

Philanthropy: An Interview With Jimmy Carter

A former president talks about effective philanthropy, middle-of-the-night epiphanies and international travel.

The affluent are philanthropic far out of proportion to their numbers. As we highlighted in our article, “Turning Water Into Steam,” in the Spring 2005 issue of *Symposium*, today’s affluent philanthropists are also unusually active: more selective, more involved, more educated about where they choose to give their time and money.

In this follow up to that article, we spoke with the elder statesman of active giving—President Jimmy Carter, who started The Carter Center in 1982 with his wife, Rosalynn—for his insights on effective philanthropy.



Symposium: Going from the world’s most powerful person to a private citizen with no particular agenda—that must have been unimaginably difficult.

President Carter: When I was involuntarily retired from the White House I was surprised, taken aback and discouraged. I had no opportunity for gainful employment. I realized that I had a life expectancy of 25 years. Remember, I was one of the youngest survivors of the White House.

S: How did you decide to devote your new life to humanitarianism?



The Carter Center

The Carter Center (www.cartercenter.org) was founded to “wage peace, fight disease and build hope by both engaging with those at the highest levels of government and working side by side with poor and often forgotten people.”

For donors, the Center provides a direct way to strengthen democracies, help farmers increase their production, prevent civil and international conflicts, wipe out unnecessary diseases and diminish the stigma against mental illness.

One way to support the Center: its Winter Weekend live and silent auctions, which feature everything from fine art to presidential memorabilia to vacation packages. Participants can bid online. This year’s event raised over \$900,000, all of which directly benefits the Center’s activities. Next year’s Winter Weekend is scheduled for February 1–5, 2006.

President Carter: I assessed my talents, abilities, and interests. I was most proud of the peace agreement I had mediated between Egypt and Israel—by the way, not a word of which has been violated in 26 years.

What if I could emulate that on a smaller scale? Helping everyone from individuals to countries settle their disputes? It was something tangible I could do. That was the concept for The Carter Center.

S: Most philanthropists have an “aha” moment, when they discover a connection between themselves and the wider world. Was this yours?

President Carter: As Rosalynn wrote in our book, *Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life* (Random House, 1987),

the idea for The Carter Center came to me in the middle of the night.

But the connection was there all my life. My mother was a registered nurse; she took care of all our neighbors, none of whom were white. So I was brought up seeing first-hand the ravages of racial discrimination and the deprivation of the poorest of people. It has influenced my life, but especially since the presidency.

S: You were a successful politician, rising from the Georgia state senate to the presidency in 16 years. How do the satisfactions of governing compare to your current work?

President Carter: As president, you’re focused on very large issues—a nuclear agreement with the USSR, diplomatic relations with China, the situation in the Middle East, the domestic budget. There are few opportunities to understand the plight of the most destitute.

The impact I have on people’s lives now is much more immediate. I see them develop a sense of self-respect, hope and confidence in themselves for the first time in their lives. They’ve known no example of this—they’ve just gotten lots of promises from distant countries.

S: You’re an extraordinarily hands-on person. Does involvement drive enthusiasm?

President Carter: Absolutely. The things we do through The Carter Center are so intimately personal. We put medicine in people’s mouths. We show them that their water is full of parasites, and how to deal with that. We teach them to wash their faces and to use a latrine, to avoid trachoma. We teach them to grow corn, rice, millet, wheat, soybeans. It’s very gratifying.

Involvement cements our donors’ ties to us. They become almost obsessed with benevolent causes. It’s no longer a theoretical concept.

S: You do a lot of traveling.

President Carter: Actually going to the place is important. Rosalynn and I have visited more than 120 nations since leaving the White House.

International travel is exciting and challenging. It can also be enlightening. I advise people who travel to get out of the international hotels and go to the villages. Talk to shopkeepers. Wander through neighborhoods. Too many American travelers don't do this, and their experience is almost like visiting the suburbs of New York City.

S: The number-one reason most affluent people don't give is the fear of doing harm. As the leader of a humanitarian institution and an active participant, how do you ensure your work actually ends up helping people?

President Carter: That's a concern. We work side-by-side with many organizations. Some establish a nice office in the nation's capital, install phones, buy pickup trucks, hire a staff. Then they start meeting with the assistant minister of health.

