



The State of  
American Philanthropy

Giving of  
Celebrities,  
Athletes and  
Media Moguls

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## ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at [insidephilanthropy.com](https://insidephilanthropy.com)

## ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at [insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy](https://insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Hollywood's movie sets to New York's stages and sports stadiums across the United States, media celebrities and athletes are building massive fortunes and fan bases. They rarely have the billions associated with financial and tech industry plutocrats, but an increasingly large number of celebrities do have sizable fortunes, and just as importantly, huge public followings that can be mobilized for good.

This paper aims to shine a spotlight on celebrity giving and get beyond the press releases and superficial puff pieces, which rarely track actual donations making their way to nonprofits. This brief considers not only the funds these media creatures can deploy as individuals, but their power to influence and use their fame to draw attention to causes.

This brief operationalizes the overused term "celebrity" as one whose fortune derives primarily from the fields of sports or entertainment, which includes media executives, actors, writers, musicians and athletes. Putting celebrities' wealth and potential philanthropy in perspective, not a single athlete, writer or actor is ranked on *Forbes*' list of the richest people in the world. The relatively few billionaires from the media and entertainment industry category included on *Forbes*' lists are media magnates like David Geffen, Michael Bloomberg and Rupert Murdoch.

The executives, athletes, actors and writers we highlight in this brief were chosen based on a mix of factors, including their net worth, penchant for robust public advocacy, success in carving out a niche in specific funding areas, and an eye toward cross-industry diversity.

The brief details the varied ways celebrities maximize their charitable efforts:

- Writing big checks.
- Endowing private foundations.
- Fundraising for signature causes.
- Lending the celebrity brand.

The brief also gives considerably more context than mainstream celebrity coverage on why they give, how they give and how fundraisers can strategize to connect their cause to major talent. The brief explores approaches to giving of actors and athletes and how they differ from wealthier studio heads in one notable way: Celebrities with large public followings have proven to be especially adept at leveraging their fame to galvanize support for cherished causes through social media. And given their roles as media creatures, some commentators argue that celebrities—or, more specifically, their agents—are more inclined to view their giving as a necessary activity to build their brand.

Given that the make-up of America's celebrity universe is considerably more diverse along gender, racial and other demographic lines than the notoriously straight-white-male-dominated worlds of finance and

technology, it is not surprising that sports and media stars' giving is extraordinarily diverse. Nonetheless, there are a number of causes that celebrities seem to gravitate toward the most, including: education and youth; global development and human rights; climate change and the environment; the arts; medical research; Jewish causes; progressive policy advocacy and equity; and, at least in 2020, pandemic response.

This brief provides many notable examples of giving to those popular causes in the Causes Celebrities Love section, but provides many more examples in the later section arranging givers by the sources of their wealth. This section indicates that the biggest money is among producers, directors, media executives and other moguls – and their giving interests and methods of giving are somewhat different.

The final subsection of Giving by Sources of Wealth notes that very few sports stars are able to parlay their short careers into long-term mega-wealth-creation vehicles, and therefore, their giving is generally more limited. There are, of course, high-profile exceptions to that fact, and the impressive giving of stars like Michael Jordan and Serena Williams proves that an increasing number of sports moguls have much more to give than just their endorsements.

The entertainment and sports sectors are a major source of wealth creation. While The Giving Pledge hasn't penetrated as much in entertainment as it has on Wall Street and tech, there are many celebrities who are serious about their philanthropy, starting foundations early and signing on staff and other advisers, with the goal of deepening giving down the line. It is an important factor that some of the most popular entertainers and athletes are people of color and/or women.

With this power to influence public interest and direct significant financial resources comes new abilities to change the philanthropic landscape. Media stars and professional athletes are looking to make an impact outside the arena and away from the red carpet, speaking out about issues like Black Lives Matter, voter registration, mental health, and a host of other issues they're passionate about. This brief provides a starting point for understanding how to connect to evolving celebrity interests.

# Introduction

In 1966, actor Jerry Lewis hosted the first Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon to benefit the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) of America. The event was broadcast on a single station and raised more than \$1 million. For the next 45 years, tens of millions of Americans tuned in for Lewis' annual MDA telethon, which raised over \$2 billion for the organization.

The MDA's last national telethon was in 2014. Six years later and three years after Lewis' passing, the association rebooted its telethon with actor Kevin Hart at the helm. This time, however, Hart hosted the event on TikTok. The telethon, which was also streamed on other platforms like Facebook and YouTube, featured appearances from NBA star Stephen Curry, rapper Common, actors Jack Black and Bryan Cranston, and Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt. The telethon also raised money for Hart's Help From The Hart Charity, which provides scholarships to those in underserved communities and helps people struggling with medical needs.

The differences between the two events are striking. For most Americans in the pre-digital age, the once-Lewis-hosted telethon was their only exposure to celebrity philanthropy. Now, thanks to the proliferation of social media, Americans learn about celebrity fundraisers on a seemingly weekly basis. In 2010, the MDA's 22-hour telethon on broadcast television raised \$59 million. Ten years later, the streamed telethon, which reached over 100 million viewers, raised **\$10.5 million** in just two hours. And while the Lewis-led telethon benefited the MDA, which was brought to Lewis' attention by a staff member in the early 1950s, the 2020 event also raised money for Hart's charity, reflecting the

growing trend among celebrities to launch their own philanthropic vehicles.

Speaking to [ABC News](#), Hart encapsulated the motivations galvanizing an increasingly influential celebrity giving sector that includes actors, athletes, entertainment executives, musicians and writers. "At this point in my life and my career, it's finding other things to hold on to," he said. "Entertainment and comedy – it's been a thing, it's been what I'm known for, and I've pushed hard to be successful at it. If I can match that energy and switch the gears and start to do things for others and bring awareness and a high level of positivity to the world and hopefully bring people together, put smiles on the faces, heal some, do for some, I will feel like I've done my job while here."

The charitable clout of the stars is growing along with massive rises in Hollywood fortunes. Singer, actor, director and political power broker Barbra Streisand has a reported net worth of \$400 million. "Spartacus" actor Kirk Douglas was estimated to be worth around \$80 million when he passed away in 2020, having smartly established a production company in the 1950s to make movies outside the studio system. In sports, the beloved Michael Jordan signed an eight-year, \$25 million contract with the Bulls in 1989. Today, the average player salary is roughly \$7 million annually. In music, the top 10 highest-paid musicians earned more than **\$760 million** in 2020. Kim Kardashian, who is now famous also for her attempts at drawing attention to criminal justice reform, is worth \$1.8 billion, according to *Forbes*.

While few celebrities have the billions of financial and tech industry titans (only George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Oprah Winfrey have net worths over

\$2.1 billion that place them among the *Fortune* 400), an increasingly large number of celebrities do have sizable fortunes, and just as importantly, a huge public following that can be mobilized for good. From entertainment moguls to athletes, the entertainment and sports sectors are awash with unprecedented wealth and influence, but the implications and potential of this power have not yet been fully examined. This paper aims to train the spotlight on celebrity giving and go beyond the press releases and superficial puff pieces.

The first step is understanding just how much wealth is being generated in the upper echelons of the entertainment sector. According to *Forbes*, in 2020, the Top 100 of the world's highest-paid celebrities earned a combined \$6.1 billion before taxes and fees (which, it notes, is down slightly from 2019, and attributable to the pandemic and economic downturn). By comparison, Elon Musk grew his fortune by \$140 billion in the same year. Top-earning celebrities Kylie Jenner and Kanye West brought in \$590 million and \$170 million, respectively. Neither, however, has put a major chunk of their money toward philanthropy yet. Others, like Jay Z and Beyoncé (combined net worth of \$1.5 billion) in music, LeBron James (raked in \$88.2 million in 2020) in sports, and Dwyane “The Rock” Johnson (\$87.5 million in 2020) in movies, engage in philanthropy at varying levels but illustrate the significant and steady money coming from this sector.

Beyond the raw net worth of Hollywood celebrities and sports athletes, these figures also have unique power that goes far beyond deploying their own cash toward philanthropic causes. For instance, they can fundraise and use their enormous social media platforms to draw attention to a cause and galvanize the masses—and people with a lot more

means—to give. Throughout this paper, we will consider not only the funds these media creatures can deploy as individuals, but also their power to influence.

Giving in sports and entertainment has a long history. Kirk Douglas and his wife Anne had been giving prolifically since the 1960s. Other long-running givers include Herb and Lani Alpert and Norman and Lyn Lear. Then and now, celebrities have leveraged their influence and deployed funds during these most critical global moments.

Consider Live Aid, the legendary mid-1980s concert broadcast around the globe to a viewing audience of 1.5 billion. Today, for some in the United States, the reality of COVID-19 did not hit home until Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson announced that they tested positive for the virus.

The current generation of entertainment and sports figures include top Hollywood figures like actor Leonardo DiCaprio and director Steven Spielberg, entertainment executives including Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner, bestselling author Nora Roberts, global pop sensation Rihanna, and NBA superstar LeBron James. Some of these figures have been engaged in philanthropy for a decade or more, while others are just starting.

Unlike the old boys' club of Wall Street or the new boys' club of Silicon Valley, these donors bring more diversity with more women and people of color represented. Givers in this sector also include more young people. Particularly in sports, top-earning NBA athletes are only in their 20s and 30s, and some are already turning to philanthropy in a real way, with considerable cash and time to iron out and deepen their giving interests.

This paper will provide a rundown of these figures, explaining how they made their fortunes, how they're conducting their charitable efforts, and what causes they favor. It also explores strategies fundraisers might consider to connect with these donors, including through agencies with a client base concentrated on entertainment and sports. This brief will give a few examples of these agencies and how to reach them.

Philanthropy by individuals in entertainment and sports is likely to grow in coming years for reasons that this brief examines at length. Ultimately, this paper will help funders understand the significant philanthropy originating from this sector and the opportunities that may exist to liaise with deep-pocketed and influential players in this space.

# The Lay of the Land

For the purpose of this brief, IP defines “celebrities” as those whose fortunes derive primarily from the fields of sports and entertainment, which includes media executives, actors, writers, musicians and athletes. But before we take a closer look at some of the “most charitable” celebrities, it’s important to contextualize their wealth across the broader donor landscape.

