



How to Write Donor Testimonials That Raise Money

By Rachel Muir, CFRE



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Introduction

Not every donor story will raise money. You could get a glowing donor testimonial that bombs.

Why? The only donor stories that raise money are the ones your reader finds relatable.

These are some of the characteristics that make a character relatable:

- Relatable pain or suffering
- Relatable because they're similar to the reader (in age, values, challenges, lifestyle, profession)
- Unfairly treated
- A sense of mystery
- They are proactive
- They have to make a tough moral choice

Here are a few examples of using donor testimonials to guide you in your fundraising.



Email campaign for giving day: The client who became a donor

[Idaho Youth Ranch](#) was taking part in their four-day “Idaho Gives” giving campaign. Their Marketing Director, Whitney Springston, wanted to stand out in her readers’ busy inboxes. She knew her competition was going after the same donors with the same email subject lines, like “last day to give” and “24 hours left for Idaho Gives.”

As an English major, Whitney had an epiphany: What if I tell a story in five parts, like Charles Dickens? She chose a relatable protagonist—a thriving local business leader who was the very first graduate of the youth ranch.

Her subject line piqued her readers’ curiosity:

What does a kid in jail in 1958 have to do with you,
<<FIRST NAME>>?

In her teaser email introducing Ron, the client, and Idaho Gives, she used immersive storytelling, grabbing the reader’s attention and helping them imagine what it would feel like to be in jail. The conflict in the story kept them reading to see how the story would play out:



EMAIL #1



Julie and Brett,

Ron shivered as he sat alone in a cold jail cell with nothing to keep him company but a few tattered magazines and his own dark thoughts. At just 14 years old, he already thought he'd thrown his life away.

The future business leader and world record-holder could not have known how the loving kindness of good-hearted strangers would change the direction of his life. At that moment, all he knew was that he was not going back to military school.

The year was 1958, and no social services existed to help Ron.

In each email, she closed with a TO BE CONTINUED ... hook and a teaser for the next part of the story in the P.S. as seen below:

You have the power to change a young person's life. Monday, April 29, is the first day of Idaho Gives. Will Idaho's kids be able to count on you?

TO BE CONTINUED...

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads 'Scott Curtis'.

Scott Curtis, LMSW

CEO

PS: In tomorrow's email, find out how 14-year-old Ron wound up in jail. You won't believe what he went through...

Whitney's strategy paid off—for the first time ever, they received gifts days before the campaign launched.

Throughout the 5-part email series, she mentioned and links the earlier parts of the story, as seen here in the opening line of each subsequent email:

EMAIL #2

A few days ago, **I emailed you** about Ron, who sat in jail in 1958.

EMAIL #3

PSST ... just now learning about Ron? **Click here** to get the full scoop.

EMAIL #4

Our story left off with Ron arriving in Rupert in 1958 at the newly formed Idaho Youth Ranch, where Rev. James Crowe and his wife, Ruby Carry Crowe, gave him the love and support he needed to heal and thrive.

EMAIL #5

In case you've been trapped under a rock lately, I've been sharing the cliffhanger story of Ron all week. **Read it here.**

Ron's story develops when Reverend Crowe visits him in jail to tell him he's building a new ranch for boys nearby and that a judge has agreed to allow Ron to go there rather than sit in jail.

To make sure the reader has the complete story, she included links back to earlier emails:

More than 64 years after his first dinner with Reverend Crowe and his wife, Ruby, Ron was moved to tears as he recalled a simple act of kindness.

Scared and shy after the horrors he'd experienced in Portland (if you didn't get a chance to read that

story, click here), Ron joined the Crowes for dinner.

"Would you like another glass of milk?" Rev. Crowe asked. Ron was speechless.

Decades later, the business leader and grandfather fought back tears as he recalled, "I didn't know you could have two glasses of milk."

For the first time in his life, Ron felt he'd found a father figure. That simple act of kindness—a second glass of milk—showed Ron that someone believed in him.

Using donor testimonials to get legacy gifts

Legacy giving has one of the highest ROIs of all fundraising strategies and is a very low-cost way to ensure your financial future. As donors plan for the next chapter of their lives, many are thinking about the legacy they'll leave behind. This is more relevant than ever—thirty years ago, roughly 3,000 people in the US turned 65 every day. Today, that number has surged to 12,000, creating an unprecedented opportunity to engage donors in conversations about planned giving.

