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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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so Hello, and welcome to Beyond philanthropy. This is a really exciting day for us because we are recording live at the leading philanthropy conference. So we are actually in a room full of people. So you may hear some background noise as people are shuffling in and getting ready for our talk today. And we're here to talk about disruptive storytelling. So I'm Val, I'm here with Monique. And to kick us off what, um, what do you think of when you think of disruptive storytelling?

You know, the first thing that I think of, and shame on me, because I didn't look it up ahead of time. But that's not how we roll. That's not how we roll. And or I would just pull up my phone right now, but I won't. There was an advertisement that I sent to you on Instagram. And at first, I thought it was the most amazing thing. And then it took a turn. And I was like, let me see if Valerie catches it. So it was an interactive display, where you can literally swipe your credit card into it. So the first advertisement was bread. And you were basically cutting the bread slicing the bread with your credit card. So when you swipe your credit card, a piece of bread fell off, and it was like you just fit X amount of people, I was like, Oh my gosh, that's awesome. We were into that one into that one. But then the next one was black boy in handcuffs, and you swiped your credit card. And the handcuffs broke. And I was like, Wait a minute. Like, I kind of get where they were going. And I feel like within this space, we're always trying to do something different and be creative. But you know, as the keynote speaker said earlier, perception is reality, in my thought was like, hey, like, all you got to do is just swipe your card and, you know, policing or bad policing ends or you swipe your card, and there's nothing else to think about it right? You did your job. You wrote your check, you cut your credit card statement, whatever it was in, you don't have to think about it again. Yeah, that's so wrong. It felt wrong. We were like, This feels icky. And we don't really know why. So then we started exploring why and came up with all the reasons Monique just explained. But

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I think that is a problem that lots of people fall into, especially when they're working with those types of organizations. So like, how do you explain what your mission is and explain what you do in a way that is respectful of the people that you're serving, but informative to people who maybe don't know anything about the types of people that you serve. So using your credit card to break handcuffs maybe is not the

best way to do an interactive display for people who are returning citizens. But no education, no advocacy, no understanding of what the situation was, it was just like, quick, like the chains, but whatever chains that you're breaking, right, right, why are you breaking them? And how are you breaking them? And is your \$5 donation really breaking chains, right? Or is it paying somebody salary, which is important? We need that? It is. But I think that most of our issues within the society are very systemic. So just swiping a credit card once is not going to actually break the chain. And that's where the disconnect definitely was for me. Right? So in order to tell ethical stories, I think one of the more important things that you need to think about is the people that you're serving and the community that you're representing, and how are you ensuring that you are doing justice for that community when you're telling stories. So we had an intern who was with us almost two years ago now, which sounds wild, but she was really interested in that community centric fundraising model, which we talk a lot about on the podcast, if you're not aware, there's plenty recaps, I'm not going to repeat it. But basically, it's moving away from the traditional donor led donor focused way of fundraising and moving towards something that is more equitable for the entire community. So she was really intrigued by it, but also from a marketing perspective was like I want next steps. I want to know how to take this information and take this theory and turn it into something that I can do for this organization. So we were like, figured out, go ahead that that could be your intern project. That sounds great. Go for it. So at the end of the summer, she came back to us she had what she called a community centric marketing plan. And it was a plan for focus groups. So sitting down with our community and exactly how to structure interactions with them to get their feedback on our marketing and get their feedback on how we talk about them. Because we as a housing organization have to talk about the people that were housing in order to explain what we do, but we don't ever sit down and ask them do you like this? Is this how you want us to represent you? Is this how you want us to talk about you? So we did not get the chance to do a focus group before she left but we did finally get a chance to do a focus group. We'd

