

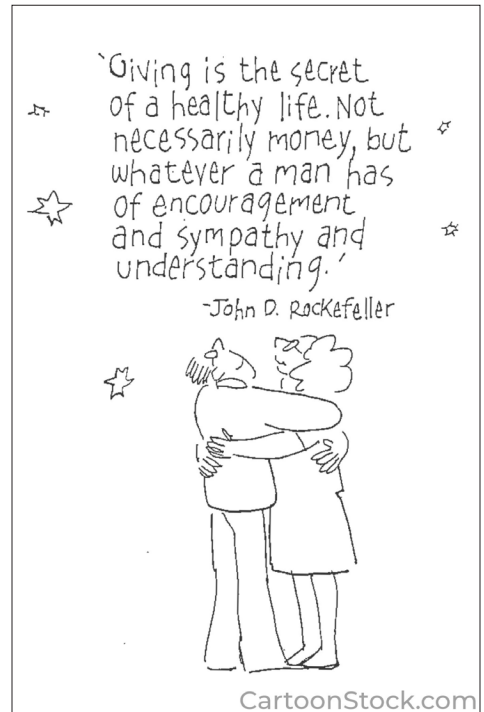
McGowan News

March 24, 2023

Giving with Love

A letter from Chief Executive Officer
Diana Spencer

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A Lasting Impact

Juan Peña, cofounder and chief innovation officer at CrossPurpose, discusses the connection, community, and care that drives his organization's work.

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Giving with Love

A letter from Chief Executive Officer Diana Spencer

Dear Friends,

As we continue to strive for excellence in our work, I am proud to say that we are nearing completion of an 18-month strategic planning process, details of which I will be revealing in the coming weeks. This process has been an incredible journey of self-reflection and growth, and I am confident that the plan we have developed will help build on our successes and allow us to reach our goals.

The strategic plan will provide a roadmap for the Fund so we can continue our work as a leader and partner in the philanthropic sector; it will also ensure that we remain mindful of our limited resources. Our core values of collaboration, innovation, and impact will remain at the forefront of what we do as we explore new ways to leverage our resources to create meaningful change. We also hope to increase our engagement with grantees and other stakeholders.

Recently, the board expressed a desire to be more proactive and transparent in our grant making, as well as to be more strategic in our approach to ensure that our grantees are well informed and better supported. They want us to be more intentional and to focus on areas of impact that are aligned with our mission and values, all while continuing to support other community needs.

During this time of determining strategy, I have also gained additional insight that I believe will help us address philanthropy through a different lens.

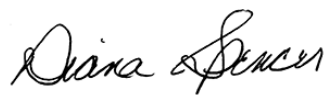
According to Merriam-Webster, the Greek root of the word philanthropy can be literally translated as “loving people.” The English word can refer to a general goodwill towards one’s fellow people, as well as the active effort to promote the welfare of people. In modern use, it is most often used to refer specifically to the practice of giving money and time to help make life better for others.

The reason our trustee volunteers invest their precious vacation time to attend meetings, review applications, conduct site visits, and engage in community meetings is clear. Our people are deeply committed to the cause, driven by a deep caring and concern—dare I say “love”—for the communities and people struggling within the five grant making regions we serve.

This fresh perspective has made me wonder if we spend sufficient time on why we work hard to challenge societal matters. Would our work change if we included more language of care in our meetings? Should we speak more to the love, the tending, and nurturing that goes hand in hand with support? Should we discuss the passion and the dedication of our grantees? And could outcomes be improved if we focused more on the care, on caring? Are these not ultimately matters of the heart as well? I would argue that people, organizations, and collaboratives aligned by a shared mission of caring for people have an awesome power, a power greater than one reached only through programmatic structure, data, metrics, and evaluation. We are seeing this again and again in NEPA RISE, our comprehensive workforce development program. In addition to focusing on the outcomes delivered by our nonprofit partners, the Fund can—and should—inject care and compassion into everything we do.

The board of directors and I are excited to soon share the results of our strategic planning process and look forward to continuing to work together with open hearts to make a positive impact in the communities we serve and love.

Sincerely,



Diana Spencer
Chief Executive Officer

A Lasting Impact

Juan Peña, cofounder and chief innovation officer at CrossPurpose, discusses the connection, community, and care that drives his organization's work.

Will you tell us a little of your story?

I'm an immigrant from Colombia. For my dad, when he was 11 years old in the 1950s, 90% of the population was illiterate in our town. He had never been to school, didn't know how to read, do math. But then there was a missionary that came and started a little church with a little school. My grandmother heard about this, and took my dad and said, would you educate my son? And to her surprise, the missionary said, yeah, bring him in tomorrow. And so, my dad started kindergarten as an 11-year-old kid. The decision that my grandma made changed the trajectory of generations, for my whole family. My dad graduated from that school and wound up in Bogotá, Colombia, and got an accounting college degree. But then he came back to my hometown and became the lead pastor and oversaw the school. To me, my dad was a superhero, educating thousands of kids. All of this had a huge impact on my life. I saw that an institution could radically change the trajectory of generations.

What was your life like when you came to America?

