**Brian Gawor, CFRE**
brian@givinggeek.com · (309)299-4682

# The Donation Equation: Fundraising Smarter Based on Science — Session Recap

**NPFC (National Parent Fundraising Conference)** | Columbus, OH | July 22, 2026 | Closing Keynote **Speaker:** Brian Gawor, CFRE **Time:** 11:30 AM – 12:30 PM ET

**Official abstract:** *What really makes parents give, and give big? Well, one gift officer who turned into a "giving geek" went on a journey to find out. What he discovered from hundreds of studies and examples is that 5 key social forces — Philanthropy, Gratitude, Connection, Story and Urgency — drive an "equation" that can help you find ways to connect better with donors. And, that removing Barriers can take giving from annoying to incredible.*

## Summary

Hey — thanks for being in the room (or for downloading this because you missed it). Here's the recap.

Full disclosure up front, same as I said on stage: this is a 40-minute complete butchery of behavioral economics, psychology, and anthropology. It's 100% pseudoscience in the sense that I can't walk you through every study in the time we have — but everything I'm about to recap is backed by real research, and I'm happy to send sources to anyone who's as big a nerd about this as I am — or buy the book when it comes out.

The Donation Equation started about 11 or 12 years ago, when a friend looked at how obsessed I was with this stuff and said, "you're the uber fundraising nerd, why don't you create the grand equation of fundraising?" So we did. We built fake email addresses and subscribed to everything the industry puts out — Blackbaud, EAB, Marts & Lundy, BWF, the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, the Do Good Institute — and at the peak we were getting 300 emails a day. The question was simple: what are the actual recurring trends underneath all of this noise? Six buckets fell out. They've changed shape over the years — "Gratitude" used to be called "Stewardship," until someone at a CASE conference told me, "stewardship is what we do, gratitude is what donors feel." That one stuck.

The equation, if you want it in one line: **Philanthropy plus Gratitude, controlled by the Barriers you put in place, amplified by Connection, Story, and Urgency, will largely determine whether your donors respond.**

I'll also say this, because it's the whole point: the goal of the science of philanthropy is to maximize the joy of giving. We know giving offers real psychological benefits to the donor — if you help someone over 50 find meaning and purpose, you're extending their life by about eight years, on average. Someone once asked me what I do for a living, and I said I basically modify human behavior at scale to get people to do good things with their money. They said, "that's a little creepy, Brian." Fair. But every donor is a unique snowflake — genuinely — and if you let me put enough of them in a big enough group, I can help you build a snowman. That tension, treating people as individuals while still using what we know about groups, is the whole job.

And a personal note underneath all of it: twenty-five years in this field, and the honest truth is I'm only here because donors funded 80–90% of my own education at Knox College. Everything below is just me continuing to pay that back.

## The Equation, Element by Element

### Philanthropy — is it natural, or learned?

Both, and that distinction matters. The *disposition* toward generosity is natural — I brought up the real story behind the Netflix *Lord of the Flies* adaptation: in 1965, ten Tongan boys were actually shipwrecked for 18 months, and instead of turning on each other, they kept a fire burning continuously for 13 months and built a chair to carry an injured boy around. Every study claiming humans revert to cruelty (yes, including the Stanford shock studies) turns out to depend on an outside party instigating the bad behavior. Left alone, we cooperate.

What *is* learned is the structured practice of giving to charity. The single best predictor that someone will give is that they've given before. Wealth concentration is splitting the ultra-rich into two camps — call them "generous and changing the world" (your Gates, Buffetts, MacKenzie Scotts) and the other group, who "are not happy." You can move the needle on the next generation, too: institutions that run a real course where students grant actual money to real nonprofits see 35% of those students sitting on a nonprofit board within three years. And know your generational splits — Gen Z's giving is driven by social proof at roughly double the rate of Gen X or Boomers.

### Gratitude — what does the donor get back?

This is Andreoni's "warm glow" — the psychological reward of giving, independent of any tax benefit. And I want to be direct about the tax piece: **no tax benefit has ever made someone philanthropic. It can absolutely change the timing and the size of a gift** — that's it. Donor-advised funds are a great example of this in action: DAFs didn't get popular because donors demanded them, they got popular because Fidelity and Vanguard market better than any of us do, and because financial advisors are incentivized to keep assets rather than distribute them — until a DAF gives everyone a values-aligned reason to move money out. One practical note: DAF donors are not trying to hide from you. Go find them and thank them properly.

### Barriers — the one thing you're trying to reduce

Everything else on this list you build up. This one, you tear down. Virginia Tech took alumni participation from 11% to 22% in three years, in the middle of the pandemic, in part by getting Giving Day completion down to 48 seconds. And here's my favorite old-school example: for years, American Express was the single strongest predictor of a future major gift — and plenty of institutions refused to accept it because the processing fee was a point or two higher. Model that out and you're looking at something like 150x return on just eating that fee.

### Connection — to the cause, the asker, and each other

The founders of Smile Train — former PayPal people — ran 16 different direct-mail image tests and found one clear winner: a smiling, light-skinned Afghan girl. That's not donors being racist, it's donors being largely European and responding to a face that looked like their own kids. The lesson isn't "use that photo," it's that donors need something they can personally connect to.

Connection also means paying attention to who's asking. Rotate your solicitation sequence — staff, then a fellow parent, then a student — because changing the messenger pulls in different responders even with an identical message. And when a donor's engagement data shifts (they've read the business college newsletter for twenty years and suddenly they're only clicking on medical research), that's a signal worth a phone call. Someone got a diagnosis. You can meet people in that moment.

