



**THE SOCIAL WORK OF FUNDRAISING –  
MEANINGFUL & FRANK CONVERSATIONS  
LEAD TO GREAT GIFTS**

**PG CALC WEBINAR**

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## I. Introduction

Why “social work”? I have spent my entire career in the nonprofit sector, serving people or serving a cause. I have always been drawn to helping professions, starting out as a nurse’s assistant in my hometown, working alongside my mother who was a nurse in a hospital and a nursing home. I attempted work in a few “for profit businesses” -- Burger King and a restaurant in my hometown--but I was an abysmal failure, not wired for a fast-paced, stressful business, particularly one where the mission was serving mediocre food. Isn’t that why most of us are drawn to the nonprofit sector? We are seeking a cause that inspires us. Or a job that delivers intangible benefits, such as the satisfaction of helping people or animals, bringing beauty to the world through art and culture, or saving a beautiful landscape.

Over 25 years ago, I started fundraising for an organization with a mission that matched my personal mission: conservation. Hired as a local land trust’s first development/communications director, I had to create many things from scratch—marketing and communications materials, grant proposals, fundraising appeals, etc. Our offices were in a manufacturing plant owned by our board president. One of his staff used to joke and enjoyed calling me “the beggar” and warned others to hold onto their wallets when I was around. Even a board member would say I was a “bush beater”. I’d ask why a “bush beater” and he said, “Because you beat the bushes for money.” A couple of decades later, I have come to see my profession as nothing less than a form of social work. We have the capacity to just not take from our donors, we are uniquely positioned to be service providers—especially when we can dig in and talk to our donors in depth about their hopes, dreams (and even their fears) and how they want to benefit the causes and people that matter to them.

I have been a grant writer, a development/communications director, an annual fund director, a donor relations director and loved every one of my jobs. But, when I was offered the opportunity to work as a planned giving officer, I realized that I had met my ideal professional match. Here was a job where I could work with donors whose gifts had a long horizon and where I could help them shape their life’s legacy. I discovered both a professional distance and intimacy with planned giving. Donors often view me as the “planned giving specialist” with whom they could talk quite clinically about their assets and circumstances while often revealing very intimate details of their lives, often over the phone. In this position I found myself able to tap a social work skill as I listened, avoided giving legal or financial advice, but encouraged donors to do what was in the best interest of themselves and our charity, including sometimes delaying a gift, sometimes not making a gift, and frequently talking to others including legal and financial advisors and, most importantly, loved ones. Throughout this essay I will share some case studies that underscore how we can look out for our donors and ultimately benefit our charities (whether tangibly or by boosting our ethical reputation).

Planned Giving matters personally to me too. I witnessed enough examples in my professional life of “estate planning gone wrong” that I applied that knowledge to my own family, particularly my elderly parents. When I discovered in 2005 that my parents---well into their 80s—had only a “dime store will”, I was able to encourage them to meet with an attorney who was able to explain not only why a valid will matters, but also why it is equally important for the sake of ourselves and those we love to have in place healthcare directives and durable power of attorney paperwork. When their health started failing in 2010, I was prepared to step in and assist with financial matters when my mother turned to me and said, “Sherrie, I am having difficulty writing this check”. As her designated power of attorney, I was able to reassure her that I could step in and take on her bill paying and maintain her outstanding credit rating that she was so proud of. When our mother had a major stroke, I was able to talk to my siblings about our mother’s written preferences and she was able to move into hospice and die with comfort measures. Our father had to enter a nursing home for a few weeks before his death in 2016 and the documents we had in place allowed me to take care of all the paperwork necessary to move into a facility and for my brother and I to communicate directly with the care provider.

While it is very stressful to deal with the illness or death of our loved ones, those losses are compounded by the chaos that is left when our loved ones do not have a plan that helps us be there for them if their memories or health fail them and to know what to do following their deaths.

Have you had to deal with an estate, including that of family, or seen the results of an estate where there is no plan? Your own experiences are valuable to share when you are working with your donors—even not so successful experiences. It is entirely an individual choice of how much any of us may want to share from our own experiences, but it is critical we protect our donor's personal information (not everything is appropriate to document in our donor databases). I have sometimes shared with a donor how much it helped my family that my parents had done some basic estate planning and what sort of additional steps may have helped our situation. While I see myself as a service provider to my donors, I am also motivated by the facts of just how much planned giving matters to our industry in terms of support.

