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Marc Pollick meets many celebrities through his Giving Back Fund, but he prefers playing basketball with his sons to mingling with the stars.

Charity drive

Marc Pollick works to persuade stars it's OK to 'give back' — and helps them make it count

By Joanna Weiss
 GLOBE STAFF

It began with an idea that, in a perfect world, might have turned out to be a perfect idea.

First, there were the good causes, too many to name. Second, the celebrities, richer than ever — athletes with unfathomable contracts, entertainers on multi-million-dollar tours. Third, the sorry tales of benevolence gone wrong: stars who left their charities in the hands of their mothers or siblings, and wound up with huge administrative costs and public black eyes.

In the shower one day in the early 1990s, an idealist named Marc Pollick — who happened to know how to run a charity — thought of a solution. Why not start a business that ran celebrity foundations, but ran them right?

Thus began the Giving Back Fund, a small nonprofit, run from a modest office at Park Plaza, that has grown to run nearly 40 foundations. Its clients include Justin Timberlake of 'N Sync, Britney Spears, Doug Flutie, and Nancy Kerrigan; its concerns range from Parkinson's disease to autism to underprivileged kids.

In a perfect world, that would be the end of the story.

The real world is a little more complicated.

In many ways, the Giving Back Fund has been a success. It boasts low overhead — at least 95 percent of the money donated to the foundations goes to charity — and has drawn interest from some non-traditional sources. Eighty percent of its foundations were started by people between the ages of 18 and 35. Some of the donors they attract are even younger; girls send letters to Timberlake with allowance-size donations. Celebrities are taking notice, too. Last year Forbes magazine named Magic Johnson's foundation, which spent 77 percent of its funds on overhead, one of the five worst in America. This year Johnson signed up with the Giving Back Fund.

But Pollick and his staff have also had to face a sobering realization: The Giving Back Fund hasn't grown as quickly as they'd hoped. It turns out it's not so easy to get stars to part with their money.

"Everybody says 'I want to give back, I want to give back,'" Pollick says. "What

Harnessing their star power

The Giving Back Fund has helped many celebrities run their charities successfully. Here are a few:



Magic Johnson went to Pollick after Forbes magazine cited his foundation last year as one of the country's worst.



"They're like watchdogs," Holly Robinson Peete says approvingly of the Giving Back Fund staff.



Marc Pollick stepped into the spotlight when he helped Britney Spears announce the creation of her charity.



Young girls — and fans of Justin Timberlake — send in their allowances as a contribution to his charity.

If you're a multimillionaire... why not have the best people in the world running your philanthropy?

MARC POLLICK, founder of the Giving Back Fund

Stars learn how to get more bang for their charity buck

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They're finding is saying it and doing it are two very different things."

Now, nearly five years into its existence, the Giving Back Fund has started to make some changes. In the beginning, Pollick and his staff required no minimum donation to start a foundation. Now, they do — \$250,000 within the first year — to keep stars from starting charities just for good publicity. For the same reason, they've created a "donor commitment agreement" that says stars must publicly disclose the amount of money in their foundations — again, to make sure they back up their good-deeds talk with the goods.

Pollick says he might lose some business this way. But he's realized there's a difference between giving for good press and giving because you mean it. So the Giving Back Fund has changed its motto, too. The old one was a Churchill quote: "You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." The new one: "To whom much is given, much is expected."

Nonprofit outlook

Pollick, 48, isn't one of those people who dreamed of hobnobbing with stars. He's a suburban dad and former college athlete who coaches his kid's basketball team and practices with his sons on a court in the backyard. And his perspective is decidedly nonprofit. When he graduated from college, he wanted to change the world. "I was a dead serious about it," he says.

The hard part was deciding how to do it. For the first 17 years of his career, Pollick tried Holocaust studies; he figured that if you taught people how badly the world could go wrong, you could persuade them to do things right. He directed the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard, opened a Holocaust museum in Miami, ran a foundation for renowned Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel. People around the world continued to message others. Pollick was forced to reassess.

"It wasn't working," he says. "I felt like I had done everything one could do in Holocaust studies, and it wasn't changing the world."

But he also had noticed that Wiesel's foundation, by virtue of a famous name, commanded atten-



AP FILE PHOTOS

Doug Flutie (right) and Nancy Kerrigan turned to Marc Pollick and the Giving Back Fund for help with their charities.

tion that other charities couldn't. And he noticed the bad-news stories about charity and stars. In 1996, Michael Jordan shut down his foundation, which employed his mother and sister, because of skyrocketing administrative costs and bad press. He was hardly the only one.

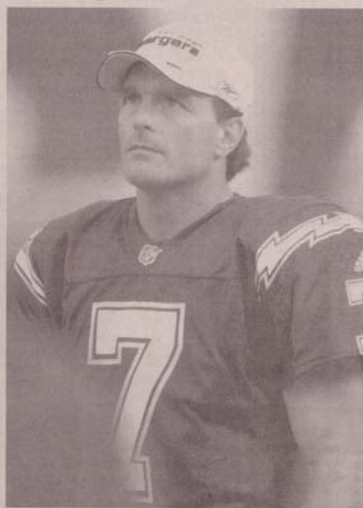
Maybe *this* was the way to change the world, Pollick thought. So he came up with a pitch for would-be celebrity donors. "If you're a multimillionaire and you have the best people in the world building your house," he says, "why not have the best people in the world running your philanthropy?"

