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I Spoke With 113 Donors of Color. Here's What I Learned About Philanthropy, Race and More

Hali Lee, Guest Contributor | March 22, 2022



Close your eyes. Imagine a philanthropist. What are you imagining? Someone male, white, and possibly older? Possibly even dead? Possibly someone like John D. Rockefeller? Or

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maybe you're seeing Bill Gates? Or maybe MacKenzie Scott? Did you picture any of the over 1.5 million high-net-worth and ultra-high-net-worth people of color currently living in the United States?

A new report out last week, "Philanthropy Always Sounds Like Someone Else: A Profile of High Net Worth People of Color," expands the definition of *who* is a philanthropist and also *what counts* as philanthropy. Among the report's many insights is the reality that donors of color are a growing demographic and an important force in philanthropy. If you are a fundraiser, philanthropic advisor, development director, wealth advisor, or anyone working in fundraising or financial sectors, it is important to think of people of color as donors and clients, and powerful ones at that. And while narrowly, this report is a story about BIPOC donors and their giving, its implications extend far beyond the philanthropic sector.

Over a period of three years, I sat down with 113 high-net-worth and ultra-high-net-worth people of color to explore their values, family stories, and the change they want to see in their worlds. This report is groundbreaking, not because no one knew that there are high-net-worth people of color who were participating in philanthropy. It is groundbreaking because it was the first time someone had sat down with these donors and asked to hear their stories, asked about their giving, about their wealth, and compiled it.

During these 90-minute conversations, I heard from high-net-worth and ultra-high-net-worth people of color who were not seen as donors capable of providing large grants or gifts. One Mexican-American donor shared a story of meeting with an executive director of a local nonprofit. He went into the meeting ready to give \$10,000, but was prepared for the ED to make an ask closer to \$25,000. At the end of the ED's pitch, she asked for \$500. This donor annually gives around \$200,000, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of dollars in pro bono work his firm provides every year. If the ED had taken a more relational tack, rather than a transactional one, she could have left that

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breakfast meeting with a lot more money for her organization, and — even more important — she would have left the meeting with a deeper understanding and relationship with a potential major donor.

This is at the crux of donor organizing and peer-to-peer organizing — to cultivate relationships that stem from our shared humanity, experience, passions and priorities. The key insight from this report for nonprofit development directors, executive directors, fundraisers and strategic planners is this: You cannot raise money from those you do not see.

The report also found that nearly all of the donors of color we interviewed had experienced racial or ethnic bias and discrimination in some way, proving that monetary success is not any type of equalizer. But for people of color, including the many other talented and brilliant people of color I work with, this finding is utterly unsurprising. And yet, the key point here is that we cannot reduce the motivations and giving priorities of donors of color to their experience with discrimination, racism or oppression. High-net-worth donors of color have giving and investing priorities that are reflective of the totality of their varied, complex and impressive experiences as people of color in America.

One of our findings — also reported in the [Lilly School report](#) on “everyday” donors of color—is that donors of color give at a higher proportion to social justice causes than their white counterparts, not solely because of the discrimination they face personally, but because of the breadth of their experience as people of color in the United States. High-net-worth people of color are betwixt and between, straddling multiple social, cultural and economic spheres. The majority of our interviewees are wealth earners, meaning they still have familial, social and community ties to multiple social, economic and cultural spaces. They have access to and first-hand experience with many critical philanthropic priorities like the effects of climate change, the power of education, and systemic and institutionalized discrimination. By necessity, they are ambassadors and

translators between spaces. I think this is one of our superpowers.

The wealthy donors of color whose stories I had the great privilege of recording and now sharing are also extremely well-networked. They belong to professional, fraternal, social, faith-based, community-based, alumni and educational organizations and networks, domestically and abroad. We also know that in wealthy donor spaces, peer-to-peer information sharing, networking and organizing are key to moving action, resources, influence and change. Yet, the philanthropic ecosystem today is largely a monoculture. Existing networks and organizations, especially those working with individuals with high net worth, are overwhelmingly white. The philanthropic, financial and advising sectors need to take notice and start the process of engaging and utilizing these powerful and well-connected individuals, not only to engage more donors of color, but also to widen the scope of philanthropic approaches, priorities and models.

So what does that mean for our sectors? It means that in order to do the peer-to-peer work well, we need to have more of those peers on our organization's leadership, boards of directors, staff and C-suites. In order to grow our organizations and businesses to be more inclusive of and interesting to wealthy folks of color, we need to recognize and speak to their experiences and priorities.

The many crises we face as communities and as a nation today require all our hands on all our decks. They are too big for any individual — no matter how rich — to fix; they require a collective response. Engaging this community of engaged, eager, well-connected and powerful people is no longer optional. The philanthropic sector needs this community to grow, to learn, and to build better solutions. We need the time, talent, treasure, testimony and ties of this demographic. How do we do this? By expanding our scope of who a donor is and our relationships with them. By prioritizing authentic relationships with folks different from us. In doing so, we expand our networks, our

organizations, and our leadership to be reflective of our communities and envision a new kind of philanthropist and world.

Hali Lee is the lead author of “Philanthropy Always Sounds Like Someone Else: A Profile of High Net Worth People of Color” (released by the Donors of Color Network). Hali is also a Founding Partner at Radiant Strategies, a boutique consulting practice that aims to change the subject in philanthropy. Download the full report at www.radiantstrategies.co/reports

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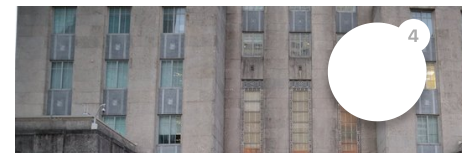
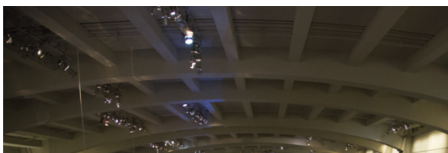
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