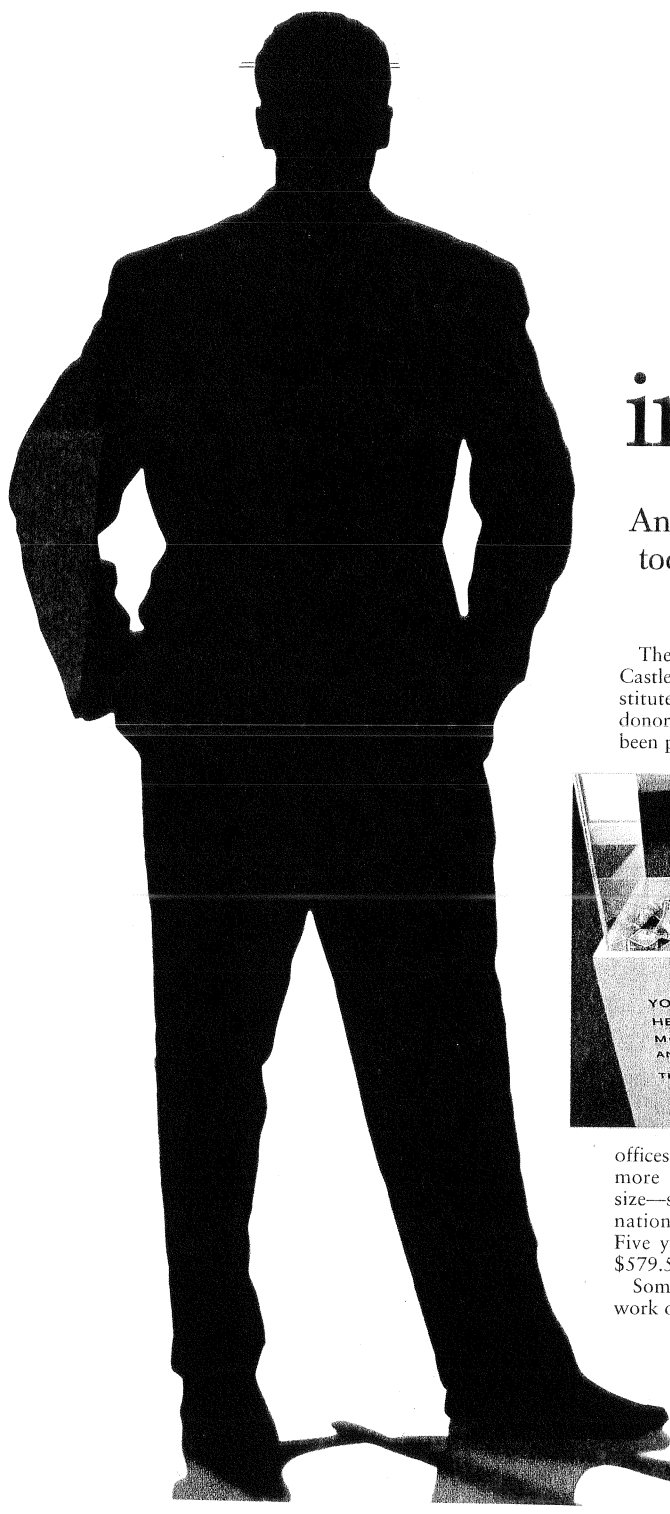


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CHICAGO BUSINESS.COM | FEBRUARY 1, 2010 | \$3.50



Donors who stay in shadows

Anonymous givers all have a story;
too many 'asks' have some hiding

BY SHIA KAPOS

The first comprehensive museum exhibition of James Castle's American folk art, which just closed at the Art Institute of Chicago, was made possible by an anonymous donor. The YWCA and Big Shoulders Fund charities have been pleasantly surprised by some recent unnamed giving.

Even the Chicago Haiku Festival in April is backed by a mystery donor.

*Yes, I gave—
a lot, but don't
ask again.*

As recession-weary non-profits keep up the pressure on dependable donors, more Chicago philanthropists seem to be masking their good works, creating intrigue within the industry as well as for anyone on the charity scene who notices huge gifts attributed only to "Anonymous Donor."

Giving USA, which researches philanthropies and foundations nationwide out of its Glenview offices, says it has seen anonymous gifts of \$10 million or more increase slightly in number—and significantly in size—since the recession hit. In 2003, anonymous giving nationwide amounted to \$315 million from 19 donors. Five years later, as the economy tanked, it shot up to \$579.5 million from 21 donors.

Some givers say they want attention focused on the work of the charity, not themselves. Some worry they'll be



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Take my donation—just not my name, please

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targets of criminals. Others are looking for the charitable equivalent of a one-night stand: to give a single donation without the strings of a continued relationship with the organization.

Mostly, they are weary of being hit up, especially amid the squeeze of the recession. The pressure to give can be intense.

"The 'asks' have gone up tremendously—and the amount asked has gone up tremendously," says James Tyree, chairman and CEO of Chicago-based Mesirow Financial Holdings Inc. "They say they need you *today*, and it's hard for people to deal with that."

He says he doesn't give anonymously but has noticed others doing so at the charities he's closely associated with: the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, the Big Shoulders Fund and the University of Chicago Hospitals.