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17 participants come which you don't know our participants, but trust me, 17 is huge. We were expecting five. So 17 was massive. We did include lunch, they all got pizza. So that was part of it. But what we really wanted to know was, how are we doing? are we representing you? Well, are we talking about what we do here at pathways in a way that resonates with you? Or is it not resonating with you? So one of the first things we talked about was terminology, and why we use the terms that we use. So our participants have experienced homelessness for long periods of time. And they all have mental health disabilities. So we talked about why we say experiencing homelessness instead of someone who is homeless, or just talking about the homeless in general, we talked about saying opioid use disorder or substance use disorder instead of just calling people addicts. And why we do that. And our participants were, they call themselves homeless, and they call themselves addicts. So as we were talking, I was like, I want to represent you and the way you talk about yourself, but I also want to be respectful of you. And I want to teach our supporters the best way to be supportive of you. So how do we make that distinction, and they basically said, We love the way you talk about us. But that's not how we talk about ourselves. But we don't want you to talk about the way that we talk about ourselves. And we were like, Alright, cool. We're on the same page. We got it. So it was really interesting way to like we showed them pictures, we handed out annual reports, we said like, how do you feel about this picture, and it was a promotion for our food pantry. And it seems like we need food items for our emergency food pantry. And it was a photo of a participant that was grocery shopping. And they said, He doesn't

look needy. I think you need a needier person on that photo. And I was like, Are you sure? Because that feels wrong to me like that feels like we're going into achy territory. And they were like, no, no, that man don't need nothing. So I need you to make sure you're using a picture of somebody who actually need something when you're asking for something. And I was like, that's solid feedback been like, and I wouldn't have thought of that, because I was so scared of like, misrepresenting them and making someone seem needy or than they are that I was actually doing a disservice because our participants were like, dude, that man does not need nothing, don't use his picture. And I was like, Alright, fine. But also, I'll say, you know, you hear this story, you're like, oh, my gosh, we're gonna use that needy photo. But it's really on a case by case basis, I was running a gala. And we usually have a really big speaker, and it's a roundtable discussion. And before every Gala, we would gather everyone together so that the first time that they weren't, they were having this conversation wasn't on the stage. And there was a family that was like, No, we're not coming. We're like, Well, no, like, we want you to come so that way you can understand each other and the dynamics and, and, and just, you know, just what the conversations gonna be about because it was a conversation, it wasn't a time for you to give a speech, right? We don't want to talk about how well this organization has done and serve for you. That's not what this is about. It's a conversation between five people.

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Well, I think that that's a problem, you shouldn't be telling me what to speak, I shouldn't have to practice it, I should just be able to speak from my heart because your NAP is she just kind of went off. And it's just like, okay, part of it was I understand what she was saying and that she just wants to speak from her heart about I shouldn't be putting words in her mouth, which we weren't. But that was a perception that she had. So really utilizing focus groups and being able to talk to the people that you serve, to understand the way that they want to participate in the way that you know, they want to be represented is always key. Because at the end of the day, if you're misrepresenting them, that's something that will be even more traumatic than what they're actually experiencing. I was I felt like I was on a zoom during COVID. And everything's a blur. So I don't remember what organization it was. But they were talking about messaging. And I cannot remember what this woman does now. But all I remember was that she was trafficked. Right. I think now she was like a lawyer or somebody and criminal. I can't put a finger on what she does now. Because she was the picture of trafficking for that organization. Why do I want to be remembered that way? Right. And I get it. We all have our stories. And we've all been through something. But if I've overcome my adversity, why am I still the picture of trafficking?

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Yeah, I think it's important to and you talked a little bit about this, but training for the people that are sharing stories on behalf of your organization's so they understand what they're getting into. They understand what it means to share their story and how far that story might go. And also, they are sharing in a healthy way. I worked with youth who are exiting foster care who were so desperate for you to know them, like really, really know them that they overshare to the point where you're just kind of like, and then what happened oh my god, why? So it's hard for

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Are those youth to stand up in a room full of people and share their story because they desperately want you to know who they are as a human being. And they want you to know that it's not their fault.

