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Magazine®

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Zooming Out

STEPPING BACK PUTS THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GIVING INTO PERSPECTIVE



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.” This opening line from a prayer commonly attributed to the late Archbishop Oscar Romero was on my mind as I read the final grant application assigned to me as an expert reviewer for the \$250 million Yield Giving Open Call.

Yield Giving was founded in 2020 by author and philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. It is one of the vehicles she is using to fulfill her commitment to the Giving Pledge, which asks billionaires to commit the bulk of their wealth to philanthropy. In just three years, it is reported that Scott has given \$14 billion away. At this pace, she could

distribute the remainder of her net worth well before the end of the decade.

Yield Giving is named after a belief in adding value by giving up control, which is where I, along with dozens more philanthropy leaders, fit in. Scott has entrusted me and my fellow reviewers with the responsibility to use our experience and



One must take a “long view” when drawing conclusions about charitable organizations.

knowledge as grantmakers to help her ensure that grant dollars are distributed for their highest and best use in efforts to benefit others. It is not an easy task.

Before scoring each of the grant applications assigned to me, I am required to disclose conflicts of interest. Because all my assignments come from nonprofit 501(c)(3) charitable organizations from states other than Florida and from counties other than Indian River, this step is fairly straightforward and relatively easy to get through. The next step, however, requires more thought and deliberate consideration of my own unconscious bias.

There is no better way to make a meaningful difference in the world than by taking care of our own community.

Unconscious bias skews all human decision-making. Research shows that it can be reduced by slowing ourselves down, in real time, and bringing unconscious factors into perspective—essentially, by taking the long view. Here is what that looks like in the context of reviewing a grant application.

Do I have a “beauty bias,” whereby the application’s score could be affected by a belief that a beautifully written application equates to greater impact as a result of the charity’s work? I have a master’s degree and am a published author, but am I able to look past a poorly written grant request to see the substance of the organization’s work?

Do I bring an “affinity bias” to the review process, wherein my own familiarity with the subject matter, or lack thereof, could influence my first impression or overall assessment of the importance of the charity’s work? Will my 10 years of experience working with homeless people make me more inclined to support similar organizations?

Does one great thing about an organization, or conversely one shortcoming, allow a “halo/horns bias” to influence my perspective about the

entirety of an organization’s history and experience? What are my expectations of an organization’s board of directors following the termination of the executive director for cause, and am I willing to give the organization a “second chance?”

Do I exhibit “confirmation bias” in which my own personal preferences, my likes and dislikes, or my firmly held beliefs could influence the review process? Now that my family owns a dog (an Australian Labradoodle named Tilly, acquired during the pandemic), am I less interested in a charity that rescues horses or another that spays and neuters stray cats?

Do I bring a “contrast bias” to the table, causing me to favor large organizations over small ones, established nonprofits over new ventures, or proven programs over promising practices? If an organization follows a best practice by maintaining a large financial reserve, am I inclined to provide funding?

Last year, approximately \$40 million out of the \$110 million raised by Indian River County charities came from foundations, including private, family, and community foundations. None of these grants came from Yield Giving and MacKenzie Scott. (Note:

DID YOU KNOW?

33%

of Indian River County residents are Seniors



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**ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. The household survival budget for an individual living in Indian River County is \$27,516.*

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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

Upon completing United Against Poverty's Success Training Employment Program (STEP), graduates ring the bell.



In 2020, shortly following the organization's receipt of the Aspen Prize and the retirement of longtime president Edwin Massey, Indian River State College, which is headquartered in St. Lucie County, received a \$45 million pledge from Scott.)

In some cases, the decisions to award grants are facilitated by foundations with a professional staff, as is the case with the United Way of Indian River County and Indian River Community Foundation. In other instances, grantmaking decisions rely solely on the dedicated service of volunteers who care deeply about their community. Indian River County is fortunate



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Focusing on fundamental skills is a common approach among nonprofits.

to have such strong representation from these types of volunteer-led grantmaking efforts, which include Grand Harbor Community Outreach, Head Heart Hands of Indian River Club, Impact 100, John's Island Community Service League, John's Island Foundation, and Quail Valley Charities. I believe this is a significant contributing factor to the overall health of Indian River County's nonprofit sector.

