

Transforming Sadness into Passion

By Blair Cunningham, Partner, Director of SignatureGENEROSITY

Life can make us wary, skeptical even. There are just too many true-life stories of organizations and people who misuse the good intentions of others for their own gain.

But sometimes life gives us something else: a mission with purpose and integrity. A place where we can confidently help others and, in the helping, be helped ourselves.

Sharing stories about our clients' generosity is one way that [SignatureGENEROSITY](#) encourages people to explore how to connect what they are passionate about with what they uniquely have to give to the people or causes that are most important to them.

We hope that you enjoy these glimpses into the lives of those who are truly experiencing transformational generosity.

Doug Keim's Story

Six years ago, my wife invited me to join her on a trip to a homeless shelter in downtown Atlanta.

It's important to know that I went against my will.

Homeless charities don't always have the best reputation for financial stewardship. More than once, I'd heard stories of founders enriching themselves and their families with funds intended to serve the poor. I had no interest and told my wife so.

True to form, Martha's response was kind and understanding. "I know you're working hard," she told me. "So if you'd rather not go ... I guess I'll just drive to the ghetto myself."

Of course I ended up going.



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An Opportunity Found

What we saw at City of Refuge that night blew my mind. In the large room where we met the CEO, Bruce Deel, I saw tangible evidence of excellence. There were beautiful canisters of coffee and platters of elegantly shaped pastries that we learned had been baked by formerly homeless men and women enrolled in the on-campus culinary arts school. The campus also included a school, a shelter for women and children, rehabilitation for women with a history of addiction or prostitution, educational programs, job training and a host of government services like day care, food and medical care. Every month, City of Refuge served more than 18,000 meals to the poor.

I'd spent a good part of my career turning around failing businesses, so immediately, I could tell that City of Refuge was a well-managed organization. There were systems and processes in place and a leadership team with passion and intensity for what they were doing. I bombarded Bruce with provocative questions about the neighborhood and internal operations. At the end of the night, sensing that I was a businessman, he turned to me and whispered, "You need to get involved here."

Savoring the last of my coffee and distrust, I said, "I need to see your audited financial statements." And much to my surprise, Bruce didn't blink. With a smile, he asked when I wanted to meet for lunch. That's when the Red Sea parted for me.

Months earlier my wife and I had made a decision to stop spreading our giving to multiple organizations. We wanted to focus our giving on something that made a tangible difference for those in need—something where we could give not only our money but our hearts and lives as well. Sitting at the table, looking over City of Refuge's clean financials and seeing how much of every donated dollar went directly to serving the poor, I wondered if this might be our chance.

Impact on Others, Impact on Ourselves

For the next several weeks, I couldn't forget what I had seen. City of Refuge is located in the single worst zip code in the Southeast. It is the major thoroughfare for drugs in the region, with the lowest graduation rate and the highest number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies. While there, I met a woman and her four children who, prior to coming to City of Refuge, had lived in a car for a month without anything to eat. I met a girl who had been raped by her uncle and a neighbor while her family had done nothing to stop it. At the same time, I saw what happens to a kid who has a safe place to play basketball when the only other option is to put on a backpack and run drugs.

For many nights, I couldn't sleep. And I'd slept like a baby for so many years I'd lived in Atlanta.

Propelled by that sadness, Martha and I took slow, incremental steps to weave our lives into the mission of City of Refuge. Martha began meeting regularly with a group of women whose lives had been plagued by sex trafficking, abuse and addiction. I began serving on the Board of Directors, offering my experience in marketing and operations to help the organization grow. Our children have served meals and spent nights at City of Refuge. And while I've seen the impact our giving has made in the lives of others, I've felt the change it's had in me.

If I've learned anything in the last six years, it's that giving out of obligation or for tax purposes is profoundly boring. To experience the life-giving power of generosity, go find something that makes you really, profoundly sad. Then follow it. Start investing your time and your resources on that, and believe me, you will get busy making a difference.

It's one thing to just stay sad. At times, I'm still sad. But I'm more energized that we're doing something about it. Follow the sadness. Do something about it. And your sadness will transform into passion.

About SignatureGENEROSITY

For many of us, the ability to make a difference brings meaning and purpose to our lives. Whether you are a parent or grandparent, child, humanitarian, co-worker, mentor, advisor, coach or friend, you have something to give—be it your time, skills, strengths, influence, wisdom or financial resources. Embracing a spirit of generosity is a way to live a more fulfilled, vibrant life and can trigger surprising ripple effects, transforming your life and the lives of others in ways you may never have imagined. SignatureGENEROSITY is SignatureFD's way to help you explore and define your own vision of generosity. For information about SignatureGENEROSITY, please contact Blair Cunningham, Partner and Director of SignatureGENEROSITY, at blair.cunningham@signaturefd.com.

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