They're here, it's not their fault, they're in the situation, they're just doing the best that they can. And there's a way to do that without re traumatizing themselves. But what we're seeing a lot is youth were so desperate to share that they were read traumas, they were telling their trauma over and over and over again to a point where they were re traumatizing themselves. So there are storytelling workshops out there that you can bring to your organization. So you can share with your participants how to do this in a healthy way where they're not going to re traumatize themselves, they're going to be sharing information that is important to know them. But maybe not terrifying the audience and or re traumatizing themselves. So I know I'm like a little thrown here. Because usually, usually on a podcast, I would have, like jumped in with a random thing, but I'm like trying to be respectful of the room. But at the same time, my mind is just thinking like, I feel like the way that we as fundraisers and and professionals have been taught to communicate are based on outdated best practices that did that existed before technology, and even before technology before social media, like a lot of these channels like tickety tock and she I thought she said friends almost like best friends. They're like, Oh, no, she said threads. I was like, Oh my gosh, I feel maybe I am a geriatric millennial. I'm not really sure. But like there's just so many different ways to communicate and being in you know, the right channel for the right area and a lot of nonprofits trying to be in all those spaces. But then understanding that like, who's your audience, like is your audience the youth if you're on Tik Tok? Are your funders on Tik Tok? Are your partners on Tik Tok? But no but the other youth are. So now you're you're traumatizing these youth and showcasing them on Tik Tok. So no other peers can see. And it's just like, wait, what? What are we doing here? Participants This is going off track. for it. This will be the first to answer Google questions about our organization. So you know, like Google business has like a q&a. Somebody else say like, how do I qualify for pathways and one of our participants will jump in and be like, here's the number you call. And here's what you say. And here's how and I'm like, I love you so much, Sandy, I love you so much. You don't have to take that on. It's not your responsibility to explain to people how to get into our program, but she loves it. And it makes her feel really happy. And it makes her feel important and relevant. And it makes her feel like she's helping people who were in her situation. So I say go for it. And I just cosign on everything. Sandy says as pathways I'll jump on and be like exactly what Sandy said, Yep, do that.

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But it's, it's in the, in this world of social media, our participants are out there watching. Your participants are out there watching your participants are seeing how you're representing them and how you're sharing their stories. And it's more important than ever to make sure you're doing that in a responsible way.

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So yeah, so the other thing that makes me think about I had a client and they were really big on giving out shirts with their like, you know, their logo on it, which you would think is great, right? Because it's kind of like promotional material. You have other youth wearing the shirts, but they were just giving it out. And they gave it out to someone who actually robbed a store. Right, exactly. Right. So I get a call like, Yeah, so like the detectives from the solar solar precinct. And I was like, okay, so okay, you can't just give out things. But also if you are right, because you're trying to promote your messaging in this like grassroot guerrilla kind of a way, you have to have differentiation, right? You have to differentiate between program participant shirts, and shirts, you're just giving away because if you have people who you don't really know, that are wearing your your, your logo and your branding, and there have been out

robbing somebody like to really be like, okay, was this a youth in our program? To really have him like, oh, well, it was funny, because the buildup was, this is what happened, and this is what's been happening. And then look, let me just show you the video. And then all of a sudden, it was like, Oh, my Lord, do you see what that is? I'm like, Oh my gosh, like, okay, let's figure out how to like how to how to minimize this, right? But imagining that phone call, I would have been so stressed out, man, I was very stressed out. But you know, they were very cooperative. They're like, Oh, we get this out at this program come to the program, all of our actual youth have it. And if they don't have it, that's the person you need to speak to. Right. So they call everybody sort of ready to wear their shirts. And they're like, just just be out, right? So that's the way that they dealt with it and happen just to be some random person that was just in at the end of it, and that they got a shirt, right? But we always just think about all these different creative ways to get our brand and our messaging out there. But we don't really think about the other side of who's receiving that messaging or what's going to impact it. And I think that while we try to be disruptive and creative, whether it's because of a limited budget, or just trying to do something

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Different, sometimes that messaging gets way off in a lot of different ways. So that takes us to donor education, which I think is another huge piece of disrupting storytelling. So how many of you were told the donors always right? Kind of like the customer's always? Right, right? Like you do things that the donor wants, the donor wants this, you're gonna do it, the donor asked you for that you're gonna drop what you're doing, and you're gonna do it, because that's your job as fundraiser right is to make the donor happy, or at least that's what you were taught, so I don't fundraise anymore.