## II. Significance of Planned Gifts for Nonprofit Sector and The Nature Conservancy

Gifts from donors' estates make up a significant percentage of revenue for U.S. nonprofits, including 9% percentage as reported in the most recent [Giving USA](#) report (2020). That percentage is even greater for The Nature Conservancy. Over the last five years, The Nature Conservancy received approximately 25% of its annual fundraised revenue from our donors' estates, which is roughly 2.5 times the national average. Why? There may be several reasons including:

- the size of the Conservancy's membership base (1 million +);
- number of long-term donors (250,000 giving consistently 8-10+ years);
- longevity of the organization (nearing 70 years);
- our steady marketing of planned gifts over 40+ years; and,
- the permanence of our mission (donors often refer to the permanence of saving places).

The latter bullet point is underscored by Joanne Fritz who recently wrote, "You must demonstrate to potential donors that your organization has staying power and that you will be able to put the donor's wishes into play. If your organizational purpose is time-limited, don't even consider a planned giving program." (Fritz, 2020)

## III. Get Started on Planned Giving Messaging

The Nature Conservancy has a very well established planned giving program. We have a department focused on this, including a dozen full time gift planners like me and other folks in the back of the shop, including colleagues who steward our Legacy donors and consistently market gift planning opportunities. It might be easy to say—well, we are not The Nature Conservancy, so what does this have to do with our organization? Perhaps you have no one focused specifically on promoting planned gifts and responding to donors. Earlier I mentioned I was once the development/communications staff person for an organization that is a fraction of the size of the Conservancy. I thought the same thing—but I also knew that we needed to start somewhere. In fact, I was influenced by Craig Wruck, whom many of you probably know. I attended Craig's "Brisk Walk Through the Basics" at a Minnesota Planned Giving Conference. I was sold on the fact that planned gifts could contribute to our organization's successful and stable fundraising mix, particularly as we were promising our donors that land protected by us would be protected in perpetuity. How would we generate revenue for decades and even centuries to come if those properties would need annual monitoring visits and potentially legal defense?

We started with a simple add in our newsletter. One donor responded in a big way. His name was Michael.

**Have You Considered Including Nature In Your Will or Trust?**

The Minnesota Land Trust has made a commitment to conserve land and water resources in our state forever.

A gift through a will or trust (or through a beneficiary form), can shape the future of conservation in Minnesota.

For more information (including sample will language), please write or phone Sherrie Beal at.....

Join our Legacy Society today!

Michael called our office and said that he had seen our ad in the newsletter and that he wanted to include the Minnesota Land Trust in his will. I thanked him and offered to provide him with the information he needed in whatever method suited him. I also said that I would love to meet with him and thank him for supporting our mission. He was appreciative but said he was in a hurry and unlikely to live very long due to a terminal illness. I said how sorry I was to hear that and reinforced our gratitude and made sure the information was sent right away.

**How do we react to a donor’s impending death or grief?**

- Sometimes “I am sorry” and “Thank you for your kindness to our organization” is all that we can say.
- People are touched by handwritten notes and genuine reactions.
- Many of our supporters simply want to put their affairs in order, and our service to them is helping facilitate that.
- I recommend Being Mortal (Gawande, 2014) to develop more skills for responding to the mortality of our donors (and our families).
- Allow people to talk openly about their health and impending death and concerns for their loved ones.

Michael passed away a few months after that one and only phone call, and within a year, the Minnesota Land Trust received two checks from his estate totaling \$400,000. That was the largest single gift the Land Trust had ever received from an individual.

Michael’s gift was not only critical financial fuel for our growing nonprofit organization, but also his gift was proof to me of the importance of letting our supporters know that we’re “Open for Business” and prepared to accept planned gifts. In addition, we were grateful for having a chance to speak to him personally, thank him for supporting us in such a significant way and acknowledging Michael’s mortality and desire to leave a legacy through his estate.

**IV. Giving in The Time of COVID-19**

In normal times, “talking about estate planning” does not rise to the top of our list of favorite conversation topics. In fact, many people put it off for as long as humanly possible, reinforced by the fact that 60% of Americans die without a will. (Walls, 2017). According to Dr. Russell James, (James, 2014) “The estate planning process typically does not happen instantaneously on the spur of the moment. Rather it is an extended process that involves an extended period of contemplation of one’s own personal mortality”. James writes of “mortality salience” when estate planning rises to the top of priorities and becomes important enough to act on.