There are a few things to look for in an organization such as ours. First, what are they actually doing? Too many groups just visit, bring in experts, have conferences, and publish nice-looking documents. These things have their place, but the goal is to achieve something tangible, whether it's alleviating suffering or bringing about peace.

Second, do they have a clear plan? We start by meeting with a country's ruler and his entire cabinet. I set expectations—we'll send the foremost experts in the world, you'll pay for your own people. If we buy a bicycle for you, you'll pay us back. We'll be here five years, at which time we want you to be self-sufficient. Then we sign a contract between The Carter Center and Bali, Burkina Faso—whatever country it is we're working with.

Involvement cements our donors' ties to us. They become almost obsessed with benevolent causes. It's no longer a theoretical concept.

We try to undertake only programs with tangible, quantifiable outcomes. We're the hands-on people. It's one of the things that has made our projects attractive to donors.

We also measure results. We can quantify our accomplishments in almost everything we do. We know exactly how many latrines we've built in Ethiopia in our effort to wipe out trachoma. We know how many cases of Guinea worm are out there, and which villages they're in, so we can better focus on eradication.

Look for accountability. For our 2,500 donors who give \$1,000 a year, we bring them here for one full day once a year to tell them how we're spending their money.

We also stay effective by avoiding duplication. It's one of our tenets. If the World Bank, the World Health Organization or Harvard University is already doing something adequate, we don't get involved. We're there to fill vacuums.

S: In other words, don't go where everyone else is.

President Carter: Everyone wants to go to Kenya—it has great parks, Nairobi is a wonderful city.

Here's a cautionary tale: I once visited Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moy. His minister of health had just told him there were 200 non-governmental organizations in Nairobi alone—and he didn't have time to meet with all of them, much less work with them!



Working Together

If you're thinking of getting more involved in philanthropic giving, speak to your UBS Financial Advisor.

Your Financial Advisor can help you with financial strategies and solutions that may put more of your resources to work for the causes you believe in. In many cases, your Financial Advisor may also provide UBS publications that can shed light on specific aspects of philanthropic giving.

Together we can make a difference in the world—you and us.

S: Today's generation of philanthropists puts a premium on education. They want to know all about what they're giving to before they invest their time and money. How important is this?

President Carter: Very. We offer this opportunity to our donors—an invitation to go with us to Zambia, to Mali, and help us monitor an election, for instance. It does a few things. First, we get their help. Second, we get transportation (some of them have jets). Third, we get them immersed in the culture, the history, the politics. This January it was Israel's West Bank; in December it was Mozambique. Last July it was Indonesia.

S: Most philanthropy is actually driven by wanting to remove the heavy burden of wealth from the next generations—to help instill the right values. How have you done this with your children?

President Carter: Our family has no accumulated wealth, so we don't have that issue. But they are deeply involved in The Carter Center—when their help is needed. After all, this can't be a Carter family expedition.

It's been completely voluntary on their part, but they await their turn with great impatience. For instance, my middle son hadn't been to Israel until very recently. My youngest son, Jeff—an absolute expert on Indonesia—has worked as an election observer. And my oldest grandson, who was an intern at The Carter Center, then with the Peace Corps for 2½ years in South Africa, is now back with us. In the first election among the Palestinians this past January, he was in charge of Gaza and my daughter, Amy, was in charge of Bethlehem, with about 40 other volunteers.

S: At last count there were more than 66,000 grantmaking foundations in the U.S. What would you say to those who are baffled by the choices out there?

President Carter: The opportunities are enormous. But many organizations are eager to help you learn about what they do.

For example, The Carter Center hosts a four-day ski weekend in the Rockies. Attendees pay their way and get acquainted with our programs. Half of the 290 people who came to our last one, in Utah, hadn't been there, and half didn't ski. They were there for the experience.

We also give prospective donors a chance to join us, either overseas or at The Carter Center, to learn what we're about.

There are a lot of darn good organizations who do outstanding work. I'm proud to say that The Carter Center is just one of those organizations.

S: What has been the most gratifying time of your life?

President Carter: When I was 70—a long time ago—Barbara Walters asked me the same question. My answer was “now.” That's still my answer.