

## Season 2, Episode 5: Unleashing Potential

**Stephanie:** There's incredible potential in girls. I think people are recognizing that's a thing that society has started to talk about more openly to that. It shouldn't actually be that we're just now discovering that half the population has incredible potential, but there it is.

**Grace:** Welcome to *Giving Done Right*, a podcast on everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

**Phil:** And I'm Phil Buchanan. Today, we're going to be talking with Stephanie Hull, who runs Girls Inc. And obviously nobody needs me to explain gender inequality in this country as a major continued issue, as much progress as we've made, you know, it's sobering to look at data about pay gaps, about disproportionate amount of childcare and housework done by women. Look at the U.S. Congress today: fewer than 30%, in 2021, of elected representatives are women. So the work of empowering girls and women, breaking down barriers, fighting for gender equity remains, obviously, vital.

And that's what Stephanie has been doing. She's been leading Girls Inc. since 2019. Prior to that, she spent seven years as executive vice president, chief operating officer at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. She led an all-girls private school in New York, and she worked in higher education administration at Mount Holyoke College. That's actually how I met her, when we overlapped briefly many, many years ago, Stephanie is also a CEP board member and just a great leader in our sector.

**Grace:** Yep, and this is a topic that is near and dear to my heart, as I know it is to yours. And I'm excited to dig in because she is such a compelling ambassador for the cause. Her whole career has been promoting the cause of women and girls. And we get into some really interesting conversations with her around, like, what it's like to lead a national nonprofit. Is it better to have foundation donors versus individual donors? And finally, just in this moment in time, what does it take to invest well in women and girls?

**Phil:** Really looking forward to this interview with Stephanie Hull.

Stephanie, welcome to the *Giving Done Right* podcast.

**Stephanie:** Thank you. It's great to be here.

**Phil:** Grace and I are so excited to talk with you. Let's start with Girls Inc., the organization you lead currently. Tell us what it does.

**Stephanie:** Girls Inc. is a network of 78 affiliated organizations across the U.S. And Canada, and our mission is to make sure that girls grow up healthy, educated, and independent.

**Phil:** That's a big goal. Tell us a little bit more specifically what you do and how you know that you're making progress toward that goal. What does that look like?

**Stephanie:** Specifically, it's a combination of three things. It's the people who are involved, the place where the work takes place, and then the environment—then the programming that we create there.

So the people are trained volunteers and staff, people who work with girls ages five to 18. They learn how to be excellent mentors and program facilitators, and they stay with the girls and understand them, get to know them, help them grow up. The places are Girls Inc. organizations, which sometimes operate in schools, sometimes in independent centers, or in community organizations like the YWCA.

And those places are all-girl safe spaces where girls can just really be themselves and can find sisterhood and be with other girls who are from the same community, likely to be experiencing some of the same kinds of challenges. What we know is that it's really always hard to grow up as a girl, so that in itself is a challenge for a lot of young people. But this group of girls, they are generally Black and brown girls, for the most part they're growing up in families that are below the poverty line, so they have a special layer of challenges. And we work with them through, certainly the sisterhood is one of the most important factors for them, but there is also evidence-based programming. We are working with girls to teach them particular skills: career readiness skills, for example; literacy programming; mind plus body, which is a combination of understanding yourself and learning to eat well, exercise appropriately, engage in healthy relations.

So how we know we're making progress: we've actually just fairly recently had an external evaluation study from the American Institutes for Research. And that study concluded that Girls Inc. girls have a measured, positive advantage over girls who don't participate in Girls Inc. who come from the same demographics. So there were 20 impact areas that we studied, and our girls are

outperforming other girls who don't have the benefit of the Girls Inc. experience.

**Phil:** That's amazing. And give us a sense of, like, the scale of the program. I understand that you are the national leader, but then there are many local entities that are affiliated. Can you just explain a little bit about how that works? And if, in our audience, a donor might be interested in finding out more about what's going on locally with Girls Inc. in whatever area they're in, how would they do that?

**Stephanie:** Yes, Girls Inc. does have this national organization. We are the place where the research is carried out, where the core of the programming is created and pushed out to all of the different affiliated organizations. At the local level, you will find an affiliate that has an executive director and has its own budget as a 501(c)(3) and is certainly eager to get to know anybody who might be willing to support them. They run a program for the community and really of the community. The national office is looking to, sort of, make sure that people understand the entire mission and that the goal of the entire organization is met, but not every community where Girls Inc. is functioning has the same kind of base of donors and support. So because we're working everywhere from small rural communities to large urban communities, what we do at national is to try to make sure that there's a consistency across all of the programming and its ability to find the funding support that it needs.