The most common planned gift amounts are \$100,000 - \$250,000. According to [Agents of Good](#), when you communicate the right message, roughly 2.5% of your donors will add a gift to you in their wills. If you have 6,000 active donors, that's 150 bequests!

Making people aware that you value legacy gifts is the first step to getting them.

One of the best ways to market legacy giving to your constituents is with donor testimonials. Using donor testimonials is ideal for three reasons:

1

It solves the biggest obstacle—it lets the idea occur to them, as in, "Gosh, it never occurred to me to add a favorite charity or two to my Will. What a good idea!"

2

Testimonials provide social proof—proof that other people are making the same choice—to leave part of their estate to charity. This knowledge makes it easier for me to make the same choice.

3

A donor's final gift is not actually the bequest—it's the story they leave behind. Their gift tells you who they were, what they cared about, and the impact they wanted to make. Donors want the same things they've always wanted: To act on their values, be part of something bigger than themselves, and make a difference. My friend Wayne Olson, JD, Author of *Big Gifts, Small Effort*, says: "Planned giving is the only way people can support a charity that brings them tremendous satisfaction, yet has no impact on their lifestyle, other than to improve it."

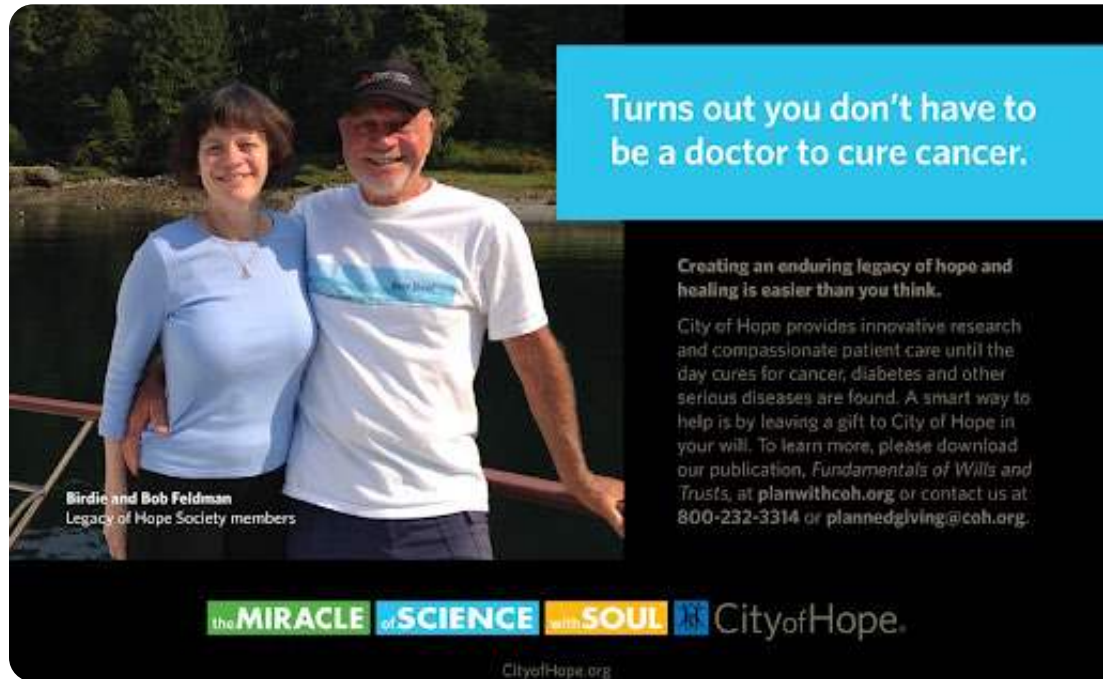
How should I market my legacy giving testimonials?

Humans are drawn to the faces of other humans, so a close-up tends to be better than a full-length photo or a group shot.

Use stories and simple words—words you’d use in a normal conversation with your grandmother, like “consider adding a gift in your will.”

The headline to the right, “Turns out you don’t have to be a doctor to cure cancer,” featuring a happy, healthy, smiling married couple, is a great example of being relatable.