Not a single athlete, writer, or actor was ranked in the *Forbes* list of the [richest people in the world](#). The roughly two-dozen billionaires on the list who made their fortunes in the entertainment and media industry were media magnates like David Geffen, Michael Bloomberg and Rupert Murdoch, plus an assortment of international executives. According to a recent review of *Forbes*’ Real Time Net Worth, blockbuster producer George Lucas is worth \$6.5 billion, placing him at No. 418, Steven Spielberg (\$3.7 billion) is No. 857 and Oprah Winfrey (\$2.6 billion) is No. 1,247. Two sports team owners made the top 500—Stanley Kroenke, who made his fortune in real estate, and Home Depot co-founder Arthur Blank. In other words, while celebrity givers are a rising force in philanthropy, collectively speaking, their overall wealth pales in comparison to billionaires hailing from other fields.

## Reconsidering the Quantification of “Most Charitable”

Outlets often rank the “most charitable” living donors by totaling their publicly announced gifts and pledges for a given year. For example, the Chronicle of Philanthropy’s “[The Philanthropy 50](#)” listed Jeff Bezos as the biggest giver in 2020, with \$10.2 billion in gifts and commitments, followed

by his ex-wife MacKenzie Scott (\$5.7 billion), and Michael Bloomberg (\$1.6 billion). Only one celebrity made the Chronicle’s list—Michael Jordan, who came in at No. 31 with \$52 million in giving.

The Giving Back Fund, a national nonprofit organization that encourages and facilitates charitable giving by professional athletes and celebrities, published one of the few lists that ranks celebrities based on the cash amount of donations documented. Its list of the [30 Most Generous Celebrities](#) takes into account the largest donations actually making their way to charity from celebrity donors. Its most recent accounting was in 2010, and many of the famous names are individuals profiled in this brief: Jami Gertz, Herb Alpert, George Lucas, Meryl Streep, Marcy Carsey, Barbra Streisand and Will and Jada Pinkett Smith.

We came across an array of [more recent lists](#) citing the “most charitable” celebrities or athletes. However, these outlets made qualitative assessments pertaining to a celebrity’s generosity rather than calculating their donations for a given year and ranking them accordingly. These lists surfaced familiar names like Oprah Winfrey, Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, Ndamukong Suh, George Lucas, Barbra Streisand and Nora Roberts, as well as a new crop of givers who have emerged in recent years, such as Rihanna, Serena Williams, Angelina Jolie, John Legend, Miley Cyrus, Beyoncé and Jay Z, Kylie Jenner, Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James.

The executives, athletes, actors and writers IP highlights in this brief were chosen based on a mix of factors, including their net worth, penchant for robust public advocacy, success in carving out a niche in specific funding areas, and an eye toward cross-industry diversity.

## Types of Philanthropic Engagement

Entertainment and sports donors take a variety of approaches to philanthropy and embrace a wide spectrum of causes; however, there are a few key patterns in how they contribute their resources and celebrity, and what issues they work on. Giving and impact can be parsed into several categories, with figures embracing one or several ways to make impact:

**Writing Big Checks.** Many celebrities primarily give individual donations without using a foundation structure, but this giving is not always easy to track. NBA legend Dwyane Wade and his wife actress Gabrielle Union, for instance, made five donations to organizations supporting healthcare for the LGBTQ community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Zaya, the couple's 12-year-old daughter, is transgender, and besides the funding, the family has also raised awareness about the trans community.

### Donor Spotlight: Dwayne Wade and Gabrielle Union



In 2020 Dwayne Wade and Gabrielle Union donated to five charities supporting healthcare for the LGBTQ community in response to the COVID crisis. Recipients included the Los Angeles LGBT Center, OneWorld Community Health Centers, and Vivent Health. Wade told Ellen Degeneres, *“We are proud parents of a child in the LGBTQ+ community and we’re proud allies as well. We take our roles and responsibilities as parents very seriously.”*

**Endowing Private Foundations.** Some entertainment and sports figures primarily fund their own foundations, including Rihanna’s Clara Lionel Foundation, named after her grandparents; Bette Midler’s Jeckyl Foundation, whose grantmaking includes support of the arts and education; and the Hilaria and Alec Baldwin Foundation, steered by the prominent actor and his wife.

**Fundraising for Signature Causes.** Stars who raise money for public charities and causes include Michael J. Fox and the late Christopher Reeve. The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation—a fundraising public charity, not a private foundation—has awarded over \$138 million to labs around the globe to accelerate scientific breakthroughs in paralysis since its 1982 creation. Up-and-coming actress Zendaya has helped fundraise for Convoy of Hope, particularly around their women’s empowerment initiative. Even without the overt celebrity of an actor, novelist Patrick Rothfuss is an active fundraiser for Heifer International and launched World Builder, which raised over \$1 million for Heifer in 2020.

**Lending the Celebrity Brand.** There are many celebrities who primarily lend their name to fundraise for causes and raise awareness, seemingly unrelated to the size of the bank account. These activities can have a kind of catalytic effect and are reflective of the unique power that some of these figures have. The previously mentioned Live Aid in 1985 pulled in 1.5 billion TV viewers around the world and raised \$245 million in response to widespread famine in Ethiopia. In 2010, Hope for Haiti Now [reportedly raised \\$61 million](#), not including money raised by private donations or sales from the resulting album and video. The George Clooney-organized Tsunami Aid: Concert

of Hope helped raise \$18.3 million after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake.

Charities around the world have benefited from celebrity support, including UNICEF, which is associated with some 400 celebrities. PETA is associated with approximately 350 celebrities. Elton John AIDS Foundation, Save the Children, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and Stand Up to Cancer all count on major celebrities to fundraise on their behalf.

## Why They Give

While it's always risky to paint donors with a broad brush, IP research has revealed some common motivating factors among donors hailing from the sports and entertainment worlds, such as "leaving a legacy" and "making a difference in their communities" by drawing from personal experience, often in partnership with professional networks and philanthropic intermediaries. Nonprofit leaders will find that the best way to connect with these individuals is through their talent agencies or representative social impact organizations. Our research also surfaced subtle differences between celebrity giving beyond differences in net worth, such as celebrities' ability to leverage social media to galvanize charitable support to a far greater degree than more affluent media executives.

In a chat with IP, Silicon Valley investor Ron Conway recalled that actor Ashton Kutcher "wanted to find a charity that would be on his tombstone. Something that he would support for the rest of his life." He and Kutcher did some research and he said that human trafficking and child pornography are what he wants to solve, Conway said. Kutcher went on to launch Thorn:

Digital Defenders of Children, which is focused on stopping online child trafficking and pornography.

Sports philanthropy executive Joanne Pasternack noted a growing trend among athletes to publicly tie their giving to personal experience. "It's less about the performance of going out and serving food for a Thanksgiving meal. It's more about, 'I'm going to serve food for Thanksgiving meal because I experienced food insecurity as a youngster, and I want to bring visibility to that and destigmatize what it means to be in those types of situations,'" Pasternack said. She called this trend "the biggest change" in sports philanthropy over the past 10 years.

### Foundation Spotlight

## THORN

In 2012, Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore established Thorn to fight child sexual abuse, pornography, and trafficking. According to its 2020 Impact Report, Thorn identifies, on average, 8 children, 215 files of child sexual abuse material, and connects with over 155,000 youth about trafficking risk, prevention and safety on a daily basis. Thorn's technology is used by NGOs, law enforcement and other key actors in the fight against child sexual abuse and trafficking around the world.

Examples of other celebrity donors motivated by personal experience and geographic proximity include Nicki Minaj, who has provided support for St. Jude's Home for Girls in her native Trinidad, and Chicagoan Chance the Rapper, who launched an arts and literature fund for the city's schools through his Social Works nonprofit. Notable celebrities who have donated to their alma maters include Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State University), Meryl Streep (Vassar College), Michael

Douglas (UC Santa Barbara), Alec Baldwin (Tisch School of the Arts at NYU), former NFL quarterback Eli Manning (the University of Mississippi), NBA player Carmelo Anthony (Syracuse University), Denzel Washington (Fordham University), and former NBA star Vince Carter (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

### Program Spotlight



THE  
GIVING BACK FUND

Founded by Marc Pollick who is an author and consultant on philanthropy, the Giving Back Fund encourages and guides charitable giving among athletes, celebrities, high net worth individuals and more. Its program staff works closely with clients and partners to help identify their philanthropic goals and facilitate their giving. Clients of the Giving Back Fund include the DeMarco Murray Foundation; former NFL defensive tackle, Malik Jackson's foundation, Malik's Gifts; and former New Orleans Saints safety Steve Gleason's organization, Team Gleason.

Of course, celebrities also make gifts to organizations with which they have little or no personal experience. In 2021, media mogul David Geffen gave the Yale School of Drama \$150 million to cover tuition for current and future students. While Geffen did not attend Yale, his connection to the school dated back to the 1978-79 academic year, when he taught a seminar on the music industry Yale officials were aware of Geffen's arts-related giving and reached out to the billionaire to discuss a potential gift. According to officials, it was Geffen's idea to make the school tuition-free. "Removing the tuition barrier will allow an even greater diversity of talented people to develop and hone their skills in front of, on, and behind Yale's stages," he said.

## How They Give

According to Rick Flynn, co-CEO and founding partner of LVW/Flynn and author of "The High-Functioning Single-Family Office," "There are basically [three levels of strategic alliances](#) between celebrities and charities. The first level is where the celebrities commit some time and money. They will donate to the cause in various ways and attend some events. Their involvement acts as a magnet for other volunteers and contributors. The next level is where something of a joint venture takes place. This is for celebrities who focus on a particular cause and concentrate most of their philanthropic activities around that cause. The third level is where celebrities form their own charities or private foundations."

Networking plays an especially critical role in the rarefied realm of celebrity giving. Conway said that will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas visited Google years ago and talked about his goal of helping inner-city youth. "I went up and introduced myself to him and told him he had a special calling to help inner-city youth," Conway said. "I introduced him to Laurene Powell Jobs, who is the founder of [College Track](#), which has a number of branches around the country that help inner-city youth with college preparedness." will.i.am went on to launch a College Track branch in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights, where he grew up.

"If a celebrity wants to do good, I want to be a facilitator of that," Conway said. "I want to make sure that they're successful. So I introduce them to the right people who give them infrastructure."

In another example underscoring the growing collaboration between celebrities and Silicon Valley, last November, Bloomberg's Sophie Alexander and Mary Biekert wrote that [over half](#) of the \$428

million donated by billionaire Jack Dorsey (of Twitter and Square/Block fortunes) over the previous two years “has gone to organizations started by, partnered with or connected to some of the most famous people on the planet—many of whom have a personal relationship with Dorsey.” For example, Dorsey gave a total of \$10 million to two social justice organizations affiliated with producer and songwriter John Legend—FREEAMERICA (\$2.4 million) and FUSE Corps. (\$7.6 million). Other individuals whose affiliated organizations received support include Beyoncé, Rihanna, Sean Penn and Jay Z.