What might be some life events that could prompt us to act on the thing that we want to do the least and often with significant time and expense?

- The death of a loved one, particularly one who has died prematurely or leaves behind a complex or messy estate.
- The birth or adoption of a child or the accumulation of significant “stuff” (i.e., usually a home).
- Retirement or emptying of the nest of adult children.

And, of course, the current day events that have galvanized the world to contemplate our own mortality like no other period in recent history: the threat of illness and death from COVID-19.

Some fundraisers I’ve talked to over the last year have a very real fear of talking estate planning with donors, particularly during a pandemic. Some suggested that perhaps it is best to not contact donors, especially in the early months of the pandemic or, if we did contact donors, to tiptoe softly around talk of wills and estates and such. Yet many donors continued to reach out to us requesting gift planning materials and many more were picking up the phone when we called. And news headlines pointed to a jump in people seeking help preparing wills and other documents:

“The One Document Americans Need Right Now: Power of Attorney”, [Minneapolis Star Tribune](#), April 2020

“Americans Rush to Make Online Wills in the Face of the Coronavirus Pandemic”, CNBC, March 25, 2020

“Coronavirus leads to surge in wills: 'Everyone is thinking about their mortality'; ", ABC News, April 2, 2020

The [Minneapolis Star Tribune](#) article gives excellent reasons why financial power of attorney paperwork is so critical to our donors (and families). The article noted that estate planning attorneys and online will tools, such as “FreeWill,” are seeing a significant increase in people seeking help in preparing a will. More than 8,000 wills were completed online via FreeWill between March and April 2020, with an increase of about 5% to 10% per week, the company said. The average user age is 57.

My gift planning colleagues have found that many supporters we talk to have practical and humorous views of the times we’re living in. One Conservancy member shared with me limericks that she and her brother wrote about COVID-19. A couple who I’m working with on a gift of real estate enjoy touching base by phone not only about their gift, but how we are all navigating through the pandemic including what activities can still be enjoyed by Zoom. These connections are valuable to build relationships and help us all survive our present day reality.

Mark, a retired software engineer and 30+ year member of the Conservancy requested some estate planning information from our Gift Planning Department. I called him and he said he had time now to focus on estate planning. He said he was at risk of COVID-19 because of his age and had a close reminder of mortality because his former coworker had recently died of complications from the virus. It was spring 2020 and Mark said that his investments had tumbled but other than that, he was not terribly impacted financially. He asked, “does TNC accept gifts of real estate through a person’s will?” I said absolutely and asked if he could share more. Mark said, “Well, there’s my house, a lake lot and hunting land”. We are now working with Mark to include those assets in his will.

For our donors, estate planning is about timing—their “salience” for estate planning as Dr. Russell James referred to. We know estate planning is on the minds of our donors and now is a perfect time to meet them—by phone, Zoom or a socially distanced visit. We can combine updates on our organization’s work with talking about their legacy planning.

## V. Prioritize What You Do

It is hard to know where to begin when it comes to promoting planned gifts at your organization or finding the time to focus on these gifts on top of already very busy lives and jobs that sometimes make you feel like you're working on an assembly line. A board member at an organization I worked for years ago told me something that has remained with me for decades: "It's better to do a few things well vs. too many things poorly". When other board members were comparing our progress to other, much more mature organizations and suggesting we dive into complex gifts that required a lot of expertise, I kept us focused. I knew that we weren't prepared for anything more than building our bequest program. We stuck to reminding our donors that they could support us through a designation in their will or by using a beneficiary form.

What are the few things an organization can do to start bringing planned gifts into the organization? Consistent messaging letting supporters know that your organization accepts planned gifts is essential. Identifying and prioritizing your prospects is key. In my experience, I've found some universals in terms of best prospects for planned gifts, including:

*People who care about what you do and who are closest to your organization (invested).* This may include your long-term members, your board members, volunteers and people who have a stake in what you do. They are passionate because your mission speaks to them. They or their families may have been helped by what you do. These prospects may say things like, "I just love your organization" and "Organization XYZ is like family to me" and, "You are my top charitable organization". The wonderful thing about these supporters is you often don't have to sell them on your mission, they are already behind you.