**Phil:** That's so interesting. And Grace, I don't know what you think about this, but it feels so many times our conversation is about this balance between the advantages of smallness and community rootedness and connection on the one hand and the need for learning and evidence and data that informs what might work across geographies on the other hand. And it seems like there's an attempt to capture both of those elements in the way Girls Inc. is structured.

**Stephanie:** Yes, that's definitely the case. I think we are looking at proof of concept, in lots of ways, but we also know that because our organizations are led and staffed by people who come from the communities, for the most part, there's a much deeper understanding of what it is to grow up as a girl there, what the resources are that are available, what the challenges are that need to be met. And the things that Girls Inc. does really are part of the underpinning of that strong, healthy, thriving society, that resilient community. Making sure that young people have a place to be, that they feel safe, that they are secure in themselves, that they value themselves. And our girls also are very interested in advocacy. They're very connected to the conversation about how government works and especially how government supports young people, young girls,

women. It's really kind of a win-win for the community—when you have a thriving community of young people, you're really on your way to having a thriving adult community and a resilient community.

**Phil:** You and I have talked, Stephanie, over the years about stuff donors do that ties the hands of nonprofit leaders to do things like have the flexible funding to work on advocacy when an opportunity presents itself or invest in the technology infrastructure in the way that you're describing, because so much funding is restricted or there's this kind of notion—that doesn't really make any sense—that "I want my donation to go to 'the cause,'" which is defined as something that excludes all kinds of essential aspects of running an organization, like rent. Is that getting any better in your experience? Because, like, we went through this pandemic where everybody said, "okay, oh, maybe we gotta be a little more flexible with these nonprofits because they've got to respond in ways that were not anticipated." So, like, was that a moment and are we on a different trajectory now? Or are you still dealing with 47 restricted gifts that you've got to report against in 47 different ways?

**Stephanie:** I would say that it was a moment, and we are still dealing with a lot of different restricted gifts. Because the pandemic hit us from all directions at once, and then the racial reckoning get us and organizations like us from every direction that the pandemic wasn't hitting us from, people did say, effectively, "you need to use what you know, to get yourselves where you need to be. You need to work your way out of this. Let us know what you need." We didn't ever really achieve just fully unrestricted, "do whatever you want." People still wanted to be involved. And I think that's because most of the people who were expressing that concern were doing it in an atmosphere of public scrutiny.

So the public said, "what are you doing about this?" And the big organization said, "oh, we're going to put our money behind COVID-19. And so we need to, you know, if you can tell me that you're addressing COVID-19. We can put our money behind that, and that—there's your bucket that says COVID-19 on it." And then—but then you had to report against your own bucket. And so, first of all, I think it's a problem that so many of us were brought up in this restricted way of thinking where I could see first drafts coming in saying, "okay, we're going to have to tell them this." And I was saying, "no, they didn't say we had to restrict it." It's—there's a habit of mind that says, "let me put something down for this."

**Phil:** When you say—you were getting first drafts of proposals for grant funding or proposals to some major individual donor from your staff. And the assumption was, it's, "we've got to make a play for this program or that

program. We can't just ask for unrestricted support" and you're like, "wait a second. Why can't we?"

**Stephanie:** Exactly.

**Phil:** Is that what happened?

**Stephanie:** Yes. Yes. Because there's a habit of mind that says, "we need to—we will need to account for ourselves, that they, they can't mean this. We will, at some point, have to go against this tally sheet and say, 'this dollar went here, this dollar went there.'" And there's a template. The template is real. The template is in our heads, in our hearts, and the donors have a template too when you kind of know that because they said, "okay, it's unrestricted." Unrestricted sometimes meant "you tell us how you want to restrict it." Unrestricted didn't mean that at the end of the year we say, "thank you so much for that money. It really helped us." Unrestricted meant "I, I am open to your ideas as to how this money plays out among your general priorities and buckets that you typically use." Which isn't to say that we weren't grateful for it, even the flexibility to take a step back and to look at where we needed it was a vast improvement over some of the ways that funding has been given out in past years. And I'm not only talking about the Girls Inc. context, because I've been in nonprofits forever. Grantees know what they need to do and that to be allowed to do what you need to do, but not to have to think of the whole thing in advance, you know, not to have to create your own template, but to be told over a period of time, "I need this money. I'm sure I need this money. Can I tell you as I go what I have done with it?" That's still pretty rare.