Active athletes lacking the time to research and fund working nonprofits frequently outsource this work to third parties. Super Bowl-winning quarterback Ben Roethlisberger began playing in the NFL in 2004 and channels his giving through his namesake foundation, which is managed by the Giving Back Fund, a national nonprofit organization that encourages and facilitates charitable giving by professional athletes and celebrities. “When I am in season, I am completely focused on football. My mind is at ease knowing that my foundation is being professionally managed by the Giving Back Fund,” said [Roethlisberger](#), who announced his retirement in January 2022. Celebrities also develop their philanthropic strategy in close partnership with their agents and managers.

## The Fame Factor

IP research suggests that actors’ and athletes’ approaches to giving occasionally differ from wealthier studio heads in one notable way: Celebrities with a large public following have proven to be especially adept at leveraging their fame to galvanize support for cherished causes through social media. And given their roles as media creatures, some commentators argue that celebrities—or, more specifically, their agents—are more inclined to view their giving as a necessary activity to build their brand.

Unlike more affluent sports team owners or media executives, who often conduct their charitable operations far from the public view, celebrities can leverage their fame to lend credibility to a cause or charity in a saturated marketplace of ideas. After a 1985 horse-riding accident left him paralyzed, the late actor Christopher Reeve partnered with the American Paralysis Association in 1995. The organization saw its revenue double thanks to Reeve’s advocacy and eventually rebranded itself as The Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation.

Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok have amplified celebrities’ ability to rally the public to their cherished causes. “What really changed to me is social media,” said tech entrepreneur [Todd Wagner](#), who founded Charity Network, a platform that helps nonprofits

### Donor Spotlight: Jami Gertz and Anthony Ressler



Actress Jami Gertz and her husband Anthony Ressler predominately conduct their philanthropy through their Ressler/Gertz Foundation, which has awarded over \$22 million in grants to date. The foundation supports a variety of causes including education, healthcare, the arts and Jewish causes. In October 2020, it awarded a \$5 million grant to Herman J. Russell Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship to provide various resources to Black-owned businesses in Atlanta.

engage high-net-worth donors. “Ten years ago, there was no Facebook and there was no Twitter. You had no ability to rally a fan base if you were a celebrity. You had to use traditional media.”

Director and producer Judd Apatow puts this phenomenon in more practical terms. “If we do an event and all of the comedians who are performing at that event tweet about it, potentially, there are millions of people learning about the charity around the country,” he said.

A slightly more cynical take on what motivates some celebrity givers comes to us from Jo Piazza, author of “Celebrity, Inc.: How Famous People Make Money.” Historically, Piazza argues, events like Live Aid were seen as primarily one-time social good activities to support specific causes. This began to change at the turn of the century when the entertainment industry realized that philanthropy could have a positive impact on a celebrity’s career.

“Celebrities give charities exposure; charities give celebrities empathy,” [Piazza wrote](#). “Being connected to the right celebrity helps a charity raise more money. Being connected to the right charity makes a celebrity more likable, and likability equals bankability.” Philanthropy, Piazza argued, “is integral to building the celebrity brand.”

## How to Access Funding

All of the profiled givers are millionaires or billionaires hailing from the upper echelons of their respective fields. Some, like billionaire media moguls, will be out of reach for the average nonprofit leader. That said, IP research surfaced multiple avenues for nonprofit professionals to access prominent actors and athletes. These include contacting their talent and social impact agencies and paying a for-profit intermediary to broker a

partnership. Nonprofit leaders will find that lower-profile athletes working in their home communities are more accessible than their more famous peers. Nonprofit leaders also need to ensure that the celebrity partnership maximizes engagement and effectively reflects the organization’s values.

Nonprofit leaders looking to engage celebrities can reach out to the figure’s respective talent or social impact agency. Joanne Pasternack runs social impact consulting firms Oliver+Rose and Athletes’ Voices at Harvard, both of which amplify the voices of some of the nation’s top athletes. Pasternack told IP that the work involves helping athletes “build out their individualized playbook for social activism so they can dig deeper and find the cause that means the most to them and to which they’re uniquely suited.”

Another prominent social impact agency is Propper Daley, headquartered in Los Angeles. Propper Daley works with individual philanthropists, brands and organizations wanting to create measurable and outcome-oriented social impact in the world. A third of its clients are nonprofits and foundations interested in culture change work. They’ve worked with organizations including Everytown for Gun Safety, Girl Scouts and the Grammy Museum. The next third are brands like Activision and Best Buy. And the final third are celebrity philanthropists like Bradley Cooper, Kerry Washington and John Legend.

President Greg Propper explained to Blue Tent that his clients are particularly interested in longer-term systems-change work and moving out of silos. And he’s excited about celebrity philanthropists and activists coming together around collective impact and aligned action. He pointed to the power and success of Stand Up To Cancer, a charitable program

of the Entertainment Industry Foundation launched by Katie Couric and other women.

Other organizations that work with celebrity givers include the Giving Back Fund, a national nonprofit that encourages and facilitates charitable giving by professional athletes and celebrities; and the United Talent Agency Foundation, which is a nonprofit organization created by the United Talent Agency that connects celebrities and nonprofit organizations; Creative Artists Agency; and William Morris Endeavor Entertainment.

Nonprofit organizations also engage with online for-profit platforms like Prizeo and Omaze that provide donors with unique celebrity experiences. For example, visitors to Prizeo's site can donate to a Nature Conservancy campaign to fund global forest restoration. In exchange, they automatically enter themselves in a raffle to win a four-night package to a [Dave Matthews Band concert](#). Similarly, visitors to [Omaze's website](#) can donate to Charities Aid Foundation America's GO campaign to improve the lives of vulnerable children around the world for a chance to be actor Robert Pattinson's VIP guest at the premiere of "The Batman."

The celebrity giving space also includes a broader and somewhat more accessible array of less affluent athletes who seek to conduct their charitable work outside the glare of the public spotlight. While these individuals are driven by many of the same impulses that motivate their higher-profile peers—such as a desire to give back to their communities and leave a lasting legacy—they tend to operate quietly like conventional place-based donors within their communities. They also tend to be more accessible than their more popular peers, thereby representing a more viable opportunity for nonprofit leaders looking to engage celebrity givers.

Organizations that successfully enter into a partnership with celebrities will want to consider a set of factors to fully maximize the relationship. [A report](#) by the consulting firm Zoetica Media and PayPal found that the efficacy of a celebrity's social media advocacy hinges on his or her level of engagement to the organization or cause. "Engagement matters with social media, often much more so than having a large online fan base at the beginning of a campaign," the [report said](#). "Unlike a personal appearance, photo op, or scripted [public-service announcement], where just showing up will get it done, social fundraising requires an active, authentic and continued involvement [from the fund raiser] ... even if only for a short time."

### Foundation Spotlight



Founded in 2017, Kevin Hart's Help From the Hart Charity focuses on the educational, social, and health needs of underserved communities. It also helps young people access higher education through scholarships. Help from the Hart's supporting partners include KIPP, Unicef and the Clara Lionel Foundation, among many others.

Nonprofit leaders should also ensure that the celebrity's public persona aligns with the organization's values and prepare for the possibility that their celebrity partner may become embroiled in a scandal that could reflect poorly on the institution. "A consequence of hyper-communications is that people live their lives more than ever in the public eye," said [Genevieve Shaker](#), associate dean for development and external affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "Celebrities are people just like the rest of us, and sometimes, life doesn't go as planned."

# The Causes Celebrities Love

Entertainment and sports figures embrace a wide spectrum of priorities and have a range of philanthropic interest areas. That said, a few key patterns are clear in how these donors operate—both what kinds of gifts they make and what issues they work on.

In contrast to other sectors, many of these public-facing figures have spoken about their upbringing, giving an insight into what might drive current and future philanthropy. The public is generally more interested in learning about the personal life of, say, the basketball star Stephen Curry than the billionaire Stephen Schwarzman, so staying attuned to what these celebrities say informally or during interviews is important. A case in point: Tennis star Serena Williams was raised in Compton, Los Angeles, and lost her older half-sister to gun violence. Her background helps explain why her philanthropy has tackled persistent problems like gun violence, educational inequity, and poverty that have personally impacted her family.

## Education and Youth

Entertainment and sports givers frequently make donations to education and youth causes. Higher education and K-12 education are important to these funders, as is arts education. Given the humble backgrounds of many in the creative and athletic fields, scholarships and initiatives supporting low-income and/or minority students are high on the list of this group of funders.

Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James launched the I Promise School, a public elementary

school in his birthplace of Akron, Ohio, and the LeBron James Family Foundation also pledged up to \$42 million toward full academic scholarships for students at the University of Akron. Hip hop mogul Diddy recently made a \$1 million grant to Howard University.

Giving that touches the K-12 education space includes NBA star Stephen Curry and his wife Ayesha's Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, which focuses on three pillars for a healthy childhood — “helping end childhood hunger, ensuring universal access to quality education and enabling healthy, active lifestyles.”

Another interest is literacy. The so-called “Henry Ford of Books,” James Patterson, founded [readkiddoread.com](http://readkiddoread.com), which aims to provide parents with the tools they need to teach their kids the importance of reading. Hollywood power couple Judd Apatow and Leslie Mann are longtime supporters of 826LA, which encourages and develops the writing skills of disadvantaged youth.

The list of celebrity givers to education is extraordinarily long; and while education/youth is often the first stop for philanthropic neophytes, it can also be an issue to which deeply committed givers dedicate themselves for the long haul. Givers to education and youth programs representing every corner of the entertainment industry include: Sean “Diddy” Combs, Eminem, music producer Scooter Braun and his wife Yael Cohen Braun, Jamie Lee Curtis and Christopher Guest, Jane Fonda, Morgan Freeman, Berry Gordy, David Letterman, Jay Leno and his wife Mavis, and J.J. Abrams and his wife Katie McGrath.

Some celebrity youth funders have a specific focus. For example, Kevin Hart founded Help from the

Hart Charity, which provides access to education opportunities; Hart also supports UNCF and KIPP students to attend HBCUs. Eva Longoria's foundation concentrates on education and entrepreneurship for Latinas and children's health, especially in Texas, Mexico and other regions.

## Global Development and Human Rights

Hugh Jackman and his wife Deborra-lee Furness consider humanitarian causes in their giving. Furness co-founded Hopeland, a platform established to raise awareness of vulnerable and abandoned children. George Clooney and wife Amal support work on human rights.