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So we believe in flipping that on its head, and the donor is not the expert in homelessness, that I mean, unless the donor has experienced homelessness, let's there are people out there who are donating who have lived experience, but let's say they don't have lived experience. They don't know what they're talking about. They've never lived homeless, they know understand what it's like to be in that position. They don't understand what kind of factors go into it. They don't understand how it can happen to somebody. So why should they be telling us what to do with their money? Why are they in charge of making decisions about how the program runs. So we think it's really important that you educate your donors on their role in this process, and how they contributed and also how they shouldn't be contributing. So if you've got a donor that's overstepping, it's kind of your role to step up and say, We so appreciate what you're doing here. But this is where we really need you to focus. And this is where we've got things handled. And I think that goes just beyond like individual donors. You know, I've told this story on another episode before but you know, even in grant writing, like I've had conversations with the state, with the way that they do their funding, now, let's not get into a conversation around reimbursable dollars, that's something else. But you know, the idea that, you know, we were, I was working with an organization who was going after some gun violence prevention money from the state. And this is, you know, two summers ago when the state representatives had stopped all of their outdoor fairs and little things because the violence was so hi. Right. So now we're applying for a grant. And we had a great grant that I wrote, I'm just gonna put that there. But the budget was the budget, because it was what we needed it to be right? Like, this is what you're paying for, as part of your budget, I'm always very clear with donors, this is what you cover, right? You're not going to give me \$10,000 and

expect for me to move all these things in the world, because our budget is actually this. And this is what you're actually able to cover with what you're giving. But including salaries, including salaries need to get paid, or the program doesn't happen doesn't happen. So when we got they got awarded the grant, and then it kicked back the entire budget, and I'm like, Wait, how did you approve us and they kick back the budget? Oh, where's the agency, we can't pay for this. We can't pay for this. We can't pay for this. The biggest thing was rent. And I'm like, I'm sorry. There are gun violence prevention organization, in a city with the violence so high, that the state reps are not even holding their events, because the outdoor violence is so high. So you want us to provide a safe space outside in the violence like how is that not a necessity for gun violence program? Well, that's just our rules. And I'm like, your rules suck. So then I had a meeting with to tell them I do. And then I had a meeting with Senator Hughes. He said, I heard you had some things to say. I'm like, yeah, let me tell you what I said and why the next year, they redid their entire grant making process in rent was included there if you have a narrative for what you need, and why educating them on why what they're doing is stupid. And, you know, like I said, I'm a rabble rouser, and I work, I work for myself. So I'm not gonna, you know, I'm not worried about losing my job. But you know, having a direct conversation, get rid of the fluff right, about what is really happening in our communities and what's needed, because the way that those guidelines were set up, and let's be real Harrisburg, and many other organizations are antiquated, right? They're based on rules and systems back in the day before technology before the life that we're living now that are impacting our communities. So they have to know that what they're doing doesn't meet and doesn't equate and we have to educate them. Yeah, my organization runs the Philadelphia furniture bank. So we distribute furniture to people exiting homelessness, it's pretty simple mission. We have a funder who only wants to support children. And I love that children come through the furniture bank that needs stuff. But they literally cannot come through the furniture bank without an adult. So you can support the children all you want. But if you're not also supporting the adults that come through the furniture bank, you're not actually going to support any children because the adults need furniture too. And they're also the ones in charge of the household. So children aren't coming through by themselves. The adults come through and pick out the furniture for their children. So I had to have a really similar conversation with a foundation funder and just say like, Hey, I know your mission is supporting children. And if we lose this money, that's okay. Because if you're really that dedicated to children, you want to make sure it goes to children. That's not