Despite my Yield Giving portfolio of grant applications being from organizations and locations around the United States that were not familiar to me, I found many similarities in community needs and how our most effective charities are responding. In general, I observed that there are numerous places like Indian River County across the country where more than 50 percent of the population live in poverty or just one paycheck away.

Anti-poverty organizations, such as United Against Poverty, that serve as community hubs where vulnerable populations can access a wide range of services are a

dignified solution. In communities where health disparities resemble those of Indian River County, organizations like Treasure Coast Community Health that provide free access to comprehensive medical, behavioral, and dental health are a lifesaving answer.

Similarly, in places where educational achievement lags, a laser focus on fundamental skills like third grade reading proficiency or a deliberate mission to serve a community of color is the noticeable difference. The Learning Alliance and Gifford Youth Achievement Center are our community's leaders in these areas, and their models work in other places, too.

Unfortunately, perennial problems like the lack of living-wage employment and a severe shortage of affordable housing are not just inherent to Indian River County. These problems are everywhere, with substantial expectations on charities and the nonprofit sector for solutions. Philanthropy, through efforts like Yield Giving and the more than \$400 billion that will be given to charity

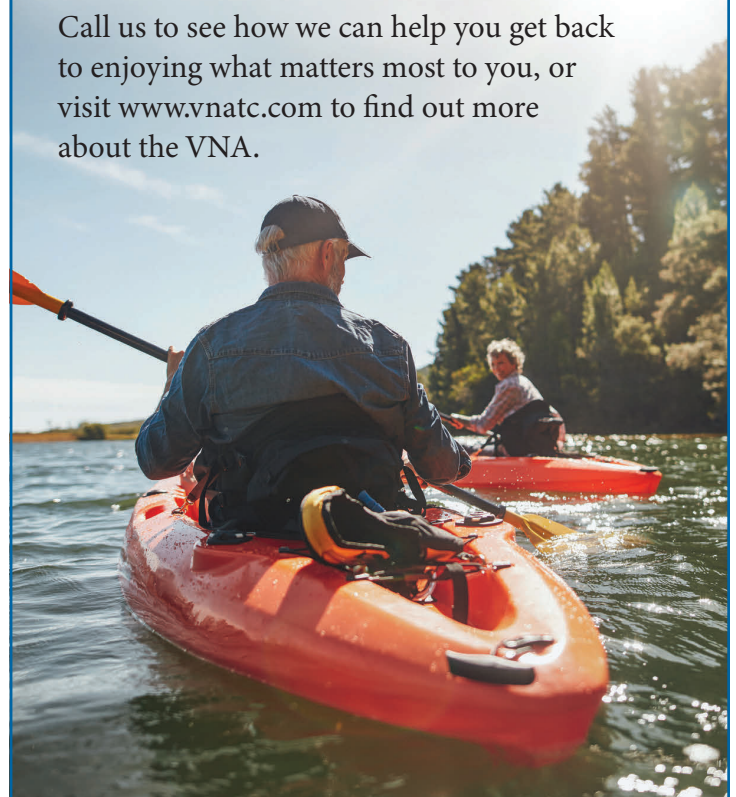
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“The place in which I fit will not exist until I make it.”

– JAMES BALDWIN

this year, does matter. But so does public funding, especially here in Indian River County where tax dollars dedicated to education, health, and other essential services is so critical to the overall quality of life of our residents.

In contemplating where to eventually settle down, American writer James Baldwin wrote “The place in which I fit will not exist until I make it.” It is a line from a letter he wrote in the middle of the last century to a friend while traveling somewhere between

Istanbul and Paris, far away from his birthplace in Harlem.

I didn’t need to join MacKenzie Scott on a virtual voyage around the country to know how special our local community is. By “zooming out,” however, and taking the long view through my participation in Yield Giving’s Open Call, I was reminded that there is no place like home and no better way to make a meaningful difference in the world than by taking care of our own community and making a place for everyone to fit. ✨

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“My mom had two jobs, so GYAC was a big help for her. She didn’t have to worry about me falling behind in school.

As a first-generation college student, it means a lot to me to paint a pathway for other GYAC students, who are from similar backgrounds. If I can do it, they can too!”

ALONDRA MUNOZ SANDOVAL
GYAC Alumna, Scholarship Recipient,
& Junior at Vanderbilt University