There is perhaps no celebrity more associated with human rights than U2 lead singer Bono. He has campaigned for debt relief for developing nations and raised funds to fight HIV/AIDS. Bono has especially focused on the fight against poverty, playing a leading role in creating the ONE Campaign and (RED). ONE is a global movement to end extreme poverty and preventable disease, and in association with that work, Bono has lobbied heads of state and government and members of legislatures all around the world. This lobbying, combined with the work of ONE's grassroots membership, has ensured the passage and funding of government policies and programs that have

helped to save tens of millions of lives over the past 10 years. (RED) partners with brands to raise public awareness about and corporate contributions for the AIDS crisis. (RED) reports it has generated more than \$650 million for AIDS treatment and prevention in Africa through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. Bono is also co-founder of The Rise Fund, which describes itself as "a global impact fund investing in entrepreneurial companies driving measurable, positive social and environmental change in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals." Bono has received three nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize and was knighted in 2007.

Angelina Jolie is quite well-regarded for her global humanitarian commitments. She was the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and spoke out for causes like preventing violence against kids and women in conflict zones. Jolie set up a series of foundations, the first being the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation, and later, the Jolie-Pitt Foundation with then-husband Brad Pitt. When they launched it, they donated \$1 million to Global Action For Children, and another \$1 million to Doctors Without Borders. In 2014, Jolie and Stella McCartney launched the [Draw Me To Safety Campaign with War Child UK](#), to help children in peril in war-torn countries. While her giving has become considerably more low-key in recent years,

### Donor Spotlight: Angelina Jolie



Angelina Jolie is well known for her involvement in global health and humanitarian efforts. Jolie has served as a special envoy to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees for over 20 years and has established foundations of her own. In addition to her personal philanthropic work, Jolie partners with other organizations to elevate their causes including the Women for Bees Initiative, the Draw Me To Safety Campaign with War Child U.K., and SOS Children's Villages.

she is still one of the most prominent celebrities associated with global humanitarian giving.

## Climate Change and the Environment

Leonardo DiCaprio is the most prominent celebrity who has prioritized environmental causes in his giving, working to slow climate change through his foundation and public appearances. But other stars also focus on this issue, including Mark Ruffalo, who helped create The Solutions Project, a group that backs grassroots environmental activism.

The environment is one of the primary giving concerns of singer Jimmy Buffett's Singing for Change charity, along with projects that serve children and families. Media mogul Ted Turner is famous for his philanthropic support of the United Nations, but he is also a major supporter of environmental causes, and he has much more to give, with an estimated net worth of \$2.3 billion.

### Donor Spotlight: Leonardo DiCaprio



The Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation (LDF) was established in 1998 and has awarded over \$100 million in grants to environmental conservation organizations around the world. In 2019, the foundation announced that it was partnering with the Emerson Collective and Global Wildlife Conservation to launch a new organization called Earth Alliance, which focuses its work on helping to “address the urgent threat to our planet’s life support systems.” LDF’s staff and operations were fully folded into Earth Alliance.

Legendary Beatle Paul McCartney’s philanthropy is known primarily for support of animal rights and environmental organizations, though he’s also championed a number of humanitarian causes, and supports charities that fight cancer. The celebrities giving for climate and the environment are especially varied and include Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, Judd Apatow and Leslie Mann, Alec and Hilaria Baldwin, director James Cameron, director and former “Happy Days” star Ron Howard, Cameron Diaz and Sam Waterston.

## Arts

Funders from Wall Street, Silicon Valley and other industries are strong funders of the arts.

Sometimes, these donors are art collectors, have a spouse who is in the field, or perhaps at one point pondered a career in the arts themselves. What makes entertainment and sports donors unique is that many of them made their money with their talents and back these causes with philanthropic cash. Nintendo pioneer Minoru Arakawa helped launch the Arakawa Concert Hall at Performing Arts Center Eastside (PACE) in Washington State with his wife Yoko.

A&M records mogul Herb Alpert and his wife created the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, followed by more than \$23 million for the music program at CalArts. The Jazz legend’s foundation focuses heavily on supporting the arts and arts education. Alpert also notably supported music majors at Los Angeles City College, a community college, with a \$10.1 million grant.

Many celebrities direct a portion of their giving to arts nonprofits, but relatively few really place the arts at the top of their charitable priorities. Some of the celebrities who do include Billy Joel, Steve Martin, Shonda Rhimes, Diana Ross, Carole Bayer

Sager and Meryl Streep. George Lucas, who is best known philanthropically for his long-term commitments to K-12 education, also comes up as a funder of arts and culture now that he is backing the Lucas Cultural Arts Museum, which, once built in Los Angeles's Exposition Park, will curate "all forms of visual storytelling, including painting, photography, sculpture, illustration, comic art, performance and video."

Those dedicating far greater proportions of their charitable giving to the arts tend to be media moguls and producers, who usually operate outside of the public eye. Some of those include talent producer Don Buchwald and wife Maggie, cable TV billionaire Amos Hostetter and wife Barbara, literary agent Morton Janklow and his wife Linda, Black Entertainment Television co-founder Robert L. Johnson, Broadway producers Stewart Lane and Bonnie Comley, Broadway producer Luigi Caiola and his husband Sean McGill, Comcast founder Ralph Roberts and his wife Suzanne, Broadway producer Edward W. Snowden Jr., and Broadway producer David Stone.

## Medical Research

Just as celebrities can back a global cause in a public-facing way, they can also bring much-needed awareness and funds to a medical condition and disease. Consider actor Michael J. Fox and his Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, which has become the largest and most recognizable funder for such research and treatments. The public also learned a great deal about spinal cord injuries from the work of the Christopher and Dana Reeves Foundation. The Elton John AIDS Foundation has grown into an expanding global charity.

While there are several celebrities who have had direct experiences with a particular medical condition and put their reputational capital into fundraising and grantmaking efforts associated with them, there are many more media industry heavyweights who quietly give to established institutions, usually as just one part of a larger giving portfolio.

The givers to large medical institutions or medical research, like those to the arts, tend to be media moguls earning their fortunes away from the celebrity spotlight. Those include Comcast CEO Brian Roberts and his wife Aileen, theater chain heir Ben Moss III, former Marvel brand majority stockholder Isaac Perlmutter and his wife Laura, film production company owner Thomas Tull and wife Alba, and film producer/financier Ryan Kavanaugh.



### Foundation Spotlight

CHRISTOPHER & DANA  
REEVE FOUNDATION  
TODAY'S CARE. TOMORROW'S CURE.®

The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation is committed to advancing science toward curing spinal cord injury. It funds innovative research ranging from developing new rehabilitation and recovery programs to supporting scientific discoveries for potential spinal repair treatments. The foundation also operates a number of support programs helping families and individuals living with paralysis. In February 2022, it announced a joint \$1.1 million grant with the International Spinal Research Trust to support four studies "designed to restore neural/motor function primarily through novel circuit formation in chronic, traumatic spinal cord injury."

## Jewish Causes

Many Jewish donors also made fortunes in the entertainment industry, with philanthropy reflecting deep commitments rooted in religious, cultural and political values that span generations. Steven Spielberg created the Righteous Persons Foundation, which donates money to Jewish organizations and historical projects that relate to the Holocaust; and the Shoah Foundation, which has collected tens of thousands of testimonials of people who lived through the Holocaust or experienced it firsthand.

Media executives are the most frequent givers in this area, and among those who put Jewish causes among their top priorities are music executive Les Bider and wife Lynn, music publishing and computer games executive Joe Cayre and wife Trina, music and movie producer Haim Saban and wife Cheryl, film producer and New York Giants chairman Steve Tisch, and film director Robert Zemeckis and wife Leslie.

One of the camera-facing stars who has given significantly to Jewish causes is Wolfgang Puck, who is also involved in food and hunger groups.

## Progressive Policy and Equity

Pundits often present as a matter of “fact” that the “Hollywood elite” are predominantly liberal, and this translates to philanthropy, as well, although the number of celebrities actually giving to systems-changing work may not live up to the hype.

One of the leading progressive philanthropists from the entertainment industry, television producer Norman Lear, helped form People For the American Way, a nonprofit that speaks out for “Bill of Rights guarantees and monitors violations of

constitutional freedoms.” Hollywood superproducer JJ Abrams and his wife Katie McGrath also support this organization and recently announced a \$10 million, five-year pledge to “organizations and efforts committed to anti-racist agendas that close the gaps, lift the poor and build a just America for all.”

Susan Sarandon is also well-known for donating time and financial support for organizations dedicated to women’s rights, civil liberties and other issues.

As Harry Cheadle wrote on Blue Tent about their political giving, “Hollywood liberals are such a stereotype at this point that they’ve been repeatedly caricatured in movies made by Hollywood liberals... But whatever faults individual writers, actors, directors and producers may have, their money is just as green as anyone else’s, and the entertainment industry is an ultra-reliable source of Democratic cash. And while the industry is sometimes concerned with its own economic self-interest—copyright protection is probably the most prominent example—many individual donors in this space are motivated more by personal ideology than attempts to buy influence.”

Some of the donors whose political giving he profiled are also major donors to nonprofits advancing equity, civil rights and grassroots organizing.

For example, Seth MacFarlane of “Family Guy” fame became one of the Democratic Party’s top donors from any industry, but he’s also given [lavishly to other causes](#), including \$2.5 million to NPR in 2018 and \$200,000 to the Human Rights Campaign.

Steven Spielberg has made millions of dollars of political contributions to a wide variety of progressive PACs, and “he regularly cuts checks for tens of thousands directly to the Democratic Party and maxes out contributions to individual candidates. That makes him one of the party’s biggest donors, as well as one of its most famous,” writes Cheadle. But he also donates to nonprofits like Planned Parenthood and recently [announced giving](#) to a wide variety of justice-oriented organizations such as Avodah, Black Voters Matter, Collaborative for Jewish Organizing, Dayenu—A Jewish Call to Climate Action, Jews of Color Initiative, Justice for Migrant Women, National Domestic Workers Alliance, Native American Rights Fund, One Fair Wage and Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

## Pandemic Response

Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, along with other celebs like Idris Elba and Chris Cuomo, have spoken about their experience with the coronavirus, and have hammered home the importance of social distancing and masking up. Hollywood studios have contributed aid, including Netflix, which launched a \$100 million relief fund to aid out-of-work entertainment-industry workers during a time when much of Hollywood slowed down. This giving reflects an awareness that while top-earners in entertainment haven’t seen their careers change, production staff, office workers, and the many essential services workers that keep the industry afloat still need a lifeline.