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us like we can give it to children, but we're also going to give it to adults. And if you're not okay with that, that's cool. I'm sure your money would be useful elsewhere. But if you're okay with that, that's actually what we really need. So they were able to give us funding, they continue to give us funding for several years, they changed their guidelines for themselves internally. So I think that was really helpful to be able to have that conversation, but also terrifying, because like, I don't want to lose \$20,000 a year for my furniture bank, like I don't want to walk out of a meeting and have to tell my CEO, like, I just lost that grant, because I told them, they were wrong.

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Say that? So luckily, I've had successes. When I do that I'd have you ever had any of you ever heard that go wrong? I've never I don't think I've ever had that gone wrong? Because I think that the other side of it is I mean, the status side with foundations are people, right? And if you're storing them, and

you're really forming relationships, having those real heart to heart conversations, isn't hard, right? You know, you're already taking them out to lunch or to breakfast, or you're meeting them or wherever, and you're already having these conversations. Most of my conversations don't even have to revolve around an ask most of the time, right? It's really like, oh, how are your kids? Right things that we know about each other personally. So when it does come time for an ask, it's not even as she's like, how much do you need? Right? What do you need it for? Right. And that's what most funders, so as long as you're having those conversations, and even on a state level, if you're stewarding actual state representatives, especially the ones that are associated with whatever that funding is, because they're the ones that are helping to create and dictate those guidelines later, right. Senator Hughes is on the Appropriations Committee, right? Or at least he was then. Right. So having those conversations makes it a lot easier. I think we're off track, because we're

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always off track, I'm sorry to have those conversations when you need to write have them all the time, and have them with funders that can't fund you. Because you never know what your next organization is going to be. You never know if they're going to shift their funding priorities. I've had people approach me and say, Hey, I just heard you moved organizations. And I love this new mission. And it actually does align with the foundation. Even though I haven't been able to fund you before I want to start talking to you now. So having those conversations is really important. But and I think that going back to messaging, we're off stories, we're off storytelling. But if you're able to have real storytelling opportunities, right?

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When you have those conversations with funders, they're not getting that fluff, right? They're not getting, oh, we serve or your budget is going to be you know, this purse student or whatever, a lot of times those numbers are under reported, because you're trying to make it look good, right? Don't make it look good. Right? Tell them the story the way that it is, right? Because they're never going to change, you're never going to learn if we keep always trying to make it look good. We're going to make mistakes. And you know, ever, I mean, the world is the world. But since 2020, like every month, I feel like the world has changed for us. So we can't go back to the way things were. And we can't talk about things in that same light. So as long as we're being able to tell stories that are honest and true and representative of the people that we serve, and what's actually happening in our organizations, I think that we can actually educate donors better. Oh, tell them about your, um, about the campaign you just said.

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So I was gonna say, we touched on this a little bit, but the type of story you're telling is also really important. So Monique mentioned like you don't want to be seen as the face of violence.

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So this kind of lens into how we did our campaigns. So we, the sob story is not a thing for us for our organization. But it is for a lot of nonprofits. And I think when you come into nonprofits, that's kind of how you're taught to tell the story, right? Look at this sad, starving child in Africa, let's get some really close up shots of their ribs. So you're real clear on how hungry this kid is. And the kid shivering and the

kid is sad, and this is why we need your money. That is one way to tell a story, it is not the best way to tell the story, in my opinion. So you can tell the same story from a place of strength, where you're not marginalizing the person that you're telling the story of. So that's kind of what led us to this campaign. So we've done several campaigns in my organization now, but we are always telling stories from a place of strength and forward looking. So we don't ever talk about participant backgrounds. I think explaining what my organization does is enough for you to make some assumptions about where this person has come from, or what they might have had experienced. And that's all you really need. You don't need to know how long this person experienced homelessness where they slept, which bridge they were under. Like, that's not important to the story. The story is

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This is a human being that needed help, we were able to provide help. And this is what they've done with that help. So it's not even so much this is what we've done for them. It's this is what we've supported them through and what they were able to accomplish on their own strength, basically. So that's consistently how we're telling stories at my organization. We've gotten really, really great feedback from supporters, donors, foundations, who love to hear those types of stories and don't really want to see really sad puppies anymore.