*People whom you don't have to share with other organizations or people.* Too often we may overlook our most likely planned giving prospects because we are pursuing the richest people in our community or people who show up to all the social functions. Some of these prospects do eventually give to your charity and we have certainly received generous gifts based on our reputation or recommendations of others. However, many donors who tell us they have included our organization in their estates or are willing to do so rate us among their top charities and even share that they do not feel obligated to pass all their wealth to the people in their lives. Some of these supporters can be identified through discovery questions such as, "What are your other charitable causes and how does our organization rate?". "Are there people in your life that you hope to benefit through your estate?"

*People with wealth indicators, including real estate values and security holdings.* We have this information available through our donor database (though we never consider this in a vacuum). We have also found certain zip codes have a high concentration of donors with wealth---our donors Hank and Sharon you will hear about later lived in a first ring suburb of Minneapolis, MN which is one of the state's wealthiest zip codes.

*People who live simply.* Many of my colleagues have found that some of our most generous donors, particularly planned giving donors, live comparatively below their means in terms of what they drive, where they live and perhaps focus their energies on passions and charitable works. They fall into the "millionaire next door" category where there is no indication from the house they live in or the car they drive or what they wear that they are capable of a seven-figure gift. Or the billionaire next door category---think thrifty Warren Buffet who has lived in the same house and neighborhood since the mid-50s (although reportedly his own luxury is a private jet). These prospects' wealth may be tied up in businesses that fly under the radar, such as rental properties or significant stock holdings.

*People with complexities and things (property, artwork, coins, collections, investments).* While we as a charity have indeed accepted tangible personal property, some of the best gifts come from donors who have highly appreciated assets such as stock and real estate. Contributing those assets can lighten

one's tax and ownership burden and avoid the mess of leaving an asset to multiple family members. We can do a real service by engaging with our supporters about the future of the asset—can they speak to family members instead of just leaving an undivided interest to many heirs? Might that asset be best donated in return for a stream of income or as an outright gift to spare the family from future conflict?

*People who are older, but not too old.* “Salience” for estate planning is often motivated by events and circumstances such as marriage, job changes, children, divorce, obtaining significant things and retirement. Many of our donors contact us as they are approaching retirement or are retired and frequently exclaim that finally they have time to get their plans in order. We also see donors at the far end of the age spectrum (85+) for whom it is simply getting difficult to fulfill the best of intentions.

## VI. When Marketing & Our Donors' Timing Converge

The Nature Conservancy has a robust planned giving marketing program that continually informs donors that we accept planned gifts and how those gifts benefit nature and people. Donors may see an ad in our magazine, a story on our website or receive mail messages. The advantage of consistently letting our donors know that we are in the planned giving business is that our donors may reach out to us to make a planned gift when it fits their timetable and situation. Hank and Sharon are excellent examples of this.

Hank and Sharon were 20+ year members of the Conservancy when I came across their names in 2004 while working as a donor relations director and managing our donor discovery process. They had been giving roughly \$100 annually. Hank and Sharon stood out for a few reasons—their giving rose ten-fold one year and their zip code stood out as one of the richest zip codes in their home state. I reached out to thank them for their support and extended an invitation to visit. They rebuffed me, time and time again, but in a friendly way. I sent them notes and gave them my contact information including informing them when I moved over to Gift Planning.

I was a year into my new job as a gift planning officer when Sharon called to inform me that Hank had just retired and they were planning a trip out of state to shop for a new home in a warmer climate. Sharon confided that she is terrified of flying and figured they better put their affairs in order, “in case we kick the bucket”. I provided them the information they needed for their attorney, including sample will language and a form to complete once their plans were in place. Then Sharon asked me a question that required my complete transparency, even if it lost us the gift. “Since we are giving your organization basically everything we have, I'm guessing The Nature Conservancy can serve as our executor or personal representative? You see we have no one else that we trust.”