Music legend Dolly Parton made a \$1 million donation to coronavirus vaccine research and supported the development of the Moderna vaccine. Sean Penn’s nonprofit CORE helped create the largest COVID-19 testing site at Dodgers Stadium.

Some of this funding also has a notable collaborative aspect. Rihanna teamed up with Jack Dorsey to provide \$4.2 million to victims of domestic violence impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns.

### Giving Spotlight: Pandemic Response

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, people in the entertainment and professional sports industries opened their wallets to support various relief efforts. Among some of the largest donations: Oprah Winfrey made a \$10 million donation, which included a \$1 million check to America’s Food Fund; Rachael Ray gave \$4 million to support various food charities; Houston Astros pitcher Justin Verlander donated his paychecks over two months (totaling around \$300,000) to response efforts; Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds donated \$1.4 million; and Rihanna, Jack Dorsey, and Jay-Z joined forces to donate \$6.2 million to support relief efforts in the U.S. and abroad.

# Giving by Sources of Wealth

The world's highest-paid celebrities earned a combined \$6.1 billion before taxes and fees in 2020, according to *Forbes*. The top-earning celebrities were Kylie Jenner and Kanye West, who brought in \$590 million and \$170 million, respectively. West took in most of his earnings from his Yeezy sneakers deal with Adidas. Though this was the first decline in earnings since 2016, even with the pandemic, many entertainment and sports figures are still sitting on enormous piles of cash—a philanthropic force to be reckoned with. Still, stars with the most wealth aren't necessarily the most charitable, and neither Jenner nor West are major philanthropic forces as yet.

Instead, this rundown will sketch out some major figures amongst actors, directors, producers, agents, entertainment moguls, musicians and writers. Some have established foundations and are giving away money on their own. Others raise funds. And others rally for causes. As Justin Forsyth, former head of Save the Children, once said: “In my experience, the benefits of celebrity are not fabled, but real – and can produce very concrete results. Without the campaigning energies of Bono, Bob Geldof and Richard Curtis, for example, I don't believe 46 million more children would be in school today in some of the world's poorest countries.”

A closer look at *Forbes*' list of the world's highest paid celebrities provides an instructive look into how individuals in the entertainment field amass their fortunes – sometimes in massive windfalls that are unlikely to be reproduced in future years. Consider the top-earning celebrities of 2020.

Jenner generated her impressive payday by selling a 51% stake in her cosmetics firm to Coty. Meanwhile, West derived most of his earnings from his Yeezy sneakers deal with Adidas.

Live, pre-pandemic performances generated millions for musicians Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift and Paul McCartney, while actors like Dwayne Johnson enjoyed big paydays for acting in blockbuster films. Author James Patterson, who we profile in this brief, sold almost 5 million books in the U.S. between June 2019 and June 2020. Readers will note that celebrities' reliance on liquid forms of income stands in contrast to figures in fields like tech, where a substantial amount of the donors' “paper wealth” is tied up in company stock.

Actors, musicians, and writers' ability to commit to long-term philanthropy hinges on their ability to secure future work and effectively manage their finances, much like their peers in the sports field. This is no sure thing in Hollywood, where celebrities like Nicholas Cage, Curtis Jackson (aka 50 Cent) and Pamela Anderson all had net worths exceeding \$20 million before they declared bankruptcy.

## The Stars of Screens Big and Small

**Michael J. Fox.** There may be no more fascinating model for the actor-donor combo than Michael J. Fox, even though his net worth is only \$65 million by some estimates. With a moderate amount of wealth, and without any major acting role in years, Fox has become synonymous with Parkinson's disease research and advocacy, driven by his own candid battle with the disease.

In 2000, he established the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, which has raised and made grants of more than \$700 million

to accelerate a cure for Parkinson's disease. The foundation supports high-risk, high-reward research, including stem cell research. The foundation has a number of major supporters, including Sergey Brin and Anne Wojcicki, who have donated at least \$50 million. In 2017 alone, the foundation pulled in nearly 100,000 donors, with Steve and Connie Ballmer, late Intel executive Andy Grove, and the wealthy Farmer family of Ohio among the foundation's top donors.

It's unclear exactly how much of his own money Fox put into the organization, but clearly, he has dedicated a lot of time to the issue, and has brought attention and resources to the cause in a way that only a celebrity of his stature can. "I've opened up about Parkinson's on TV to destigmatize it," Fox once told *The View*.

**Leonardo DiCaprio.** DiCaprio has a singular focus on the environment, and is one of the most prominent celebrity environmental activists, if not the most. Using money and his public caché to advocate for environmental awareness. DiCaprio was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace for climate advocacy. His DiCaprio Foundation (LDF), founded in 1998, has awarded over \$30 million since 2010 to fund tens of high-impact projects in more than 44 countries across Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa; North, Central and South America, the Eastern Pacific, the Arctic, Antarctica, the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean.

**Jami Gertz and Antony Ressler.** Gen Xers may remember Gertz from her roles in the TV show "Square Pegs" and the movie "The Lost Boys," but she is increasingly famous for her giving with her financier husband. Moving steady funds from their Ressler/Gertz Foundation, they prioritize education, the greater Los Angeles community and Jewish causes. Available tax filings reveal that the foundation awarded \$5.84 million in grants in 2017. Antony Ressler is a founding board member of the Alliance for College Ready Public Schools, a network of college preparatory charter schools in Los Angeles. Alliance Gertz-Ressler High School bears the couple's name.

**Will and Jada Pinkett Smith.** With an estimated \$300 million net worth, this prominent Hollywood couple got started with philanthropy early, launching the [Will and Jada Smith Family Foundation](#) (WJSFF) back in 1996. It works in arts and education, empowerment, health and wellness, and sustainability. Both stars showed an aptitude for the arts when they were young, and Pinkett attended Baltimore School for the Arts, which Tupac Shakur also attended. The Smiths back WJSFF with their own money. But they also raise funds for their partners. Smith's bungee jump over the Grand Canyon inspired \$240 million in donor commitments to WJSFF's education partner, Education Cannot Wait.

## Foundation Spotlight



The George Lucas Educational Foundation has been helping improve K-12 education for more than 30 years. Its two main divisions—Edutopia and Lucas Education Research—helps educators implement the foundation's core strategies of project-based learning, social and emotional learning, comprehensive assessment, teacher development, integrated studies, and technology integration.

**Kerry Washington.** The Spence School and George Washington University-educated thespian is active in social justice and grassroots power-building. She co-chairs the Black Voices for Black Justice Fund, co-chairs Michelle Obama’s When We All Vote campaign, and is the founder of Influence Change 2020, an initiative that partners with nonprofit organizations to increase voter turnout.

### Campaign Spotlight



In 2013, Salma Hayek and Beyoncé teamed up with Gucci to establish Chime for Change, a global campaign fighting for gender equality. To date, the campaign has raised over \$19 million, supporting 442 projects around the world including UN Women, mothers2mothers, and Girls Not Brides. In 2021, it joined the UN Women’s Generation Equality Forum as the private sector lead on the Feminist Movements & Leadership Action Coalition.

**Samuel and LaTanya Jackson.** Samuel L. Jackson and his wife LaTanya do their grantmaking through the Samuel and LaTanya R. Jackson Foundation, which has given modestly of late. Funding priorities include youth, health and the arts. Jackson and LaTanya also support their HBCU alma maters. The Jacksons are top supporters of the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

**Meryl Streep.** The Oscar-winning actress and her husband Donald Gummer have been engaged in active philanthropy since the early 1980s, when they launched the Morristown, New Jersey-based Silver Mountain Foundation for the Arts. They have an interest in arts, education, healthcare and human services. Previous grantees include New York Women in Film and Television, Opus 118

Harlem School of Music, and Streep’s alma mater, Vassar College.

### Producers, Directors and Agents

*Forbes’* list of the [richest people in the world](#) suggests that the top strata of givers within the broader “celebrity” demographic consists of billionaire media executives over 60. Celebrity donors featured in this brief who made *Forbes’* list of the world’s richest people include Geffen (No. 245), George Lucas (No. 339), Anthony Ressler (No. 665), Steven Spielberg (No. 807), Oprah Winfrey (No. 1,174), and Michael Jordan (No. 1,931).

These individuals amassed their wealth by launching successful entertainment and production companies, drawing enormous salaries and consulting fees, striking lucrative merchandising and licensing deals, and successfully managing their investments over the course of the past three decades.

George Lucas sold his company Lucasfilm to the Walt Disney Company for \$4 billion in 2012. His net worth reportedly stands at \$8.7 billion. Another profiled donor, Oprah Winfrey, has a net worth of \$2.6 billion. Her fortune is derived from her media and entertainment company Harpo Inc. and investments in food and health brands.

Producers, directors and agents tend to move a lot more money out of their foundations compared to actors, rather than relying on raising funds and rallying others for causes. On the whole, nonprofit leaders will have difficulty connecting with these individuals, many of whom do not have webpages, much less enable nonprofits to make unsolicited funding requests. While this approach puts them at odds with some private foundations, it aligns with

Wall Street financiers, tech donors and other funders who operate in an opaque manner.

**JJ Abrams and Katie McGrath.** Filmmaker JJ Abrams and his wife Katie McGrath do their grantmaking through the Katie McGrath & JJ Abrams Family Foundation. The foundation supports education, policy, human services, the arts and more. Abrams supports his alma mater Sarah Lawrence College. In 2020, the couple pledged \$10 million over five years, through their foundation and Abrams' production company Bad Robot, to organizations and efforts committed to anti-racist agendas that close the gaps, lift the poor and build a just America for all.

The couple has also been involved with Children's Defense Fund, where McGrath is an emerita board member. Abrams and McGrath have supported CDF Freedom Schools, "child-centered summer enrichment programs that boost student capacity and motivation to read, and connect the needs of children and families to resources in their communities." With an estimated \$300 million net worth, this is a Hollywood power couple to watch for even greater giving down the line.

**Steven Spielberg.** One of the richest directors in Hollywood and a bona fide billionaire, Spielberg brings unusual wealth to this space. His giving, with wife Kate Capshaw, has been going since the 1990s, focused on Jewish causes and, increasingly, social justice. The Righteous Persons Foundation (RPF) is dedicated to supporting efforts that build a vibrant, just and inclusive Jewish community in the United States. Their Wunderkinder Foundation, meanwhile, has an asset base above \$110 million in recent years, according to tax records, speaking to the significant amount of funds—disclosed and undisclosed—in play here.

