley bro or something.

Phil Buchanan: Right. No, he was not that.

Grace Nicolette: No hate to the Silicon Valley bros who listen to this show.

Phil Buchanan: No, no. The ones in your life.

Grace Nicolette: But you know what I mean?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. Yeah. Right.

Paul Niehaus CLIP: The people we should be going after are not the people that are giving to, like, poverty alleviation in the US and sort of hitting them over the head and say, "Why aren't you doing poverty alleviation in Africa?" But it's the people that aren't giving at all, right? Like, those are the bad guys in this story. We want to get them into the game.

Phil Buchanan: Over the years, you pushed us in a variety of different directions, including to focus more on trying to influence individual donors, different kinds of institutional givers that weren't necessarily foundations. You had a real interest and advocated internally at CEP for us doing more work outside the United States, more work globally, which we have done. You have also pushed us to, you know, make sure that we're not just speaking to the choir, that we're reaching a diverse range of folks in all the ways, including ideologically. And then you've also helped just increase our reach in a big way. Like, we're much more well-known than we were when you joined, when we were half the staff size, but also just reaching many fewer...

Grace Nicolette: Definitely a group effort.

Phil Buchanan: people. Yeah, no, but I just wanna give you credit for all that stuff 'cause it's true and, you know, has a lasting impact not just on us, but on the folks that we seek to serve and influence. And I'm curious, any advice that you would give

me or CEP or anything that sticks with you from just seeing that evolution? I mean, the organization was very, very young when you joined, and now people often seem to think we've been around forever, which we most definitely haven't. What comes to mind for you as you reflect on that time?

Grace Nicolette: Yeah. Gosh, how much time do we have? I, I think when people ask me what is it like to work at CEP and I share with them, I'm often met with the sense of like astonishment that an organization like CEP exists, and I felt that way when I first joined. There were so many moments where in the beginning I was like, "Is this place for real?" Like, I can't believe that we do this or that. And so even little things like, for instance, we always have a time of thank yous at the beginning of every staff meeting where folks can just shout out their colleagues and say, "Thank you so much to so and so. I couldn't have done this and that without you." And now it seems so part and parcel of my life, but I know that a lot of places don't do that. I will also say, you know, I've always believed, and I think this is really true, that one's boss really makes a huge difference in one's life. So I first started working with our colleague Kevin, who is amazing. And then as you mentioned, I transitioned and I've been working with you for the last...

Phil Buchanan: Downgraded. Yeah.

Grace Nicolette: No, no, no last 12 years. And I just feel like the biggest difference I noticed, because, you know, I'd had quite a few bosses at that point, was I think that there's just like a generosity of spirit, Phil, that you bring to the work. Some people can be really petty because they're about control, and I feel like you have been the opposite of that. There have been moments where I was like, "Oh, I thought he was gonna be a lot more worked up about this one thing," but you've been like, "No, actually let's just trust them to do the right thing." Like, let's err on the side of generosity, you know, not just in spirit, but you've been so generous to the staff too. And so I think that there has been, for me, a change in my mindset around what leadership is because when I first joined, my idea of leadership was actually more about command and control than it was about how do we foster growth. Those close to me know this, but when I joined the senior team at CEP, I was having my first child. I wanted to get off the road more, 'cause I was traveling, and I discovered when I came back from parental leave that I needed to work four days a week. That's what worked for my family. And I just felt nothing but support from you and from CEP, and actually got promoted to vice president under that kind of working arrangement, which I think just really speaks to just how much CEP really cares about supporting folks where they are and rewarding folks for what they do, and not preconceived notions of what it means to show up as a leader. And so I will never forget that. I love that I was able to grow as a parent and as an employee and as a leader, and I didn't have to pick and choose along the way. And now I talk to a lot of parents who are younger than me or earlier on the journey, and I say, "You should expect that your employer at least should have that kind of mindset." And then obviously the details can differ, but not to expect anything less than that, because I think that we are all humans and we're trying to do our best to work and be there for our families, and it really abounds to the organization to be that kind of generous to its employees.

Phil Buchanan: Well, that's all very kind of you. And, you know, it's interesting 'cause like I started here almost 25 years ago, was the first employee, had a board meeting a few years in where I told the board in executive session, because we were growing, you know, to me it was, like, astronomical growth. We went from, like, seven to 12 staff or something. And I said, "I just want y'all to know I don't know what I'm doing." Which I was then summoned to have a drink with one of our board members who ran a big consulting firm, and he said, "That's not something you should ever say to your board." "And I'm gonna get you a pro bono coach," which I badly needed. But one of the nice things about being in the early, early moments of establishing an organization is you're not inheriting anything, you can figure it out. But on this whole point about flexibility, which has become a really core part of, like, people being able to ramp up and down, that literally had never occurred to me until I had breakfast with Jeff Bradach, who was Bridgespan's much bigger organization than ours. He was running Bridgespan, but similar timetable, and he was telling me how they had many parents who would ramp up and down part-time to full-time, and that their career progression would, would not be affected. And then I was like, "Oh, we should do that." Like, it was literally... You know, so just to give, give credit-

Grace Nicolette: Oh, thank you, Jeff.

Phil Buchanan: credit where it's due. But yeah. One thing I'd love to ask you about is just a little bit more about where your interest in even doing this work has come from, and what has influenced you. I know, and we talk about it sometimes on the podcast, that your faith is a really important part of your life, of who you are. I actually don't know to what degree that sort of directly connects to your decision that this philanthropy world would be where you would spend your professional time. But can you share a little bit about why you've chosen to do this work?