You aren’t marketing death—you’re marketing lives lived rich and legacies that last.



Turns out you don't have to be a doctor to cure cancer.

Creating an enduring legacy of hope and healing is easier than you think.

City of Hope provides innovative research and compassionate patient care until the day cures for cancer, diabetes and other serious diseases are found. A smart way to help is by leaving a gift to City of Hope in your will. To learn more, please download our publication, *Fundamentals of Wills and Trusts*, at planwithcoh.org or contact us at 800-232-3314 or plannedgiving@coh.org.

Birdie and Bob Feldman
Legacy of Hope Society members

the **MIRACLE** of **SCIENCE** with **SOUL** City of Hope.

CityofHope.org





Ronald McDonald House Charities Atlanta



How will you be remembered?



We strengthen families by keeping them together when they need it most. But we cannot do it without you! **Make a difference in the lives of seriously ill or injured children by planning a legacy gift and ensure Atlanta RMHC can support families for years to come.**

With a little planning and a big heart you can transform lives like the Morrisons and the Roeschs, members of **Atlanta Ronald McDonald House Charities' Legacy Circle.**

"Our long association with the Ronald McDonald House has been rich and rewarding. With our planned gift, we wanted to help ensure the important work of this very worthy charity continues well into the future."

— Kathy and Bob Morrison



"We have seen firsthand the immediate and lasting impact Atlanta Ronald McDonald House Charities has on children and their families. It is a wonderful feeling to know that a portion of our family trust, from our life's blessings, will help carry on this important and compassionate mission."

— Nancy and Jeff Roesch

The call-to-action Ronald McDonald House Charities uses in the example to the left, "How will you be remembered?" prompts readers to visualize the last chapter of their biography.

In the example to the right, we see a donor testimonial showing how a living donor has created a sense of symbolic immortality by naming a charity in his will.

School janitor Rufus Wells signed his will today.



One day, his bequest will help an 8-year-old understand math.

Child reflecting on their parents' legacy

Another strategy to use in marketing donor testimonials is sharing them through the voice of the spouse or child, as seen in the example email below:

Subject line: where there's a will, there's a way ...

Dear [Donor's Name],

My mom died 7 years ago.

But before she died, she did a wonderful thing.

The older I get, the more I appreciate what she did and how she made a difference in my life and the lives of others.

My mom, Rebecca Silverman, made a special gift in her will to [org name].

It was a testament to her love of [org's mission].

Thanks to her [describe the impact of the gift on target beneficiaries].

This week is Will Week, and in honor of my mom and her passion for [org mission], I've arranged a special gift for [org name] in my will.

It's a wonderful tribute to my mother and a legacy for generations to come.

Donor's Name, you're one of those people, like my mom, whose gifts help us make a difference.

The next time you review your estate plans, I hope you'll think of [org name].

Many thanks,

First name Last name

P.S. If you have any questions about making a gift like I did, please feel free to reach out to me by email [insert email] or phone [insert phone number].



Telling the stories that move people to give



A great donor story isn't just a nice anecdote—it's a catalyst. The right story does more than inform; it shifts perspectives, stirs emotions, and moves people to give.

The most powerful donor testimonials aren't about perfection; they're about connection. They feel real—rooted in shared values, personal choices, and the impact one person can make.

As you craft and share these stories, think beyond words on a page. Show, don't just tell. Spark curiosity. Create a moment of recognition where a donor sees themselves in the story and realizes, *"I can do that, too."* Because when people see their own potential to create impact, giving becomes personal—and that's when fundraising magic happens.



About the author



Rachel Muir, CFRE

Rachel has worked every side of the Rubik's cube that is the nonprofit sector. When she was 26 Rachel Muir launched Girlstart, a non-profit empowering girls in math, science, engineering and technology in the living room of her apartment with \$500 and a credit card. Several years later she had raised over 10 million and was featured on Oprah, CNN, and the Today show. Today Rachel delivers workshops and offers a monthly membership, [League of Extraordinary Fundraisers](#), transforming people into confident, successful fundraisers. Learn more about Rachel at www.rachelmuir.com.

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Raised This Week

\$4,520.00



Donor record successfully updated