

The Janitor Who Became a Major Donor



Randy Vanness has raised tens of thousands of dollars for the Myocarditis Foundation and as a board member has had brilliant insights.

I have a confession to make. It isn't pretty and I know better. I thought I would share my failing with you to serve as an example of what not to do.

I tend to judge people by their appearance or job title. I have read and constantly recommend *The Millionaire Next Door*, I have known people who are a year behind on their mortgages driving Jags and ordering \$300 bottles of wine and people who buy day-old bread who could purchase the Wonder Bread corporation.

Yet, I did it again. I was hired to recruit new board members for the Myocarditis Foundation, which is a national board dedicated to raising awareness, providing education, and supporting those affected by myocarditis. In case you aren't familiar with myocarditis, it attacks the heart suddenly and is a major cause of sudden death in children and adults unless treated aggressively and quickly. Plus, it is difficult to diagnose.

A major donor surfaced named Randy Vanness, who lives in a small town in Wisconsin. Randy lost his 27-year-old son Brad to myocarditis several years ago. His first fundraiser netted about \$15,000 and his second about \$17,000. The funds were sent to the foundation as an unrestricted gift. I talked to the board chair and the executive director before contacting him.

Randy was charming on the phone but very reluctant to serve on the board. He is a janitor for an elementary school. His concerns were that he wouldn't fit in. He was so wrong.

We had a long discussion about roles and responsibilities of a board members and what he could contribute. He was already a major donor and he had such a passion for finding answers and sharing his story.

The first thing I did was to ask the board if everyone was willing to go by first names. The board chair is a former nurse and referred to the doctors on the board as Dr. Cooper and Dr. Price, a difficult habit to break. I asked the doctors about how they felt about using first names, and they were totally comfortable with it.

Randy showed up to his first board meeting with two checks. One was from the children in his school who were in second, third, and fourth grades when he lost his son. They are now in fourth, fifth, and sixth and gave him the proceeds from their spring dance to bring to the Myocarditis Foundation. And I can't even remember who gave him the second check.

He not only had brilliant insights, but he could actually put together the easel.

Do you assume that wealthy people with big titles will give and get money? Granted, board members are not ATMs, but do some serious due diligence before inviting someone to join your board and explain what is expected.

Before walking into the boardroom, Randy was a mission-based resource for others experiencing a loss from myocarditis in on-line chat rooms. He was responsible for around \$34,000 in unrestricted gifts, and he understood the mission.

Don't fall into my idiotic trap of thinking that the rich will give or people with more modest means won't get!

Final takeaways from the "judging a book by its cover" school of recruiting:

1. Because someone is rich doesn't mean he or she is generous. Whether they earned, married, or inherited their money, there are a number of rich people who for any number of reasons are not philanthropic. Some worry that their financial security will evaporate if they share their wealth, others did not grow up in a culture of philanthropy. The list goes on.
2. Because someone is rich and gives to other charities does not mean he or she will give to yours. I got a call from a near-homicidal executive director of a social-service agency. One of her board members who was a \$500 donor asked her to sit at his table when he was being honored for donating \$15-million to the hospital. I told her to go and work the room, if and when she calmed down.
3. As far as I am concerned, and I know some of you will disagree, I would rather have a diligent board member than a passionate one. I have worked with boards filled with people who were passionate about the cause but did absolutely nothing and boards with major social climbers who got the job done. I don't really care what people have in their heart. I care what they do.
4. There are a lot of Randys out there: people who care and work hard and don't have a ton of money who make a tremendous impact on your organization. Randy told me that before he lost his son he spent most of his evenings watching TV. Now he spends his evenings in chat rooms giving advice and solace to people like him who have lost loved ones to this miserable disease. And he is one heck of a fundraiser.