With \$250,000 in seed money, Pollick started the fund in 1997. His first big name was then-Celtics captain Doc Brown, who launched a foundation to help single parents. In 1998, Flutie started a foundation to combat autism. The next year, at a benefit for the Flutie Foundation at Jon Bon Jovi's house — a reproduction French chateau in Rod Bank, N.J. — Pollick met the manager for Spears

and Timberlake, who said she had the teen pop stars wanted to start charities.

Over the years, both celebrities and noncelebrities have joined, with foundations to benefit everything from pediatric disease to science education to racial understanding. The donors range from basketball players (Elton Brand, Jalen Rose, Donyell Marshall, Arvydas Sabonis, Val Whitting, Kara Wolters) to hockey players (Scott Mellanby) to football players (La'Roi Glover, Leo Lewis). Sports marketing pioneer James Warsaw started a Parkinson's foundation. Actor Jon Seda took on victims of a chronic nervous system disorder. Yankees catcher Jorge Posada launched a charity for victims of an infant cranial disorder, and to finance youth athletics in New York.

Star power can create some unusual scenarios; as the nonprofit world goes, one week, an exquisitely polite British girl called the Giving Back Fund every 10 minutes, begging for Timberlake's phone number. It can also draw a lot of attention. In October 1999, Pollick found himself on a magazine in Hollywood, in front of a thousand popping flashbulbs, announcing the Britney Spears Foundation with the pop star herself. Spears's publicist later sent



news.

But having a well-known name and a worthy cause doesn't mean you know what you're doing, says actress Holly Robinson Peete. Four years ago, she and her husband, Oakland Raiders quarterback Rodney Peete, started an independent foundation to help patients with Parkinson's disease. Back then, she recalls, people spoke in shorthand about not-for-profit tax status, telling her to get a 501(c)(3). "I said, 'What is that, a new BMW?'"

Eventually, she learned the terminology. But after a few years of juggling a sitcom, twins, and the Hollywood Foundation, she decided she needed help. About six months ago, she signed up with the Giving Back Fund.

"They're like watchdogs," she says. "They're very by-the-book and very protective, and they found ways to make this work out and make it better."

Just say 'no'

But not everyone, Pollick and his staff have discovered, wants to run an operation by the book. Pollick and senior vice president Stephanie Sandler are meticulous about not naming names, but they joke that they could write a terrific tell-all book if they wanted to.

poorly with charity. Sandler and Pollick say some of their clients are truly dedicated. And outside the Giving Back Fund, they give high praise to Andre Agassi and Rosie O'Donnell for their mix of good intentions and good works.

But too many stars, whether well-intentioned or not, are apparently challenged by what Sandler calls "thinking in the nonprofit way." It's possible, she says, to hold an event that raises \$2 million for charity but costs \$1.99 million to throw, when you get through the cost of flying celebrity guests to town, carting them around in limousines, and feeding them caviar. And some celebrities, Pollick says, have trouble with the concept of "no."

Some also don't seem to agree, Pollick says, that foundation employees should be qualified for the work, and paid a market rate. Stars still ask to hire their out-of-work cousins; one wanted to pay an agent four or five times more than market rate for a foundation position. On these matters, Pollick won't budge. When a basketball coach wanted a foundation with the Giving Back Fund, he wanted to hire his daughter. Only if she's paid reasonably and supervised, Pollick replied; send in her resume.

stars how to run a successful charity, Pollick and Sandler say, it's sometimes harder to get them to start one in the first place. Traditional big-money philanthropy stems from rich families with histories of giving, and a firm sense of their net worth.

New money, Pollick says, "has more neurosis circumscribing it than old money." It's sometimes tough to convince young stars that "if you have \$100 million, you can make a \$1 million gift and you'll have \$99 million. You'll be all right."

But stars who make a lot of money spend a lot, says Leland Faust, a Giving Back Fund board member who, like many of the Capital Management, a San Francisco investment firm with many professional athletes clients. Stars also have shorter careers, and less certain year-to-year salaries, than the average wealthy lawyer. If your earnings dip from \$1 million to \$1 million per year, Faust says, "you still feel relatively poor."

Robinson Peete has another theory about why the Giving Back Fund hasn't been an instant success: the address. Boston might be Pollick's home, but by celebrity standards it's hopelessly out of the way. Last summer, the Giving Back Fund opened a branch office in Los Angeles.

There are times, though, when local connections lure some of the Giving Back Fund's stars to its home town. Britney Spears's centerpiece charity, the Britney Spears Camp for the Performing Arts, was held in the Berkshires in its inaugural year and on Cape Cod this past summer. On a sunny day last August, Spears set foot on the Cape — briefly — to watch the revue the campers had prepared. And her visit proved how strange it can be when celebrity and charity intersect.

A crowd of reporters had come to document the pop star's moment in town, and at a press conference, some of them asked her about her philanthropy goals. Spears described them dutifully: the TV rooms she's set up in hospitals so teens can "go and just chill and be who they are," the campers she hoped would "feel really good about themselves." Asked why she started a charity, she replied that "you get to a point in your career" when you want to give back.

Then her mobilist started in to end the conversation, so Britney could be wired for her interview with "Access Hollywood." And when the TV crew started to ask her about Madonna, Spears really