Here's where honesty is the best policy, but honesty can be delivered with compassion and underscore your organization's integrity. I answered, “I am sorry, Sharon, we are very appreciative of your generosity and faith in us, but it is not the policy of The Nature Conservancy to serve as our donors' executors. Let me suggest some other options”. Sharon was understanding and a few weeks later notified me that her's and Hank's wills were in place and she said she would fill out our Bequest Information Form, “Because it might help you in your job”. She mailed it in, and I was more than pleasantly surprised when they had revealed that they had left us their entire estate, valued at...**\$5,000,000!**

## VII. Timing Is Everything

While everyone benefits from planning, there are events that trigger a donor's decision to move on their charitable planning and giving. We as fundraisers serve our organization and our donor well when we are attuned to these events and have established a connection as I had with Hank and Sharon. But timing is everything: Hank and Sharon had been receiving marketing messages for years that TNC

was “open” for a gift through their estate long before their circumstances (retirement and travel) prompted them to have a will in place. The time was not right for them prior to this because Sharon was caring for her elderly mother and Hank was still working and not ready to plan. And Hank and Sharon were like a lot of donors who found it easy to give away their unearned gains (appreciated assets) through their estate.

All donors are different in how they wish to interact with us, and some prefer minimal or no communication at all. Hank and Sharon moved to Florida and they continued to rebuff all invitations for visits. We tailored our plans so that I am their stewardship manager and I send a few emails or notes a year; occasionally Sharon sends me a pleasant message back.

Hank and Sharon had several “triggers” that prompted them to put an estate plan in place---death of a parent, retirement, decision to move (sell a home) and fear—in this case, Sharon’s fear of death.

#### VIII. Proceeding with Care and Caution When A Donor Is Confused

Roger had been a member of our organization since 1995, giving between \$20 to \$2,000 annually. In 2018, Roger reached out and inquired about giving us stock in exchange for a life income gift. We set up many of these gifts by working with a donor by phone, mail or email and often do not meet with them in person. In our phone conversation, Roger said he was considering donating \$100,000 or so to establish a charitable gift annuity and that he had a “tax problem”. He also said something on the phone that gave me pause and prompted me to want to visit Roger in person or ask a colleague to visit him. Roger said, “I forget things”. I mentioned to Roger that I saw that his wife Mel was a member too and asked if the two of them would meet with me in person, since I lived not far from them in Minneapolis. Roger agreed to a visit.

I arrived at Roger and Mel’s modest home in Minneapolis and I found them both to be engaging and interested in conservation. Roger appeared to be following the conversation, but I wanted to discover their motivation for making a gift. Roger explained that he had plenty of resources, and in fact that he owned too much Amazon stock. As we discussed their situation, it was also clear that they didn’t need income. I explained that an outright gift might be the best solution and encouraged Roger and his wife to discuss their situation with a tax accountant/ advisor. Shortly after that visit, Roger and his wife donated close to \$80,000 of Amazon stock, allowing them to give more than they had ever considered before.

What did I do when working with Roger to tap the social worker side of my planned giving role?

- I encouraged an in-person visit so that I could better observe Roger
- I encouraged his wife to be a part of the visit and I engaged her during and after the visit
- I didn’t tell Roger or his wife what they should or shouldn’t do, but I encouraged them to get additional advice which helped them to make an informed decision.

A friend who is a licensed social worker shared some of the important lessons her profession has taught her, including: “Probably the biggest lesson I’ve learned—and was taught-- is allowing people to make their own decisions. My job is to try to let you figure out the consequences, and then support your decision.” Chris added, “I’ve learned in my career that relationships are everything. I guess I’m most proud of my ability to build relationships with a variety of people.”

There are a lot of correlations between Chris’ approach to social work and how many of my fellow gift planning colleagues approach our work: we know that it is the relationship and the connection that we make with our donors and colleagues that brings us the greatest satisfaction in our work. We often say, “We came to The Nature Conservancy for the mission, but we stayed for the people” and we also walk a fine line in helping our donors come to their own conclusions when making gifts to our organization.



**IX. Get Your Own Plans in Place**

The landscape is littered with stories about people who have died without an estate plan—celebrities and ordinary people. Why might it be important to have your own plan in place? Certainly, the people and the charities in your life will be appreciative if you have made provisions for them and if you have not left behind a legacy of chaos. Determine who will make your healthcare decisions in the event you are incapable of making them yourself and complete a healthcare directive that helps guide those decisions (many clinics keep those forms handy). Be sure to assign someone you trust to step in and serve as your financial power of attorney in the event you become disabled and unable to make your own financial decisions.

Having your own plan in place serves as a good example for others, including the supporters you interact with (your loved ones too). And, it's a wonderful thing to already be a part of your organization's legacy or planned giving society in the event a donor turns your question on you as a man named George did to me.