Grace Nicolette: Sure. So I would say it wasn't one thing. I think that when I was in China, I kind of backed into starting a small consulting firm with some friends, American and Chinese friends, that helped foundations and corporations do their giving in China. And partially it's just 'cause we saw the need. I mean, it was kind of in our face all the time. We were going into western China and visiting orphanages and all of that. I was part of a really awesome faith-based community, and so yeah, I mean, I feel like the faith piece is certainly, of any faith, like the giving piece is a core part. And I would say the other biggest influence on me is actually my parents, my dad in particular. They are also just uncommonly generous people. You know, they grew up literally from nothing, as I've shared on the show; abject poverty, being war refugees from China to Taiwan, and I think that my dad has experienced a lot of giving and philanthropy as he was growing up. So a neighbor had to pay for his middle school schooling fees, otherwise he couldn't go to middle school. The Catholic Church was really active in their area, and that's actually how they got fed a lot of times. And so really encouraged that with my brother and I from a very young age, that giving was a really important part of being in the world. And to this day they are still very, very generous. And one of the joys, which I've also shared on the show, is actually, like, giving with them. Like, we have identified things that we like to give to together. It's just been an extension of our relationship, which I think I'm really grateful for. So yeah, I would say, you know, when we've had guests on, like my friend Vivian Long, where their parents also had a huge impact on her giving and her

leading their family's giving, I really resonate with that because that was certainly true for me as well. And as for what's next, actually, because I am very close to my family, I think it was a really hard decision to leave CEP. And I think that, you know, I'm at a phase where my parents probably need me around more, and they live overseas. They live in Taiwan. And also my kids and husband are also folks that I probably need to spend more time with as well. So it was not an easy decision, but as I'm finding, as I've been kinda sharing the news, it is sort of this secret society of people who know what it's like to take care of both aging parents as well as kids. It's the sandwich generation thing. And so I've gotten some really kind notes from people about that. But that certainly I have felt now for a bit that is sort of the, the next chapter that I'm being called to, and wasn't easy because I love CEP so much and I love the people At CEP, some folks know that my dad actually had a stroke in our home in 2023 during the CEP conference, and I actually learned in the months that followed just how much my colleagues at CEP are part of my village. And it was just really amazing how folks just showed up and were so kind and supportive to us during that time. And I think that there's a reason for everything, and I'm not particularly good at endings, but felt kind of led to have this ending, which has just filled me with nothing but gratefulness.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, and, you know, you've been such a mentor to so many people here that it didn't surprise me one bit that everybody wanted to rally to support you after all that you had given them. Speaking of endings, I feel like, you know, 50-plus interviews trying to influence givers of various types to give more effectively, you and me asking the questions of others about, well, what advice do you have? I guess I want to ask that of you now. So what are the one, two, three, whatever number of things that you would want to leave with our audience, whether it be an individual donor, whatever level of giving, or a program officer at a foundation or a foundation president, whether it's a volunteer gig or whether it's a paid gig, who are charged with or have given themselves the charge of giving effectively to make a difference in the world, what would you want them to remember or keep in mind?

Grace Nicolette: You know, the phrase that comes up most in my head is relationships matter, which is the name of an early CEP report that we had. I think that I didn't realize just how critical a relationship between a funder and a nonprofit or a cause can be. Now, obviously, that doesn't have to exist, right, that relationship, in the instance of MacKenzie Scott or direct cash transfers. In some cases, there are other aspects of that giving that mitigate the fact that there's no relationship. But for the rest of us, like the everyday givers and also people who work at foundations, I think that sometimes it's easy to give short shrift to the quality and the nature of relationships that we are in, in that giving, there's sometimes no playbook for that, right? It's kinda hard to teach at times. But it is learnable, as we have resources to share around that, because I think that it's the quality of that relationship that allows nonprofits and community members to be truly candid with folks about how things are going. It's that quality of the relationship that allows donors to be even more generous than they would've otherwise. And so I'm leaving just thinking about really taking time to understand, how can we deepen and make relationships more high quality? Because at the end of the day, I think those things matter the most, and the money flows from that, but the relationships matter the most.

Phil Buchanan: Completely. Yeah. And that's how change gets made and, and how it becomes lasting. Grace, thank you so much for everything you've given, not just to CEP or to this podcast, but also just to the broader field of philanthropy. Our working relationship, I think, has been incredibly gratifying to me and has pushed me because we have really shared values, but different ways of seeing the world. And I've learned a lot from you because I've learned to see the world differently because of our working relationship and my conversations with you, and I'll be forever grateful to you for that. This podcast has been, you know, one of the most fun things I've done professionally, so I appreciate-

Grace Nicolette: Same for me.

Phil Buchanan: you agreeing to do this with me back in 2020. We're gonna do season six, and it's gonna be just me, and we're gonna see how that goes. It's not-

Grace Nicolette: It's gonna be great.

Phil Buchanan: gonna be the same. Uh, and I, I just wanna thank you for everything that you've given, and I hope that when you decide to get back into the workforce and run some big foundation, I certainly hope that you will support CEP, so that's gonna be my final request to you.

Grace Nicolette: Absolutely. I will always remain CEP's most loyal fan. And thank you so much, Phil. This has also been one of the most fun things I've ever done. So thanks, everyone. This is Grace signing off.

Phil Buchanan: Thanks, Grace. Appreciate you.

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

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