Creating a Culture of Giving

by Lyn Balistreri, Director of Fund Development

Philanthropy is to the 21st century what conspicuous consumption was to the 20th.

Virtually every form of media bombards us with requests to give to this or that charitable cause. And yes, I’m well aware that you have likely received Morrissey-Compton’s Fall Appeal in the mail, so I’m not casting stones from this particular glass house! But to continue: affluent individuals are constantly in the news, touting the virtues of philanthropy to the other 99% of us. And they’re not just paying lip service—many of them have taken The Giving Pledge, a commitment by the world’s wealthiest individuals and families to dedicate the majority of their wealth to philanthropy. It’s a wonderful movement that has the potential to make a huge impact on the world, and if Morrissey-Compton could become one of its beneficiaries, it would be an amazing boon to an organization of our size.

However, most of us don’t have unlimited resources, and there are an awful lot of worthy causes out there. What is the average person to do if they want to feel as if their more modest gifts are making a real difference?

One answer is to give to Morrissey-Compton. I’ll make a case for that later in this article, but in the meantime, I’d like to talk about the culture of giving we must cultivate as an organization if we are to continue to provide our services to all who need them in the future, regardless of ability to pay.

A Note about Income

Statistically, the average income in our area is among the highest in the country. I’m reminded of what a certain very cool individual had to say on the subject: “There are lies, d**** lies, and statistics.” Our geography can be deceptive; in many Mid-Peninsula neighborhoods, one older couple may be living off their Social Security income in a tract home that was built in the 1940s, while next door, in a sparkling new mansion, lives a family that made millions during the dot-com boom.

What I’m calling a culture of giving goes beyond what each household gives monetarily, although it certainly does help when our supporters are committed to giving as much, and as often, as they can. But what I’m referring to is how the community at large—and each family in particular—can create a culture that incorporates giving into its daily life.

First Published in Morrissey-Compton Educational Center’s Winter 2014 Newsletter
History Repeats Itself

My own family did not focus on philanthropy when I was growing up. With eight children to raise, and living on a truck driver’s salary, my parents had enough challenges putting food on the table without putting a lot of time, energy, or resources into furthering charitable causes.

My parents (photo at left, circa 1970s) did the best they could, and they were very decent people. But to this day, I notice that few of my siblings make it a point to give regularly, and I find myself wishing that we’d been taught differently. Had the ten of us collectively looked beyond ourselves and our problems, we could have found so many opportunities for volunteering, or fundraising, or simply helping to raising awareness of causes that we found important. These experiences would have not only made us more grateful for what we did have, but provided quality bonding time for us as a family. Moreover, giving just a little each can really add up for a family of our size; if the eight children in my family could come together to give just $25 per month to a single nonprofit that we could all agree on, that’s almost $2,500 per year that could go towards a worthy cause.

Into the Future with Morrissey-Compton

Although the world’s population has grown exponentially in recent years, the global community has become much smaller. Thanks to social media, charitable causes from around the world now have a means to enter our homes and our consciousness. It’s an exciting time, with lots of potential for good works. And giving to causes that have demonstrated worldwide impact holds definite appeal to all of us.

At the same time, when I see a commercial appealing to the average person to send money to a large national or international charity, I can’t help but feel that in a way, they make the playing field uneven for smaller nonprofits. Many charitable foundations with hundreds of millions to give annually have chosen to focus much of their giving on such causes, rather than on local agencies that don’t fit into very specific categories (or have much of an advertising budget). I do see a certain logic in putting the largest sums of money towards proven large organizations, unless one has a very personal relationship to a particular smaller nonprofit—but that also means that places such as Morrissey-Compton must work a lot harder, and with fewer resources, to get just a tiny fraction of the money in gifts that is available.

To me, it makes much more sense for the average person to put their limited giving dollars toward smaller agencies within our own community that work to achieve the goals closest to our heart. And since you are reading this newsletter, it’s a good bet that, for you, helping individuals with learning differences is one of them.