### Story — the narrative, not the statistics

Adrian Sargeant's "Donors Like You" study is the one I'd bookmark: NPR pledge calls that simply said "donors like you have given in the range of $192" — no ask attached — increased the average gift by 35%, and the effect held for 34 months. We're social creatures; everything tied to identity and belonging performs better and stickier. And don't sleep on video — you've got a 6.5-inch screen and about 30 seconds to make someone feel something.

### Urgency — why now, not just why

Giving Days exist to answer a different question than "why give" — they answer "why give *today*." About 80% of higher-ed gifts land in July and December, because that's when we concentrate our asks. Win-framing and loss-framing both work, and there's a real, if modest, gender split in which one lands harder — but I'll be honest, I'm personally uncomfortable with the "starving child, flies on the face" school of loss-framing. It works. I don't love it. Charity: water's model is the one I'd point you to instead — here's the problem, and immediately after your gift, here's a live webcam of the well you funded. That's urgency and gratitude working together.

## Three Case Studies

**The Good — the Ice Bucket Challenge (2014).** Almost nobody who dumped ice water on their head could have told you what ALS actually was. The Philanthropy element — education about the cause — was close to zero. It worked anyway, because Connection (a friend challenged you directly) and Urgency (a 24-hour clock) did all the work, and it became Story the moment it hit social media.

**The Bad — Susan G. Komen and Planned Parenthood (2012).** Komen cut funding to Planned Parenthood without fully reckoning with the fact that Planned Parenthood was one of the largest providers of breast cancer screening in the country. $3 million in counter-donations landed within 24 hours. They reversed the decision, but the trust damage was real. (A second example, same shape: a school that addressed solicitation letters only to husbands — including households where the husband had died. The women alumni organized their own campaign in response and raised more than $400 million. Barriers cut both ways.)

**The Fantastic — We Are the World (1985).** Quincy Jones and USA for Africa raised $50 million — call it $300 million today — and almost nobody singing along fully understood the famine crisis behind it. Connection (literally every major recording artist in one room), Story, and Urgency all stacked at once. It's very hard to write a more effective piece of philanthropic psychology than that song, by accident or design.

## Applied to Parent Giving

- **Purdue's Parents' Council** (built with Susie Budreau) leads with Connection — a peer social experience from day one, including a student-made video that coaches incoming families through what to expect. It's produced one of the largest parent gifts in U.S. history.
- **St. Lawrence's RV Village** turns a real logistical problem (not enough hotel rooms, geographic isolation) into a full-blown community: parents camp together at events, and it's become one of the most effective parent-engagement mechanisms in the country.
- **The Oregon "Duck flag" program** is about as clean an identity-plus-low-barrier play as I've seen: a $10 minimum gift for a yard flag, and a 248% increase in giving. When people start reselling your gift premium on eBay, or faking gifts to get one, that's not a problem — that's a sign the program is working.
- **Virginia Tech's license-plate data** — yes, DMV vanity-plate purchase records — turned out to be a genuinely unique-per-person signal for major-gift capacity, because almost everyone drives one car and chose that plate on purpose.
- **Parent data is close to perfect** on address quality, which means wealth-screening accuracy on parents can run around 99.5%. That's an underused prospecting advantage most shops aren't fully using yet.

## From the Q&A

**On protecting minors' identities in scholarship stories (asked by a Lawrenceville School attendee):** Anonymized donor stories do not reduce response — this holds in domestic violence shelter appeals and food-insecurity appeals, where donors already expect anonymity. Have students write a genuine, handwritten thank-you note (reviewed for anything identifying), and revisit the relationship post-graduation, once they're adults, to ask if they'd like to attach their name and story then.

**On channel strategy (phone-a-thon retirement, QR codes, postcards):** Segment out your loyal check/reply-device givers rather than force them onto a QR code. For everyone else — especially donors under 35 or without a strong giving prediction — a postcard with a QR code outperforms because it doesn't require opening an envelope and leans on imagery. And coordinate your channels like a symphony, not a middle school band concert: direct mail, email, a ringless voicemail, and a text, timed together, lifts response by an average of 35 points — and average gift size goes *up* too, because the story is simply being told better.

**On why parents get overshadowed by alumni (asked by a Penn State attendee):** Don't file parents under a lesser category than alumni. For a lot of families, a state flagship is the first time a kid in that state even learns college is possible — that's the actual mission, not a side program. And structurally: parent contact data is close to perfect, which makes wealth-screening on that population near-flawless. That's not a smaller opportunity. It's a cleaner one.

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## Quotables

> *"The entire goal of the science of philanthropy is to maximize the joy of giving."*

> *"Every one of your donors is a unique snowflake. They are special in their own way. But if you let me stand above them and put them in large enough groups, I can help you build a snowman."*

> *"Stewardship is what we do, gratitude is what donors feel."*

> *"No tax benefit has ever determined whether or not someone is philanthropic. They can, however, greatly impact timing and amount."*

> *"Because Fidelity and Vanguard market way better than you." — on why donor-advised funds took off*

> *"Higher education fundraising is right now, for the most part, a middle school band concert… We have to be a little bit less like a middle school band concert and much more like a symphony."*

> *"Fundraising is largely not about money. It's mostly about the story that you can tell that grabs attention, provides an experience, and locks in on purpose."*

> *"Philanthropy plus gratitude, all controlled by the barriers you put in place, amplified by connection, story, and urgency, will largely determine if your donors respond. That's the donation equation."*

> *"This is not just about fundraising. It's about fundraising smarter."*

> *"The degree to which we bring more people onto that island with those ten boys in a collaborative way, we're going to change the world."*

*Source: transcribed from the live NPFC 2026 closing keynote recording, July 22, 2026. Condensed and lightly cleaned up for readability — content reflects what was actually said on stage. Companion to the session slides and the Donation Equation worksheet, both live on givinggeek.com/presentations.*