**Lin-Manuel Miranda and Vanessa Nadal.** Lin-Manuel Miranda teamed up with the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation to donate \$300,000 to Puerto Rico relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Miranda and his wife Vanessa do not appear to have a formal family foundation. In 2020, he made a \$1 million commitment to provide scholarships for students of color at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Theater Institute.

### Donor Spotlight: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Vanessa Nadal



Based on the successes of *Hamilton*, *In the Heights* and *Encanto*, it's not surprising that Lin-Manuel Miranda and Vanessa Nadal's philanthropy is growing. The couple has made some significant charitable donations recently. In addition to a 2020 commitment to provide \$1 million in scholarships at the National Theater Institute, in 2021 the Miranda family awarded \$225,000 in grants to immigrant rights organizations and policy reform advocates.

**Marcy Carsey.** The Carsey Family Foundation was established by TV producer Marcy Carsey and her late husband, comedy writer and war veteran John Jay Carsey. Carsey has a major interest in public policy issues and the media. In 2013, she gave \$20 million to create University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy. Carsey is also a strong supporter of University of California, Santa Barbara, where her two children graduated. UCSB is the site of the Carsey-Wolf Center.

**Seth MacFarlane.** After Fox News host Tucker Carlson's suggestion that viewers should discount any other media besides Fox News, MacFarlane tweeted criticism. He followed up his words with a \$2 million donation to NPR and \$500,000 to Los Angeles' NPR member station, KPCC, the top news distribution for NPR content in Southern California. He does not yet appear to have a family foundation.

### Donor Spotlight: Seth MacFarlane



Though Seth MacFarlane does not have a family foundation, the multi-hyphenate entertainer gives to a number of charitable causes. Aside from his previously mentioned \$2.5 million donation to public radio, MacFarlane has given \$1 million to the Rainforest Trust; \$200,000 to the Human Rights Campaign's Equality Votes Initiative; and according to the *Los Angeles Times*, he has donated \$4.6 million to the Democratic party since 2005.

**Shonda Rhimes.** Some estimates put this prolific Hollywood producer-writer's net worth at \$130 million. She's climbed the ranks from writer to showrunner and producer, and she may eventually rise even higher one day, joining the ranks of the mega-wealthy like Spielberg, Lucas and Winfrey. Rhimes established the Rhimes Family Foundation in 2016 to support arts, education and activism with a focus on cultural inclusion, fighting for equality, and standing up against bigotry. Rhimes and her family have made at least \$10 million in grants to the Smithsonian National Museum of

African American History and Culture. Rhimes' casting diversity was groundbreaking for TV, and she has become increasingly outspoken about equity and inclusion, issues that could trigger even more philanthropy in this area in the coming years.

### Executives/Moguls

Executives and moguls in Hollywood head up media companies, studios, record labels and production companies. Some are billionaires, illustrating the serious wealth coming out of the entertainment and media industries in recent decades. These figures tend to rely on foundations and individual donations, and are least likely to go the route of fundraising and overtly championing causes. They operate most like the traditional donors found on Wall Street, tech and other sectors. With greater sums on hand, these figures have the potential to spread their money widely or also more narrowly for greater impact, toward a specific institution like a school or a cause like global development. Many of the figures examined focus on sustained support of select institutions and causes, conducting strong and focused giving.

**Oprah Winfrey.** One example of this strong and focused giving is that of media mogul Oprah Winfrey. Her Harpo Productions, Oprah Winfrey Network and *O Magazine* have made her billions. The bulk of Winfrey's grantmaking has gone to educational causes, including charter schools, programs that support African-American students, and the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. Her flagship school was born out of discussions with Nelson Mandela, illustrating the rarefied air some of these figures breathe and the deep connections they have.

Winfrey has been outspoken about her humble beginnings in the South, and is a unique figure in

that before she was Winfrey the media mogul, she was Winfrey the television host. In this way, her work and potential role in philanthropy mixes both, as she uses her own enormous wealth to create change, but also inspire and galvanize others. Oprah's Book Club recommended around 70 books over the years, and many of them became bestsellers with the Winfrey stamp of approval. Increasingly, Winfrey has turned her philanthropic attention stateside. In 2020, she pledged \$12 million through her COVID-19 Relief Fund to support organizations helping underserved communities in what she considers her "home cities": Nashville, Chicago, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Kosciusko, Mississippi.

**George Lucas and Mellody Hobson.** For many years, George Lucas has supported education. In recent years, Lucas has also prioritized bringing the Los Angeles-based Lucas Museum of Narrative Art to life through \$1 billion spent on construction and endowments. Importantly, he signed the Giving Pledge with his wife, Mellody Hobson. The couple makes grants through the George Lucas Family Foundation (which held more than \$1 billion in assets in a recent year) and the George Lucas Educational Foundation. Hobson brings her own unique power to the couple's philanthropy as a Black woman with strong ties to Chicago. She serves as chair of After School Matters, a nonprofit that provides Chicago teens with high-quality, out-of-school programs.

**David Geffen.** David Geffen's giving has largely been in the form of individual donations to select institutions. Approaching a \$10 billion net worth, he's been a major proponent of marriage equality and donor to LGBTQ causes. He also funds numerous organizations that fight AIDS, but his biggest contribution has been the \$300 million he

gave to the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. He has also made significant contributions to organizations focusing on the arts and education. Geffen gave \$100 million each to MoMA and Lincoln Center. In 2017, he pledged \$150 million to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the largest gift in the museum's history. Down the line, his impressive art collection, including works by Jasper Johns, De Kooning and Jackson Pollock, could hold high interest for major museum fundraisers.

### Donor Spotlight: Shonda Rhimes



On the website [shondaland.com](http://shondaland.com), Shonda Rhimes shares a few of her favorite charities, which include Time's Up, GLAAD and Girls Who Code. In addition to her personal philanthropy, her Rhimes Family Foundation awards around \$5 million annually to nonprofits. Grants over the years include \$6 million to the Smithsonian, \$5 million to the Obama Foundation, and \$2 million to the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

**Michael and Jane Eisner.** The Eisner Foundation, started by former Disney CEO Michael Eisner and his wife Jane in 1996, has made over \$100 million in grants. Supporting underserved children and the elderly of Los Angeles County, the foundation averages approximately \$7 million in annual grantmaking.

**Mo Ostin.** Former Warner Records executive Mo Ostin's philanthropy has heavily benefited higher education, particularly at his alma mater UCLA.

Ostin gave \$10 million to establish the Evelyn and Mo Ostin Music Center. More recently, Ostin made a \$10 million commitment to UCLA’s new on-campus basketball training and performance facility, to be known as the Mo Ostin Basketball Center.

## Musicians

The world of music is big business, and lucrative for the most successful performers. Kanye West was the highest-earning musician of 2020, with \$241 million earned thanks to his Yeezy sneaker deal with Adidas. Second on the list is Elton John, who earned \$113 million. While the gender pay gap impacts all industries, a number of female artists are among the *Forbes* top 20 wealthiest musicians.

Musicians, like Hollywood actors, can also have foundations, but they also have a unique power to rally awareness toward causes and spearhead fundraisers. And many of them have used their voices on the stage to rally for causes they believe in. Human services, humanitarian and health causes seem to be of particular interest to this swath of donors.

**Rihanna.** Barbados-born singer Rihanna is the world’s richest female musician, with a net worth of \$600 million, according to *Forbes*. She launched her first foundation when she was just 18. Today, her Clara Lionel Foundation focuses on climate

resilience in the Caribbean, health, and global education, with a small but impressive staff that keeps its ears to the ground. Rihanna’s rise and influence from such a young age reflects the unique position some of these figures can have. And regarding what Rihanna herself might say about her philanthropy, CLF Executive Director Justine Lucas said, “Obviously, she builds empires in business and music, and she wanted philanthropy to be as big and as resounding a success as all of those other things.”

In 2018, CLF announced a climate resilience initiative and began testing a different approach in its Caribbean work, focused on proactively strengthening infrastructure and social systems to prepare for future storms, rather than working reactively. The \$25 million initiative will be a major focus in the next five years. In the effort’s first pilot project, the foundation worked with International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region and Engineers Without Borders-USA to make reproductive health clinics in the Caribbean more resilient to disasters. Since then, the resilience initiative has worked with schools in Dominica, reproductive health clinic projects in Belize and the Dominican Republic, and supported efforts in Barbados.

**Gloria and Emilio Estefan.** With an estimated net worth of a half-billion, Gloria Estefan and her husband Emilio do their grantmaking through the

### Donor Spotlight: Rihanna



Although Rihanna makes personal donations to support various charitable causes, the majority of her philanthropy flows through her Clara Lionel Foundation, which focuses its giving on climate resilience and justice, inequity, and injustice in communities around the world. In 2020, Jack Dorsey’s charitable vehicle, #StartSmall, donated \$20 million to the foundation to support its Climate Entrepreneurship and Climate Resilience initiatives.

Gloria Estefan Foundation. Estefan teamed up with the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis and served as the capital campaign director for the Miami Project's new building campaign, which raised over \$40 million. She donated at least \$1 million alone to University of Miami, her alma mater, in 2006.

**Bruce Springsteen.** In the 1980s, Springsteen set up and funded an organization called The Foundation, Inc., which covers home repair costs for local residents in his native Monmouth County, New Jersey. Today, he moves philanthropy through Thrill Hill Foundation, which focuses on human services and antipoverty efforts.

**Bette Midler.** Bette Midler is the founder of New York Restoration Project, which plants trees, renovates gardens, and restores parks in all five New York City boroughs. Midler's environmental philanthropy has mainly involved the city, but she has supported organizations with a broader scope, too. Midler has also funded arts and culture organizations, and supports arts education. Through one of several charitable giving foundations she operates, the [Jeckyl Foundation](#), she supports the Stages for Success initiative, which funds renovations of New York City public school auditoriums.

**John Legend and Chrissy Teigen.** John Legend is a good example of a musician giver who has used his influence and celebrity to advocate for causes. On the heels of reading Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow," the 11-time Grammy Award winner showed an interest in education reform and then the school-to-prison pipeline. Today, Legend is one of the most prominent celebrity advocates for racial justice and criminal justice reform. He launched the Show Me Campaign, which seeks to give every child access to education, and

#FREEAMERICA, a program designed to change national conversations and policies around the criminal justice system. His wife, model/social media star Chrissy Teigen, is a vocal partner in their philanthropy. Of their highly publicized giving to the ACLU, she said, "John and I are outraged to see and hear the horror stories of immigrant families seeking asylum and refuge in America being ripped apart due to the inhumane policies of the Trump administration. The ACLU is committed to defending the rights and humanity of these vulnerable families. In addition to fighting for immigrants' rights, they're advocating for reproductive rights, voting rights, and holding the Trump administration accountable whenever possible."