It's also been relatively rare that the funders who stepped up to say, "we are going to put our money behind social justice"—what that has meant is a lot of, "okay, we said that, we've made that commitment, we're thinking about what we really will do. We are not ready to release funds in support of that commitment. We have made that commitment, and we are defining more closely what that means in terms of dollars, what that means in terms of grants that we will issue." There's been a lot of coming back to say, "well, what exactly is your racial equity statement? What exactly is your social justice mission? How do you define yourself?" So it's left us, as organizations, trying to think—I like the mission of Girls Inc., how can I also talk about that within the context of racial equity and social justice when for 157 years, that's all that we've done, but we haven't used those words because nobody really used those words? And, you know, for us to be rethinking the words we use is not really the right move any more than for us to be creating a new template with different buckets in it for an

unrestricted grant is the right move. It's—we are still functioning in the same paradigm.

**Grace:** Donors have such a deeply seated skepticism towards nonprofit leaders and nonprofits in terms of their ability to figure things out. I find that even with the most experienced donors, there can be that strain of, "well, you've got to show me, because there's always this risk of the funds being misused or nonprofit bloat." I would love to just give you the opportunity to address that head on, because I think that it's always in the back of everyone's minds, it's like, "well, you know, I've been called to steward this funding, so therefore, why shouldn't I keep a tight rein?"

And I'm just curious, what would you say to that donor?

**Stephanie:** I would say: what I experienced with the 78 other leaders who are running nonprofits under the general aegis of Girls Inc.—these are people who know exactly what to do with the dollar to make sure that it has the greatest benefit in the lives of girls. And they actually use a bit differs by the day sometimes.

At the beginning of the pandemic, a lot of the Girls Inc. affiliates became the places in the communities where food was given out to families that didn't have enough food. Is that our mission? No, it is not. But to grow up healthy, educated and independent, you need food security. We have a place we could do this in, we will do this and we'll figure out—if we need to keep doing it, we'll keep doing it. If somebody else picks it up, that's great; we'll go back to what we do. That flexibility is the flexibility that we're talking about. To take people who are deeply embedded in the families and the workings of that community. They completely understand, they know the traffic patterns, they know the people, the needs. To have them go through a formal process of writing to say, "may I repurpose some of the grant items on the line here up to 5%," resubmitting a budget, getting that approved—weeks would go by when people didn't have any food.

So what I would say about that is, give people a chance, do a different kind of check-in, but to keep people's hands tied and to keep them putting energy toward justifying a decision that they know is the right decision—and it's not just a sort of "know in your heart," but this is knowledge born of years of experience running an organization. And, you know, to be able to think on your feet, use your knowledge, and not have the formalities of trying to reach people in different media and different, you know, sort of budgeting—because I think it probably is true that these people are not deeply skilled at budget redrafting and



reforecasting and, you know, sort of grant, you know, that maybe does make them look like they're a little bit on their back foot—but see them in the context of a community, building community, supporting community, and you'll know that you're seeing an expert. And that, I think, is—again, I'm personalizing the example to Girls Inc.—but there are many, many organizations that function that way where, if you didn't have to operate within the strictures of, sort of, formal grant reporting and requesting, you would see the expertise and your confidence would be restored that these people are the right investment.

**Grace:** Your example talks about like grant reporting and being a grantee. Is this true for individual donors too? Do you find that individual donors restrict the gifts or is it a little bit more open-handed because essentially they're writing a check?

**Stephanie:** I have not found the same constraints with individual donors, honestly. I think that the conversation is usually different upfront, and they have a deeper understanding of the organization and what the different elements are of it. The accountability is different. It's a personal choice. You can satisfy yourself that you've made a good decision. You can get to know the leader of the organization personally. You also probably feel much more free to pick up the phone and say, "that's the last thousand dollars you'll ever see from me until you do X." And then it's a choice. And so it's not that there's not pressure from individual donors. They can be quite important. But I think that they tend more to see themselves as thought partners.

**Grace:** That's really interesting, that interplay, the contrast. Seems like, as a non-profit leader, you would want more individual donors because of the flexibility and less admin overhead required to process the gifts.

**Stephanie:** It's true. I would say though, it's not so much the admin, it's not about the scrutiny. It's about the mindless things, as Phil was mentioning, it's about things that don't feel real. But we would be thrilled to write a report and let people know where their investment went. The issue that I think donors fear is that there's, you know, as you said, Grace, the bloat. There isn't that. There's nothing that we don't want people to know. But what we don't want to do is fill out several forms in triplicate just to be allowed to put \$2,000 someplace where we know it needs to be.