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And know, the organizational campaign.

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She's really proud, she brags for me.

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However,

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it is not only our participants that make our organization happen. So going into this past fiscal year and campaign, we were like, Let's give the participants a break. Let's give them a well deserved break. They don't always have to be out here stumping for our organization, making sure things happen. Let's talk about our staff, let's highlight all of the great work that we're doing without having to highlight our participants at all. So we did a series, I think it was five, five different kinds of vignette stories, about five different staff at our organization, we did follow alongs. With people who are out in the field, we did office interviews with our administrative staff. And we tried to

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kind of connect the dots between how our work gets done, from finance, to HR, to our housing maintenance department all the way down to the people that are out in the community with our participants that are providing like one on one services. And it was really fun to do that with our staff, we got a lot of great pictures that we're going to end up using in future campaigns. But we also got to talk directly to our supporters about why we're telling this story and not that story. So the final kind of story vignette of that campaign was from me directly saying, we don't do sob stories. And we don't solely rely on our participants to tell our story. And that's why you're getting these stories this time around. So we

we never make that much money in our fiscal year end campaign. We know it's our fiscal year end, our donors could care less if it's our fiscal year end, it's okay. But we ended up with a hugely larger minimum get average gift size. So our average gift size for our like urine campaign is about 100 \$150. Our average gift size was \$500.

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She was downplaying it. She was like Monica was in LA. I'm like, No, you're not understanding the difference between your average before and afterwards. Yeah, like that's a big job. So for the people that it really resonated with, it really resonated with them. So when you're thinking about telling the story of your organization, think about the entirety of your organization, and not just the people receiving services, because there's a lot that goes into making your services happen. It's not just the participants. Thank you, you

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know, I thought, you know, I thought that was a really good campaign. I don't think that a lot of us think about I mean, as much as we talk about the idea that it takes all of those different people to make programs operate and work, we never really take the time to focus on them to really say, this is really what it's taking, right? This is the amount of time and effort and why they do what they do and the hours that they spend. And I think that that's, again, is the narrative that helps funders understand while why general operating at best is needed, right? And why that 10% Like I teach, I teach financial management for nonprofits, and I brought a CPA and someone asked about the 10% rule and a CPA was giving a generic answer. I said, I'm going to destroy that answer. And everybody busted out laughing. I'm like, No, stop it. As long as we keep abiding by that 10%. That's what they're going to expect. But if you tell the narrative on why whatever you consider as overhead is needed, it breaks it down, right? And we have to keep, again, educating people. But we have to do it from a place of ethical storytelling and honesty, and being really open and honest with understanding what we're telling with that messaging, who's on the other side of that messaging. Every messaging component is not right for the for the same people, right? So understanding how you're going to not fudge the story or change the story, but adapt your messaging to really meet the person on the other end. Yeah.

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Yeah. No, I'm gonna close. Yeah, sure. But you're the year though. But thank you so much for being our first live audience ever for the podcast. It's very exciting for us. Hopefully, the only thing we edit out is the little generosity club bear at the end, but we might keep it Yeah, we might keep it right if you're, we have listeners from not just Philadelphia so we don't always want to make it fill up a specific

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Actually the rules there's a lot of there's a lot of really people on the podcast. So thank you. This was really cool. We'll hang out if anybody wants to talk to us afterwards. We'll be here for at least a little bit. Maybe the rest of the day. And if you didn't know now, you know, this has been beyond philanthropy.