**Elton John.** Most of Elton John's charitable grantmaking supports the Elton John AIDS Foundation, created in the United States in 1992 and in the United Kingdom in 1993. The two foundations together have raised more than \$385 million in just shy of 30 years, but he has still found time to raise money for other causes.

**Barbra Streisand.** Streisand has a history of giving to Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles, supporting a regenerative medicine research fund in 2007, and underwriting the Barbra Streisand Women's Cardiovascular Research and Education Program in 2008. Streisand gave at least \$13 million to Cedars-Sinai between 2008 and 2010 alone. Cedars-Sinai is also the site of the Barbra Streisand Women's Heart Center.

**Beyoncé.** Beyoncé co-founded Chime for Change with actress Salma Hayek. Chime for Change describes itself as "a global campaign to raise funds and awareness for girls and women around the world." Beyoncé also launched a philanthropic

initiative called #BeyGOOD to help the homeless, sick children, and the unemployed. In May 2020, Beyoncé's BeyGOOD pledged \$6 million toward mental-wellness services related to the COVID-19 pandemic for communities of color in Houston, New York, New Orleans and Detroit.

### Donor Spotlight: Beyoncé and Jay-Z



Beyoncé and Jay-Z's individual philanthropy tends to flow through their respective charities. #BeyGOOD largely focuses on gender equity, disaster relief and humanitarian aid and the Shawn Carter Foundation focuses on improving access to higher education for disadvantaged students. Outside of their charities they have backed a number of diverse causes ranging from his push for criminal justice and bail reform to her involvement in Phoenix House, a center for people recovering from substance use disorder.

**Herb and Lani Alpert.** “The politicians,” Alpert told Inside Philanthropy, “don’t get it.” “It” being the importance of arts and music education. Herb and Lani Alpert have been major supporters of music education for the past two decades through the Herb Alpert Foundation. His biggest recipient has been UCLA, which he gave tens of millions for the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, followed by more than \$23 million for the music program at CalArts. Other higher education institutes have received support, as well, including Thelonious Monk Institute for Jazz. He also established an endowment to provide free tuition and private lessons to music majors attending Los Angeles City College with a \$10.1 million grant. The foundation

also awards scholarships to high school students through the Herb Alpert Scholarships for Emerging Young Artists at the California State Summer School for the Arts.

### Best-Selling Authors

Writing is by no means a get-rich-quick scheme. That said, at the highest levels, the top earning authors, playwrights and screenwriters rake in quite a bit of cash. J.K. Rowling was once on the *Forbes* billionaire list. There are other top-earning scribes who've put some of their cash toward charitable causes. Writers, like actors, are drawn to arts and education. For writers, that draw is rooted in literacy and fostering the same love of reading and writing that launched and sustained their careers.

**Stephen and Tabitha King.** The storied horror writer and his wife Tabitha met at Raymond H. Folger Library at University of Maine. The couple has given millions to their mutual alma mater, and some of King's works can be found at the library. Their Steven and Tabitha King Foundation has been around since 1986, and makes grants solely in the Maine community, giving away around \$3 million annually in recent years. They're also major supporters of local fire departments, and to a lesser extent, human service organizations.

**John and Renee Grisham.** John Grisham and his wife Renee do their grantmaking through the Oakwood Foundation Charitable Trust. The couple's philanthropy prioritizes Mississippi and Virginia. Grisham's alma mater Mississippi State University has received millions. The University of Mississippi, meanwhile, is the site of the Grisham Writers in Residence. Another funding priority is justice organizations such as the Innocence Project, where Grisham sits on the board of directors.

**Isabel Allende.** Allende does her grantmaking through the Isabel Allende Foundation, which primarily supports nonprofits in California and Chile providing vulnerable women and children with access to reproductive rights, healthcare, education and protection from violence. The bulk of grants are between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

**Nora Roberts.** Nora Roberts does her grantmaking through the Nora Roberts Foundation. The foundation makes grants to about 140 organizations each year, with a primary focus on supporting literacy. Children’s programs, arts organizations and humanitarian efforts are additional funding areas. The foundation also prioritizes local organizations, particularly in Maryland, Washington, D.C., and West Virginia.

**James Patterson.** Novelist James B. Patterson’s philanthropy unsurprisingly prioritizes youth reading and literacy. He believes that a child’s reading success starts at home. Patterson has given away thousands of books, supported and advocated for reading programs, supported libraries and independent bookstores, and funded scholarships.

### Donor Spotlight: Isabel Allende



Author Isabel Allende established her foundation in 1996 in honor of her daughter Paula, who died at age 29. Allende continues to contribute to the foundation with her earnings from her books. Recent grantees include the Center for Reproductive rights, the Global Fund for Women, and Mujeres Unidas y Activas.

**Dean and Gerda Koontz.** Dean Koontz and his wife Gerda do their grantmaking through the Dean and Gerda Koontz Foundation, which was established in 1994. Koontz tends to keep his philanthropy close to home in Orange County, California. The couple has supported charities for critically ill children and people with severe disabilities. One of the main benefactors has been Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a charitable organization that provides service dogs for people with disabilities.

## Athletes

Sometimes, they are shooting stars that burn bright for only a very brief time. Forbes reports that the 100 highest-paid athletes earned a combined \$3.6 billion in 2020; according to GQ, the NBA’s top 10 highest-paid NBA players earned \$875.9 million in 2019-2020. However, few are able to parlay large paychecks into the long-term, growth-oriented wealth associated with big-time philanthropy.

The most affluent current or former athlete profiled in this brief is Michael Jordan, who retired in 2003 after earning \$90 million during his NBA career. His net worth stands at \$1.7 billion, placing him at No. 1,931 in *Forbes’* list of the richest people in the world. Jordan built his wealth through his own apparel line after retiring, Nike royalties, and franchise, which is worth approximately \$1.5 billion. Jordan provides a useful template for current players whose wealth comes from salaries, sponsorships and business ventures.

Jordan is in many ways the exception rather than the rule. A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that roughly 16% of NFL players end up bankrupt within 12 years of retiring. Similarly, 78% former NFL players “experience

financial distress” two years after retirement, according to [Chris Dudley](#), senior wealth advisor and director of sports and entertainment at Boston Private Wealth. He also notes that 60% of NBA players declare bankruptcy within five years of departing the league.

Dudley attributes these statistics to the fact that athletes’ career earnings are compressed into a limited time frame. The average length for a player’s career in the NBA and NFL is [4.5 years](#) and [3.3 years](#), respectively. As such, Dudley says, players have a small window to “not only save—but also invest wisely—all while navigating the minefield of people looking to take advantage of them, because there likely won’t be more coming in.”

Wealth management firm [RBC](#) found that the average professional athlete will likely retire before they hit age 30. Given athletes’ relatively brief playing careers, many chose to pivot to philanthropy upon retirement. Former NFL player Robert Golden told IP that every athlete has a “what’s-next” moment when their sports careers are coming to a close, and he hopes to be a model for what players might do when they turn the page. “I just want to let them know that you created this platform for yourself by being an athlete,” he said “But life is so much bigger than sports.”

Sports philanthropy executive Joanne Pasternack told IP that an athlete’s initial foray into giving is “usually some variation of being introduced to a cause at a team event, through what a teammate is doing, or something they’ve experienced personally—for instance, their grandmother had breast cancer, or their brother was dealing with addiction.”

Patrick Willis’ journey from a football player for the San Francisco 49ers to philanthropist

corroborates many of Pasternack’s insights. Speaking with IP, he cited the philanthropic work of his team’s 49ers Foundation during his playing career. “I did events and tried to bring out some of my teammates,” he said. Personal experience also plays a huge role in his giving. “I don’t like to use the word ‘less fortunate,’ but I didn’t have a whole lot growing up,” he told IP.

“And I always told myself that one day, I wanted to be able to give that same feeling to someone else.” He said that one of the things that his fellow football players-turned-philanthropists “most definitely all have in common is that we feel like we have to give back to those who are trying to come up from similar situations.”

**Foundation Spotlight**

STEPHEN & AYESHA CURRY'S  
EAT.LEARN.PLAY.

Steph & Ayesha Curry’s Eat.Learn.Play focuses on ending childhood hunger, ensuring children have access to quality education, and that they have safe places to play and be active. Working in Oakland, California, the foundation has delivered more than 25 million meals to area students, rebuilt elementary school playgrounds, and supported various parks, recreation and youth programs.

Pasternack told IP that athletes “have always had a platform that can amplify their voices around a cause with a much broader audience than your average individual, or even your average influencer.” However, she has noticed an important shift in the last 10 years “where athletes are not only acknowledging that they have a platform and they should use their voice, but they’re really thinking more deliberately about how they want to elevate their voices and what causes are most important to them.”

Athletes, like Hollywood actors, sometimes have non-traditional educational paths. This drives them to put a high philanthropic value on educational and youth programs, particularly around scholarships and empowering underprivileged youth. These figures are also becoming increasingly outspoken about social causes around them.

The NBA is a majority Black league, with some 75% of players identifying as such. The league is considered more progressive than others, from owners all the way down to fans. This is in contrast to other leagues like the NFL. This diversity has an impact on the philanthropic priorities in this sector, with NBA players especially interested in social issues and increasingly outspoken about them.

### Donor Spotlight: Michael Jordan



In 2020 Michael Jordan and his company, Jordan Brand announced a 10-year, \$100 million commitment to fight systemic racism in Black communities around the country. The grants are awarded to both national and grassroots organizations. Current grantees include the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People & Families Movement.

The average NFL player isn't making as much as the average NBA player. Still, the top NFL stars are major earners, with these earnings likely to grow. Per the NFL's new collective bargaining agreement, starting in 2021, the players will get at least 48% of all league revenue. In 2018, the NFL made roughly \$16 billion in revenue.

In a story that sharply contrasts with the more progressive NBA, former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's treatment reflects the different climate in the NFL. Still, players are starting to champion causes that are personal to them.

"I think that's probably the lane I'm excited about most that these players chose to influence," explained Jalen Rose, retired NBA player turned ABC/ESPN analyst, to Inside Philanthropy. "There used to be some sort of jock undercurrent. If you weren't the best student, or you didn't necessarily graduate from college, your influence here wasn't necessarily important. But I'm glad that that glass ceiling is shattering. And not just in the NBA, but the sports world as a whole."

