

COMMENTARY

Donors and nonprofits have more work to do

Re: The Star's Dec. 2 article "DA sues car donation nonprofit":

I hate badly run nonprofits. Most nonprofits are run by well-intentioned leaders determined to fix a problem that they see and that nobody is addressing.

But there will always be some who, instead of seeing a problem to be fixed, see a game to be conned. These are the ones we need to watch for.

I have been involved in therapeutic horseback riding and nonprofits for 31 years now. In that time, I have run across dozens of badly run nonprofits under well-intentioned leaders

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trying to make their world just a little bit better.

Running an effective nonprofit is pretty complicated. Good intentions require good knowledge and training to make a difference.

One way to fix this problem is to continue educating would-be nonprofit leaders. In this regard, the Ventura County Community Foundation can play a role by reopening its educational arm, the Center for Nonprofit Leadership,

which did amazing work until earlier this year when it was closed by the VCCF board of directors — a false economy.

For those of you, like me, trying to maximize the benefit of your charitable donations, here are some tools to help as we enter a season of giving.

This is how I tell if a nonprofit is worth supporting.

First, I go to their website and look for their financial statements. If I find them, this tells me this organization is at least vaguely aware that being financially transparent to the public is at the core of being a nonprofit.

Next, are the financial statements independently audited? If yes, this is a good sign but not sufficient in itself; bad managers somehow can find bad CPAs to shape their audit.

While I'm on their website I look for evidence they have a physical facility that can support its claimed mission and I look for evidence of its programming.

Note that small nonprofits, less than \$1 million in annual revenue, will only rarely have an audit, and that is OK. In these cases, a prospective donor will need to dig a bit deeper.

Next, I go to the charity

website www.Guidestar.org. If you donate money to charity, you should bookmark this site. Create a free account and it will allow you to do a bit more research. Guidestar has created a program that well-run nonprofits can opt into. If you are considering donating, do a quick check.

501(c)(3) nonprofits are required to disclose their tax returns and, for the hardy, there is a wealth of detail. You can find salary information, a list of board members including if any are related to each other or paid, and a summary of how much money they spend on programs versus

fundraising and administration.

The final and best check on a charity is to walk onto its site when they are operating and look around. If it's a food bank, it will be busy right before the holidays. Load up a bag of groceries, put a check in an envelope and walk in.

Most of these programs survive by the work of volunteers. That is, hands down, the best way to get to know, and hopefully love, a local nonprofit.

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