I sat down and thanked George and his wife for supporting our organization for years and asked a discovery question I often use in my work: "Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_, you have been generous supporters for so many years. I would be remiss if I didn't ask if you've considered including The Nature Conservancy in your estate plans". George didn't take offense, but he shot back with this question: "Now, Sherrie, can you tell me if you have a will and what charities you have in there"? Fortunately, I was able to say, "Yes, I am a member of the Conservancy's Legacy Club and let me tell you why the organization is in my will..."

**X. Starting The Estate Planning Conversation**

Now you may have a sense of some of the prospects that are ideal for planned gifts and why it might matter to your organization's bottom line to uncover these prospects. What might we ask in a visit with these people—which is increasingly by phone or Zoom, etc.? Here are some open-ended questions that have worked for me and other colleagues.

Questions to determine a donor's motivation and interest in your organization/cause:

- Are there people in your life you would like to provide for? Or are concerned for?
- Do you have an estate plan in place? What are the barriers for you in planning?
- Are there things you would like to accomplish through charitable and estate planning?
- Why did you join (our organization)?
- Why does (our cause) matter to you?
- What would you like to accomplish with your giving?
- Do you recall what influenced your first gift to our organization?
- Would you like to become more involved with our organization? What might that look like?

The second to last question was asked by a colleague in a visit we were on with donors who have been supporting our organization for 44 years. They both had similar responses – their mothers had the biggest impact on their love for conservation.

The last question I've found to be helpful when I'm in discovery mode—I've had donors tell me that their lives are too busy, but they would like to do more financially for our organization. Be prepared

for how your donors may respond. Do you have volunteer opportunities? How can your supporters learn more about what you do?

How would you respond to an offer of donating more? Is there a special project where support is needed? Could you do a blended ask that entails an outright and a deferred gift? Could you follow up with a discovery question to drill down a bit into “donating more”, such as, “That’s wonderful. What might “give more” mean—do you have a range that you’re considering or a type of asset that might allow you to expand your support?”

And sometimes donors say “No”, they are doing all they wish to be doing for your organization. The “no” answer allows you to move on and moves you closer to the donors who will say “yes”.

Questions to help assess competency and capacity:

- Have you talked to your children (or loved ones) about your plans?
- If you made that gift to us, would you have enough resources to cover your other needs?
- I need to remind you that [this gift] is irrevocable and we would encourage you to get outside counsel.

Sometimes we need to delay or say no to a gift because it is not in the best interest of the donor and could cause reputational risk to our organization. An example of this was a donor who called our organization wanting to establish a \$200,000 charitable gift annuity. This was exciting news to a gift planner, but as we talked the donor revealed that he was in a care center. Further questions revealed that he was there for long-term and that there was uncertainty how such a gift would affect his finances related to his care. I asked if he had family or advisors who he could speak to and he had none. I suggested he might wish to put our organization in his estate plan and that way the money would be available to him if he needed it for his care. The donor was mildly annoyed, but it seemed the best thing to do under the circumstances.

Questions to help determine next steps and whether a donor is a planned giving prospect:

- How can I be of help?
- Would it be helpful to you if I touched base with you from time to time? How often?
- I would be remiss if I didn’t ask you if you have considered including charity in your estate plans?
- Would you consider including our organization in your plans? [If yes, follow up!]

Many of the donors with whom I’m working are coming to our organization interested in a planned gift, but when I was in a donor discovery role, I found it ideal to pull out some of these questions to just cut to the chase---what’s the harm in asking if they already have us in their plans or would consider doing so? When you ask a donor for guidance on how to communicate with them, you set the stage for a relationship that is on the donors’ terms. Some may tell you that they will get back to you when they’re interested in planning and others may tell you as Steve recently told me, “Going forward, do stay in touch occasionally as I will eventually get this done and might need some guidance.

### XI. How Can We Avoid Leading With A Specific Gift?

How many times have you had a conversation with a donor where you begin a conversation about a specific gift vehicle without fully knowing that person’s motivation and circumstances? This has happened several times to me, particularly since many donors come to us either having seen some marketing materials or because they have been referred by colleagues outside our gift planning department. Here’s an example:

A gentleman named Jim reached out to our conservation staff and said, “I have a property that I would like protected, but I can’t afford to donate it to you.” His property turned out to be of interest to our organization. The other colleague was aware that there are gift vehicles that provide someone with a stream of income and early in conversations this concept was introduced to Jim. I was asked to provide a lot of calculations and such and I was asked to join Jim and conservation staff in a meeting. One concept tossed around was that perhaps our organization could provide Jim with income in return for the land which would require our local chapter coming up with the funds to provide the stream of payments. I suggested that I have some time during the meeting to better understand Jim’s circumstances as it seemed like we were getting ahead of ourselves suggesting a gift vehicle.