We were a family of six in a tiny two-bedroom apartment. It was just so confusing. We were really living in poverty. In Colombia, we never owned a house, but I never thought we were poor, and suddenly my dad couldn't provide for us. He was delivering The Boston Globe newspaper at 3:00 in the morning, that was the only job he could get. I came into school as a ninth grader without much English, and I was the only Latino in the school, which was in a very affluent neighborhood. By my senior year, math class had become my safe haven. I could succeed there; math is the same everywhere. But the physics professor, a retired MIT professor, was super intimidating. He said to us one day, "I want everybody to tell me what college are you going to and what's your career track? What are you majoring in?" I freaked out because I was the only kid that didn't even apply for college. He was just praising everybody for applying to Harvard, and then when he got to me, I just said, "I want to be an engineer." And in front of the

whole class, he said, "Don't even try. You don't have what it takes." I share that story because something in me broke that day. I started working at Burger King and I was sure I was just going to spend my time flipping burgers, but something about that didn't sit well with my mom, so the week of graduation, my mother went to the school and asked, "What options does my son have for college?" They gave her an application for University of Massachusetts, and three weeks before the fall semester started, I was accepted. I had been an engineer for 11 years when I realized I wanted to do more. I wanted to use my experiences, the things I had learned, and help make systemic change. Change like my father had made. And that's what happened in 2008. My wife and I joined Jason Jans and his wife, and we had this crazy idea to give the best 30 years of our lives to help get our neighbors out of poverty.

Did your starting model for CrossPurpose reflect the work you do today?

By 2012, we had started several other nonprofits. One was a prison reentry program that had 2,500 men and women coming through our doors. But nobody was coming to our building a year later saying, "Thank you so much, you changed my life." We realized we were not doing enough to get people out of poverty. We were probably helping our neighbors in poverty, but we weren't making generational change. So we made this crazy decision to shut down and start again with the same budget, but we were only going to focus the journey on 25 neighbors, instead of 2,500 people. We don't know what the answer was, but we wanted to figure it out. From 2012 to 2020 we were like a big lab. In 2020, we had found a model that was repeatable. We could start with 40-50 individuals in a cohort and truly help them exit poverty. At least 70% of participants in each group do. Most graduate in six months with good jobs and career training.

There is a quote on your website that says, “The system that created conditions which caused poverty to spread needed expensive love.” Can you tell me what that means to you?

Expensive love is one of our richest core values. It has been at the root of everything we have done. Number one, expensive love is that we’re going to give the best 30 years of our lives to loving our neighbors. There’s no Plan B. We’re going to give our lives to this. We’re not giving \$3,000 per neighbor here or there. What can we do with \$3,000 really? Instead, we ask, “What do you need?” It turns out we need to invest about \$25,000 per graduate. That is money that can make change.

What does generational change mean to you?

Generational change is a core value of our organization. We believe that real change is not just measured by one life, but by generations. As we often say, success is not just replication, it’s multiplication. We see generational change bringing about a legacy of hope, allowing generations of people to hope and dream for a new future while appreciating the history, heritage, and struggle that came before them.

How does time with CrossPurpose change a participant’s future? How does your work affect the larger community?

At CrossPurpose we serve individuals relationally, economically, and spiritually. Relationally, we believe that it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. We foster relationships between our program participants, staff, and volunteers to build bonds that transcend gender, race, and class. Economic growth allows our participants to flourish in career and beyond, impacting themselves and their families. Meanwhile, we acknowledge that many of our participants have experienced trauma and provide opportunities for healing with healthy coping mechanisms, soft skills, and counseling services.

What is the “heart” of your work?

It’s a belief that neighbor loving neighbor is the best and fastest way to organically and meaningfully transform our communities.

Do participants ever come back as volunteers?

Yes, in fact, many come back to volunteer as allies, volunteers who commit to walking alongside program participants for the duration of their time at CrossPurpose and providing support along the career-training journey.

What is an unexpected pleasure of your work?

We’re really about community development. We’re not just a jobs program. We’re about reweaving the fabric of our society; this is why we go out into the community and recruit. It’s our neighbors that are going through the program. Every Wednesday night, we have a family gathering in our space and all of us get together. If you were to come to our building on a Wednesday night, there’d probably be about 120 people there—plus kids and childcare—and we have a meal. It’s a big family celebration and we have a rhythm of shouting out people’s successes. It’s just super encouraging. Life giving. We’ll often have an inspirational talk and then we break up into small groups for an hour. The groups are a combination of eight participants or neighbors with four or five allies. When you graduate from our program, you have personal development. You can get as much counseling as you want. It’s all free. You have a marketable skill, a career job, and hundreds of new relationships. We are truly a community. That’s what we’re so passionate about.

Read more about the benefits of giving back:

Studies show [that volunteer work is good for your heart.](#)

[Giving is good for emotional and physical health](#), increasing happiness, and decreasing blood pressure.

Nonprofits don’t help only the people they’re serving; [they benefit the whole community.](#)

Want to love your job and feel passionate about your work? [A career in nonprofit can lead to job fulfillment.](#)