**Grace:** Yeah, I want to go back to something that you said earlier of statements that corporations and other organizations have put out over the past year. Seems like the death of George Floyd really catalyzed some reckoning around systemic racism. And I'm just curious, I've heard you talk openly about how that focus

broadly has played out for you as a Black woman leading a nonprofit that's serving girls, including girls of color. And there is this gap between the rhetoric and the reality, as you just said. Now we're seeing—there's probably more backlash and pushback about systemic racism a year later. Where do you think we are now? And how do you hope that donors will respond?

**Stephanie:** It's hard to say where I think we are now.

I have a lot of colleagues who felt much more optimism in the moment of last year, along with much more disappointment. And I think that the sort of balance between the disappointment that people felt that this kind of thing could still go on, that George Floyd could still be murdered, and then the optimism that this was a moment where people were no longer going to take it, and then the resultant attacks against Asian American and Pacific Islanders.

I think companies made bold statements. They made bold statements about being part of the solution to COVID. They made bold statements about being part of the solution to systemic racism. They were concerned, I think, that customers and constituents would put their money or put their foot traffic where their mouths were, and that it was important to say, "we're no longer going to tolerate these things." But it has been less important for them to come back within six months and say, "thanks for the chance to think about this. Here's how we're investing these dollars." There are a lot of people who are still studying, and it's hard. We're out here still running an organization that still serves these people. I still am a Black leader of an organization. The rhetoric has shifted radically, but the allocation of dollars does not seem to have gone with it.

And it's not everybody. And I don't want to lump everybody in, but a lot of people made the rhetorical move much more fluidly than they have made the financial or the fiscal moves that supported it.

**Grace:** So it's time to walk the talk.

**Phil:** While we're talking about race and gender—let's talk about gender—I met you when we were both working at a women's college, Mount Holyoke College, and you had attended a women's college, Wellesley College. You headed up a girl's school, the Brearley School, in New York. You run Girls Inc. Where does the interest in focusing on girls and women come from? You've devoted your entire career, really, to this issue of opportunity for girls and women, gender equity. What shaped you that led you to devote your career to that work?



**Stephanie:** It's kind of funny—I've not necessarily done it consciously. I have fallen into a lot of these pathways because I think I'm attracted to opportunity, as you say, and to equity and to potential. Which is not to say that the other communities that I don't support don't have that potential, but there's such tremendous potential in young people, and in my career I've gone sort of every younger. So I went to a women's college, I actually taught at Wellesley for a little while. I led the Brearley School. I'm back working with Girls Inc. There's incredible potential in girls. I think people are recognizing that's a thing that society has started to talk about more openly too, that it shouldn't actually be that we're just now discovering that half the population has incredible potential, but there it is. And I mean, because we are now awake to the opportunity and the potential, but with the underpinning of equity, it feels like this is a moment to fight for that equity. It feels like it is possible to see this happen. And I think everybody likes to see themselves win a fight. So the idea for me is to get out there and, for as long as I can, to see if I can make this happen.

And what's interesting about it is that these young people are ready to make it happen. There are a few barriers that stand in their way, and I think it's our job to remove those barriers or at least to sort of block and tackle. Young people aren't the problem. Their attitudes are not the problem. It's our attitudes that are the problem. It's our acceptance of these attitudes that remains a problem. And if we don't address the problem, we will continue to say to young people, "well, here's what you need because when you go in there, it won't be a fair fight."

In my life, I have always felt like I wasn't quite in a fair fight. I was the victim of racism when I was a kid, I've been the victim of sexism, you know, all through my life. People said the thing that you don't want people to say about being "relatively articulate for a Black person." People were surprised that I achieved the things that I did because of what I look like. What happened for me, I think, is that annoyed me. And I think my family was annoyed with me and said, "well, why can't you, why shouldn't you?" And I was supported to do it.

So I know firsthand that if you support young people and you say, "you know what? You do what you're capable of doing. Ignore those people. I'll take care of those people." That's the upbringing that I had, and in my little sphere, that worked for me. So what I'd love to do is to do that on a bigger sphere. I'd love to say to the young people, "you take care of yourself, you worry about yourself, do what you can do. We will move these people out of your way, who don't believe in you, who don't support you. Don't worry about them. Don't put your energy toward that." I think that there's an incredible thing that will happen if we can finally do that.