Jim mentioned that he lived simply and that much of his assets were tied up in this property as well as other properties out of state. His family lived far away and were well established. Jim was approaching 80 and had had some health issues. I had some concerns: Jim’s overall financial needs, particularly if he gave up significant assets in exchange for a stream of income. Did he have other resources he could tap into for significant health or care needs? He did not.

There was no doubt that Jim was competent and philanthropically motivated. He said he had spent his lifetime acquiring these properties specifically to protect them. He also said that he had talked to his family about his decision and had made other provisions for them. All good news. But Jim also pointed out that he didn’t really need a charitable deduction and his income was enough for his needs. He could use a nest egg, but he didn’t need the full value of the property.

A complex life income gift was not the best solution for Jim or our organization. We did come to a better solution accepting the donor’s offer of purchasing the property at a reduced price. The donor is very happy that his conservation legacy will be fulfilled.

Some questions that can help avoid leading with a gift include:

- What is motivating you to come to us with this asset—why do you want to part with it?
- Have you contacted any other charities about it?
- What are your goals in giving us this asset?
- What are your financial needs---tax deduction, income, nest egg?
- How does giving this fit into your overall financial picture (or, do you have other assets to cover your long-term needs such as medical?)
- Are you the only owner of the asset?
- Have you discussed this with your family and your advisors?
- In the case of real estate—have you had it on the market prior to this? Is it mortgaged?
- In the case of securities – have you owned the stock or mutual funds more than 1 year?

### Conclusion

After all these years, I am as excited about fundraising as I was when I had my first planned giving conversation with Michael 24 years ago. I love securing resources that are so critical to my nonprofit’s mission, but raising money would be totally meaningless if I wasn’t confident that my work was having a positive impact on the people I work with every day---donors, volunteers and work colleagues. These are my rules—or guiding principles—that help make planned giving more than a job, but a true vocation:

- Expand the tent to include children and loved ones. Encourage donors to involve/inform others. No surprises. Their lives will be better for it.
- Be wary of donors who lead with seeking benefits (tax, off-loading troublesome assets).

- Run from gifts motivated by anger, strife, revenge, control.
- Be honest about what you can and cannot do and don't waste your time, your organization's time, resources, or string along your donors.
- Share credit and expand the relationship beyond yourself. It's okay to be the gift planning wizard behind the curtain or on center stage—whatever moves the relationship along with the donor. Be secure enough to allow donors to connect with many others in the organization.
- Know your limitations and lead with your organization's priorities.
- Admit when you don't know the answers (“I will get back to you on that”).
- Use your ears and eyes to uncover clues for competency, capacity & readiness for making a gift.
- Be vulnerable, authentic, sometimes unscripted & SILENT.

Lastly, I think this rule may be as important now as ever: do not be consumed by the workplace—live after hours so that you not only recharge, but so that you will have interesting exchanges with your donors. Donors I've worked with frequently want to talk about themselves and their situations and enjoy finding connections—not only with our cause, but with things we have in common (dogs, cats and horses are common touchpoints). It is particularly important during these times----when so many of us are working from home--- to draw a line between work and home life. Seek out experiences — books, movies, hobbies, activities, and volunteer passions — that bring you joy and comfort and give you something to talk about.

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- p. 3        “Brisk Walk Through The Basics” training. Check it out on the web: [https://www.mnpgc.org/general/custom.asp?page=brisk\\_walk\\_basics](https://www.mnpgc.org/general/custom.asp?page=brisk_walk_basics)
- p. 4        Book: **Being Mortal** by Atul Gawande. Published 2014
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- p. 5        Newspaper article: “The One Document Americans Need Right Now: Power of Attorney” by Beth Pinsker Reuters, [Minneapolis Star Tribune](https://www.startribune.com/the-one-document-americans-need-right-now-power-of-attorney/), April 6, 2020

**Gratitude**

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