"If people have 10 good charities, all asking that they support—and asking to double, triple or quadruple that support—they may only want to do a few, or none at all," he says. "You don't want to make other charities feel bad."

Equity Group Investments Chairman Sam Zell says he has given anonymously to avoid being pestered by other groups.

"There are certainly benefits to anonymous giving," he says through a spokeswoman. "If you open the floodgates to organiza-

tions asking for funding, and they are not a fit with your passions, you are wasting everyone's time."

FUDGING NUMBERS

Leslie Hindman, a staple of the city's social set who owns eponymous auction houses in Chicago and Naples, Fla., thinks most Chicagoans on the philanthropic scene have given anonymously at some point.

"That's especially so now," she says. "Spending money isn't the thing to do these days—even when it's giving to charity."

Seemingly every organization in town has a story of anonymous giving, with varied explanations.

Some have seen previously public donors decide recently to mask their giving.

"It's a challenge, because it's to our advantage to recognize them because it attracts others," says Lisa Key, director of fundraising for the Museum of Contemporary Art. "I've asked people who want to be anonymous if we can recognize them at a lower gift amount. They may give \$25,000, but we only list it as \$5,000."

The Chicago-based Big Shoulders Fund, which supports inner-city Catholic education, has done the same. It has seen anonymous donations almost double in recent years, to \$950,000 in 2009 from \$480,000 in 2005.

"People want to be seen as supporting an organization," says Josh Hale, the group's executive direc-



Lisa Key handles fundraising for the Museum of Contemporary Art. She says that when donors don't want a large gift made public, they may agree to being acknowledged at a lower amount.

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN J. SERIO

tor. "They don't want to appear to be showing off their wealth."

ONE-TIME GIFTS

Jim Kales, CEO of Westchester-based Aspire of Illinois, which helps children and adults with developmental disabilities, says charities may need to be gentler in approaching donors.

"Sometimes, as non-profits, we inhibit by overdoing and pestering too much," he says. "If anonymous giving is on the rise, I'm not surprised, because people

get tired of that. They want to give but don't want to be bombarded."

The YWCA of Chicago just received a \$100,000 anonymous gift through the United Way.

"When the donors are completely anonymous it may be because they don't want to maintain a long-term relationship with the organization," says Christine Bork, CEO of the Chicago office of the YWCA. "In some cases, it could have been an inheritance or a bonus; it's a one-time thing,

and they don't want the ongoing connection."

Julie Sharpe, executive director of ALS Assn. of Greater Chicago, says the group's anonymous donations hold steady at 10% to 15% of giving each year. Givers to the organization, which benefits people with the debilitating Lou Gehrig's disease, often have been personally affected and feel they're publicly supporting a patient.

"They're walking side-by-side with these folks on the journey,"

she says.

Still, Ms. Sharpe expects that some donors request anonymity because they don't want to let on that their giving may drop from one year to another.

"That's going to be especially true if they are giving it in honor of someone," she says.

Anonymity may also be used to avoid controversy or the appearance of taking sides in a hot-button issue.

"I have clients on both sides of the spectrum. The last thing you want to do is show your hand," says John Nowicki, president of LCM Capital Management Inc. in Chicago. When it comes to attaching his name to a cause, "I try to stay as neutral as possible."

Professionals from the legal community—or media for that matter—may follow the same thinking.

TOUCHY SUBJECTS

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless saw a number of recent anonymous donations from judges, law professors and lawyers.

"They wanted to support us financially but didn't want to have it publicly acknowledged," says Michael Nameche, director of development for the agency. "A sitting judge might think it's a good cause but has to remain impartial."

Sometimes the actual money itself comes with baggage.

"We had a corporate donor that wanted to donate anonymously because the money being donated came from a lawsuit settlement," says Joyce Heneberry, senior vice-president of development for One Hope United, a Chicago-based human services agency that helps children and families in need. "They didn't want publicity; they just wanted to donate to a good cause."

Charity directors say anonymous donors often don't mind their peers knowing that they've given money to the cause; they just don't want it made known in an official, public way. (Fans of HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" will recall the Ted Danson character giving anonymously—then whispering to others that he was the donor.)

Indeed, there's an art to keeping donors anonymous, yet making them feel appreciated, says Charles Katzenmeyer, vice-president of external affairs for the Adler Planetarium. Donors who don't want their name on a wall or listed in a program may be invited to special events; be publicly acknowledged for their support, without specifics, and be sent personal thank-you notes.

Anonymity comes in varying degrees. Donors may give through a third party, like the United Way, to shroud their identities but still be able to use the tax writeoff; a name is needed for that. Sometimes the gift is known to just a few people doing the books; other times, to staff and board members of the charity, but not beyond that.

Anonymous donors were part of an intimate dinner at the

Union League Club in December for the United Services Organization, which supports the military. The event, held in the Heritage Room, was a thank-you event for donors, two of whom were featured at the podium.

The rest, known and anonymous givers alike, gave standing ovations.

"All the anonymous donors attend, but they aren't publicly recognized," says Anthony Enrietto, president and chief operating officer of the USO in Chicago. "It's totally strange, looking at the numbers and seeing people out there (in the crowd) who want no recognition."