**Michael Jordan.** With a net worth of approximately \$2 billion, Michael Jordan once had a formal family foundation during his playing career. More recently, he's ramped up individual donations, stepping into the spotlight with a bit of social commentary, as well. In 2016, Jordan gave \$5 million to the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. That same year, he gave \$7 million to fund two Novant Health Michael Jordan Family Clinics in Charlotte. In 2021, he gave \$10 million to open two additional family health clinics on the southeastern coast of North Carolina. Jordan also gave grants of \$1 million each to two organizations "working to build trust between law enforcement and the communities in which they work." A \$1 million grant was directed to the Institute for Community-Police Relations, and another \$1 million was directed to NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Other wealthy NBA legends, including Magic Johnson and Charles Barkley, also engage in philanthropy.

**LeBron James.** LeBron James' philanthropy is directed through the LeBron James Family Foundation (LJFF), which announced plans to spend \$41 million to send kids to college for free and opened its first elementary school in 2018. LJFF established the I PROMISE Institute at the University of Akron, aimed at helping students and their families transition to college life. LeBron and his business partner, Maverick Carter, donated \$2.5 million to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to support "Muhammad Ali: A Force for Change," an exhibit on the late boxer's commitment to social justice. In 2020, James partnered with comedian Kevin Hart and others to form "More than a Vote," an organization created to support African-American voter registration and address voter suppression.

**Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union.** Though retired from the NBA, Wade and his wife Gabrielle Union are active in the sports and entertainment worlds. He moves philanthropy through Wade's World Foundation, which provides support to community-based organizations promoting education, health and social skills for at-risk children. The parents of a transgender daughter, Wade and Union recently made a series of donations to nonprofits supporting healthcare for the LGBTQ community during the pandemic.

**Kevin Durant.** Kevin Durant launched the Kevin Durant Charity Foundation (KDCF), which seeks to enrich the lives of at-risk youth through athletic, educational, and social programs and recently committed \$10 million to create College Track at The Durant Center. Durant has also given millions to his college, the University of Texas.

**J.J. Watt.** Born in Wisconsin, Houston Texans defensive maestro J.J. Watt launched the JJ Watt

Foundation, which serves schools in Wisconsin, Texas and beyond, funding after-school athletic programs. Watt stepped up after Hurricane Harvey and helped raise some \$41.6 million for relief efforts. In 2020 the foundation served over 100 schools in states including Oklahoma, Kentucky and Pennsylvania. Watt also paid for the funerals of victims of the 2018 Santa Fe School Shooting.

**Drew Brees.** Drew and Brittany Brees recently committed \$5 million to Louisiana for COVID-19 relief efforts. Their Brees Dream Foundation focuses on improving the quality of life for cancer patients and provides care, education and opportunities for children and families in need. The foundation has directed some \$35 million to organizations, according to its website.

**Ndamukong Suh.** Once a star track and field athlete, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers player donated \$2.6 million to his alma mater, the University of Nebraska, bankrolling an engineering scholarship. Suh graduated from the College of Engineering with a construction management degree. Meanwhile, the Ndamukong Suh Family Foundation (NSFF) seeks to advance education, health and wellness, and international outreach within the community. NSFF hosted a training camp for youth from Overtown Youth Center (OYC), a youth development agency co-founded by Florida sports legend Alonzo Mourning.

**Michael Tauiiili-Brown.** One-time NFL player, Michael Tauiiili-Brown founded Win-Win, a fantasy sports platform that allows NFL players to support their favorite charities while delivering fan experiences. The platform allows athletes to have full ownership of the kinds of charities they support, rather than being quartered by the ideas of their team owners, agents and others.

**Serena Williams.** After having a daughter a few years ago, Serena Williams is back on the court, continuing to earn titles and endorsement revenues. She's married to Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian, and while the power couple is still very much engaged in business, they're starting to build a philanthropic track record, too. Serena launched the Serena Williams Fund (SWF) to provide assistance to youth whose families have been affected by violent crimes, as well as to assist college-bound youth from low-income backgrounds in receiving the highest-quality education possible.

Critical to understanding Serena's nascent giving is her Compton, California, background, where she lost her half-sister Yetunde to gun violence. Serena has invested in the Caliber Foundation in support of families and victims affected by gun violence. She also made a UNICEF trip to Africa, witnessing firsthand how challenging it is for young girls to access basic education. SWF has partnered with UNICEF on a number of campaigns focused on education in Africa.

### Donor Spotlight: Serena Williams



In addition to her philanthropy and her work as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF, Serena Williams is a prolific angel investor. In 2022, her venture fund, Serena Ventures, raised \$111 million. The fund will use that capital to invest in early-stage startups that share its goal of “a future in which historically overlooked people and markets are empowered for a more inclusive economy.”

**Sloane Stephens.** Part of the next generation of U.S. tennis stars, Sloane Stephens gives through the Sloane Stephens Foundation (SSF), which assists in developing a constructive future for young people by providing educational opportunities and encouraging healthy lifestyles, proper nutrition, and participation in physical activities. The SSF board includes Stephens' mother Sybil Smith and uncle, Ronald Smith, both of whom hold doctorates in education. Sybil Smith worked as a school psychologist for three decades. In fact, the entire Stephens family places a high value on education, with several aunts and uncles sporting doctorates.

In 2015, the foundation launched 'Love, Love Compton,' in conjunction with Compton school administrators, principals and teachers, to provide an ongoing model that builds on the educational foundation of the school district with an athletic component. “We've grown from one elementary school, introducing tennis on a mini-court during recess. Now, it works like a mini sports league. We also offer tutoring, ACT/SAT prep and a leadership program that introduces students into areas of leadership that will be beneficial,” Smith explained to Inside Philanthropy.

**Tiger Woods.** Woods conducts philanthropy through the TGR Foundation, which he started with his late father, Earl, in 1996. The foundation has since grown to include the Earl Woods Scholar Program and the TGR Learning Lab. The foundation is laser-focused on expanding STEM educational opportunities for youth.

# An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

The entertainment and sports sectors are a major source of wealth creation. So far, however, only a portion of riches have been directed to philanthropy. Additionally, particularly in sports, many celebrities are only in their 20s and 30s and have considerable time to amass more wealth and to direct these funds toward charitable efforts.

While The Giving Pledge hasn't penetrated as much in entertainment as it has on Wall Street and tech, there are many entertainment and sports figures who are serious about their philanthropy, starting foundations early and signing on staff and other advisers, with the goal of deepening giving down the line.

However, the greatest impact of entertainers and athletes might not be in the realm of giving away money—which is somewhat limited compared to other industries—but in their ability to marshal their huge social media followings and public personae to raise awareness and funds.

Rihanna's Twitter account is nearly 100 million followers strong, and her Instagram is at nearly 90 million. Of the 10 most popular Instagram accounts, besides Instagram itself, the other nine most popular accounts are celebrities. Soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo boasts some 385 million followers alone. Twitter tells a similar story, beyond top-followed figure Barack Obama.

Clara Lionel Foundation Executive Director Justine Lucas characterizes Rihanna in terms that reveal a willingness to wield money and influence in tandem with enacting social change. Rihanna went to France and met with President Emmanuel Macron, and to Senegal for the Replenishment

Conference. "This is not just her name on a letter, or writing an op ed. She's using her voice to put pressure on heads of state," she says. "She tweeted at many world leaders, with targeted dollar amounts, and then her followers backed her up... We've proven that this advocacy model works."

Part of these figures' power isn't just appealing to politicians and leaders, but becoming part of these institutions themselves. For instance, Angelina Jolie, was appointed Special Envoy to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees after her years of dedicated service to the program and the cause of refugee rights. She has carried out dozens of field missions in her role as a UNHCR goodwill ambassador.

While the entertainment and sports sectors still suffer from issues of diversity and representation, it's no small thing that some of the most popular entertainers and athletes are people of color and/or women. With this changing guard comes new interest areas. Increasingly, professional athletes are looking to make an impact off the court and fields, speaking out about issues like Black Lives Matter, voter registration, mental health and a host of other issues they're passionate about.

# Resources for Giving of Celebrities, Athletes and Media Moguls

## Websites & Individual Pages with Key Information:

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Hutchins, Kathy. Jami Gertz arrives at "A Better Life" World Premiere Gala Screening at the 2011 Los Angeles Film Festival at Regal Cinemas L.A. LIVE. (June 21, 2011). *Shutterstock.com*.

Hutchins, Kathy. Lin-Manuel Miranda, Vanessa Nadal at Encanto World Premiere at El Capitan Theater (November 3, 2021). *Shutterstock.com*.

Hutchins, Kathy. Shonda Rhimes at the 10th Annual Governors Awards at the Ray Dolby Ballroom. (November 18, 2018). *Shutterstock.com*.

Angelina Jolie. Visit to NATO by Angelina Jolie, Special Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (January 31, 2018). Used with permission under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic ([CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)).

Radin, Lev. Michael Jordan attends semifinal match Marin Cilic of Croatia & Roger Federer of Switzerland at US Open championship in Flushing Meadows USTA Tennis Center. (September 6, 2014). *Shutterstock.com*.

Radin, Lev. Serena Williams and Alexis Ohanian attend premiere HBO documentary Being Serena at Time Warner Center. (April 25, 2018). *Shutterstock.com*.

Raffin, Andrea. Leonardo DiCaprio attends the premiere of the movie "Once Upon A Time In Hollywood" during the 72nd Cannes Film Festival Cannes, France. (May 21, 2019). *Shutterstock.com*.

Raffin, Andrea. Rihanna attends Sephora Fenty Beauty by Rihanna launch event. (April 5, 2018). *Shutterstock.com*.

Skidmore, Gage. Seth MacFarlane on the Family Guy panel at the 2010 San Diego Comic Con in San Diego, California. (July 24, 2010). Used with permission under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#)).

Smith, Paul; Featureflash Photo Agency. Beyonce Knowles & JAY-Z 77th Annual Academy Awards at the Kodak Theatre, Hollywood, CA; Los Angeles, CA. (February 27, 2005). *Shutterstock.com*.

Wissman, Markus. Author Isabel Allende after an interview at Blaues Sofa, at Frankfurt Bookfair 2015, Frankfurt. (2015). *Shutterstock.com*.

# Thank You

*Special thanks to these celebrities and experts who have been interviewed by Inside Philanthropy in recent years:*

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Joanne Pasternack

Patrick Willis

## Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project. Each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in January 2020. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at [managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com](mailto:managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com).