And conversely, I think if we continue to condone the obstacles, and if we continue to condone the barriers, great things will still happen for these young people, but it's going to be that much harder, and we will be that much further behind what we could potentially see in the world as a result of these young people just rising up and being who they can be.

**Grace:** Stephanie, at the end of each episode, we ask our guests, giving done right, to you, is about: fill in the blank. How would you answer that?

**Stephanie:** Giving done right, to me, is about working with the people who are closest to the communities, who are closest to the research, who are closest to the vision and allowing them to be in conversation with what you know. It's—being part of a healthy conversation and allowing the grantee to be open in that conversation, I think, allows all people to make their best decisions and do their best work.

**Grace:** That's wonderful. Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Stephanie:** Thank you. It was great to talk with you both.

**Phil:** Thank you, Stephanie.

Grace, what did you think about Stephanie?

**Grace:** Wow, where to start? She covered a lot of ground, and she's such a passionate advocate. I was really struck by when she talked about the difference between rhetoric and reality from the racial justice statements that we saw last year and how she hasn't seen the changes that people promised.

**Phil:** Yeah. And another part of what was interesting was, like, she felt like certain donors were looking for her to use certain words, and she's like, "I'm not playing that game. Like we've always been about, you know, helping young girls of color," not exclusively, but, and I think that's something to be cautious about, right? Like, to recognize that you can be very much doing work, that advances racial equity and racial justice without necessarily being known for it or people understanding it or thinking of you when maybe they should.

**Grace:** Well also, it's just so much easier to want a checkbox. "Okay, you use these words." "Okay. You think about things this way." Versus really getting down, rolling up your sleeves and understanding what's happening in a community and the ways that you can really help. It's so much easier to just look for labels and then move on.

I really want to get back to the question that I asked her around, you know, there's always the strain of skepticism that donors have about trusting nonprofits with, like, an unrestricted gift. And I truly do run into it everywhere, and I know you do too. And her answer was so compelling. It's like, "if you knew how we know these people, and if you knew that, you know, my ability to pivot \$2,000, during a pandemic to something else is so vital." How do we help donors get over that hump of just worrying that the funds will be misused?

**Phil:** Yeah, I wish I knew. I mean, it is maddening the lack of trust in the expertise on the ground. And I actually would probably say that I have a more positive view than Stephanie even does of the sort of financial acumen and management ability of leaders of community-based nonprofit organizations, because they have to be really good, you know, to make it work. They're often doing so much with so little in the way of resources. But it is kind of frustrating that so often in these conversations we're having on this podcast, Grace, but also in our work at CEP, we get back to this issue of trust and lack of trust. What do you think?

**Grace:** Well, I guess I want to say to donors, like, yes, there are scandals out there, and they are really serious cautionary tales, but that those are just individual instances oftentimes, and we do not see, in the United States, at least, a pattern of funds being grossly misused and you know, by and large, these nonprofits are doing incredible work in these communities day in, day out.

**Phil:** Yeah. And you look at someone like Stephanie, I mean, you could not have a more impressive set of experiences to show, like, this is a leader who knows how to effectively run an organization.

If we can't trust Stephanie Hull, then we don't trust anybody. Right? I mean, she has run one of the oldest and most prestigious private schools in the country. She has been at college administrator. She's running Girls Inc. She's got every possible degree. For crying out loud, what does it take to give her the flexibility to allocate resources the way she and her leadership team thinks are needed to achieve their mission?

**Grace:** So, Phil, where can people go for more information about effective giving?

**Phil:** More resources about effective giving are available on [cep.org](http://cep.org). And then of course, [givingdoneright.org](http://givingdoneright.org) is the podcast website has all the episodes and show notes.

**Grace:** You can also find us on Twitter @gracenicolette and @philxbuchanan. You can also send us a note with any suggestions or comments at [gdrpodcast@cep.org](mailto:gdrpodcast@cep.org).

**Phil:** As always, I want to thank our sponsors, the Walton Family Foundation, and the National Philanthropic Trust. If you like the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. It really helps.

**Grace:** Thanks again to Stephanie Hull for joining us today.

*Giving Done Right* as a production of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. It's hosted by me, Grace Nicolette, and Phil Buchanan. It's produced by Sarah Martin. With mixing and engineering by Kevin O'Connell and additional editing by Isabel Hibbard. Our theme song is from Blue Dot Sessions and original podcast artwork is by Jay Kustka. A special thanks to our colleagues, Molly Heidemann, Sae Darling, Naomi Rafal for their research, writing, and logistical support.