



Donor's stories

COMIC RELIEF

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Comic Relief was founded in 1985 and is best known for its fundraising campaigns, Red Nose Day and Sport Relief. At the heart of the organisation remains a commitment to using the power of entertainment to tackle poverty and social injustice in the UK, Africa and beyond. Comic Relief is an active fundraiser and prolific grant-maker that has allocated over £800m to projects since 1988. Rebecca Hanshaw is Major Donor Manager at Comic Relief.



"At Comic Relief we know we're in a uniquely privileged position. Every year, thanks to the BBC we have the opportunity to enter people's homes and appeal to them directly. To help communicate our messages, we work with a huge number of celebrity friends who are incredibly important to us. Not only are they part of our heritage, they're essential in helping the public connect to the people and the issues we're talking about. We began by putting the fun into fundraising and that is still our aim each year. We're incredibly proud that millions of people are inspired to support us. A flip-side to the fun, however, is a very serious approach to spending the money. As many will testify, we have a rigorous grant application procedure and a team of in-house specialists who help ensure the money raised goes where it's most needed and makes the biggest difference.

This year, Red Nose Day celebrated its 25th anniversary. For much of the UK this means they've grown up with red noses, dress-down days and 'doing something funny for money' and for many, myself included, supporting Red Nose Day at school is the first experience of supporting a charity. Because of this, and the tremendous support we receive, it sometimes feels we're a national institution.

Our income comes from a variety of sources including public donations and merchandise sales, from schools and from companies and their employees. And we have tremendous partnerships with Sainsbury's, BT and BA, to name a few. We also receive funding from the Department for International Development. Although they account for a smaller proportion of our total income, our major donors are incredibly important to

us and we're committed to building meaningful relationships with them.

Our major donors are not all household names, although many are, and while we get some unsolicited significant donations for our campaigns, we tend to have long-term relationships with our key supporters. They often come to us wanting advice because navigating the charitable world can be complex and time consuming, and we have the knowledge, experience and networks to be able to help and identify niche projects and organisations they may find interesting.



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Sometimes we find we have common objectives and passions and we end up working together, which is great. For example, one donor who was a long-term friend approached us with a very clear idea of what they wanted to achieve with some of

their money, and was passionate about this. But they also wanted guidance on what to do with the remainder. They wished to remain anonymous yet involved, and so we created and managed the process so they could achieve this.



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A benefit of partnering with well-known major donors is the opportunity to share publicly that they have supported a project. Of course, not all donors are comfortable with this and would rather remain anonymous, but it can give a huge boost to the recipient project – and to their beneficiaries – to know that a particular individual has personally supported what they are doing. This often gives them the confidence to go on and access other funding.

In terms of how we work with our supporters, everybody is different, so we like to draw up a Letter of Agreement. This outlines exactly what they are supporting and, crucially, how they want to be involved and communicated with. Some people are happy with a light touch, whilst others want quarterly meetings and visits to projects. We like to give a menu of options – but it's important to be flexible as sometimes donors aren't sure what will work for them. So we agree an approach and then adapt it until it feels right. Being responsive to individual needs is important, and we're always mindful that our major donors have hectic schedules.

People often work with us in major-donor capacity because they have an existing relationship with us, or because they know and trust us. So, like millions of others, they can rely on us to spend their donation wisely. Spending money effectively is what we do, and that's what people buy into. Yet the catalyst for many (but not all) to give more significantly starts when we take them to see some of the projects we support in the UK and internationally. Their desire to become more involved stems from their sense of compassion for the people they meet, and often a sense of outrage about an issue they want to help try and tackle.

Many supporters are prepared to fund some pretty tough issues,

and some fund quite bold and innovative projects. Donors often worry about making a 'mistake' with a sizeable donation and partnering with us helps alleviate these kinds of concerns. After all, giving money away is what we've been doing for over 25 years. One facility we run for donors allows them to set up a special fund so that they can place a pot of money with us to spend as they wish under our umbrella of poverty and social justice. This gives them all the benefits of having their own charitable trust without the hassle of setting one up. We find this way of working appeals to a lot of our supporters as we can keep it simple, flexible, impactful and responsive to changing circumstances. The money tends to be spent quickly as people are excited about putting their money to good use.

Our plans for the future are to ensure that we continue to innovate and inspire the public to support us. In terms of our major-donor programme, we're interested in promoting more family giving. This can be a rewarding family activity especially for busy people, a positive way of going about philanthropy, and is a great tool for parents who want to connect more with their children and engage them in important issues both internationally and in their own communities. As we're approaching a Sport Relief year, we'd also like to work with more sports people in this capacity.

My advice to charities seeking major donors is that it takes time to build a brand and to cultivate large donations. Buy-in from leadership is essential and they need to be realistic about how long it will take and understand that the first donation may not be for £1m. It is also best to start with people you know, as even though they may not be givers, they may be 'getters'. Everyone knows someone, so initially look to who you know rather than spending money on database research. Be patient and if a donor of interest has given you a small donation – why not ask for their feedback, just to open the dialogue.

If they agree to talk, great. But if not, leave them alone as perhaps the timing isn't right for them. Ultimately, a relationship will develop from a dialogue. A piece of advice I was once given holds true: if you ask for money you get advice, and if you ask for advice you get money. It's been said a thousand times before, but don't treat your donors as walking chequebooks. Donors are people who possess assets and resources beyond money. Involve your donor and listen to their interests. Big gifts tend to come from people you know; who know and trust your organisation; and share your passion and commitment to making a difference.

At Comic Relief we promise to make the experience of giving enjoyable; at times humbling; but most of all, meaningful. And I feel immensely privileged to be able to share in the joy that giving gives, and privileged to be able to help people start an amazing journey which will bring about real and lasting change to those who need it.'