

## MoS Rapid Response Transcript – Charles Best

[Click here to listen to the full Masters of Scale Rapid Response episode.](#)

**CHARLES BEST:** So we started DonorsChoose in 2000. In 2001, September 11 happens.

Coronavirus threatens to widen educational inequity in America, to deepen that fissure in our country. And yet at the same time, those kids' teachers know exactly what those students need to keep learning from home.

When people are feeling insecure and anxious, sometimes that can actually generate more empathy for others who are in even more dire circumstances. And in times of crisis and anxiety and insecurity, sometimes people can actually be more altruistic.

That sense of people out there who you've never met rooting for you and reaching through the web to help you in physical ways? That's, I think, more powerful than the donation itself.

### [THEME MUSIC]

**REID HOFFMAN:** Hi Listeners, it's Reid. We're continuing our Special Coverage and today, I'm talking to [Charles Best](#), founder and CEO of DonorsChoose. That's the crowdfunding platform that serves K through 12 teachers in the U.S. Charles recently passed the milestone of a billion dollars raised, and we'll have a full episode with him later this Spring. But today, I want to share what Charles is learning right now.

As the pandemic hit – and schools were ordered to close – the teachers on Charles' platform faced a completely new set of urgent needs that he's pivoting to meet. No matter what your job is I think you'll find a lot to relate to and take from the conversation.

**HOFFMAN:** Charles, it's great to see you remotely since we're all in...

**BEST:** That's right.

**HOFFMAN:** Pandemic land. Thank you so much for arranging all of the extra details.

**BEST:** Thank you so much, Reid. I'm just thrilled to be here.

**HOFFMAN:** I was really looking forward to doing this in person. This is obviously the next best thing, but it's also appropriate for the times. Let's start a little bit with what was the moment where you got the idea for DonorsChoose?

**BEST:** I got the idea for DonorsChoose during my first year of teaching at a public high school in the Bronx, called Wings Academy. I was a history teacher and an English teacher. And during my first year, my colleagues and I were spending a lot of our own money on school supplies. We'd buy copy paper, pencils, poster board, everything we needed to equip our classrooms.

But then in the teacher's lunch room, I would find us talking all the time about even more stuff we wanted for our students that we could not continue to go into our own pockets for. So we were talking about novels that we wanted them to read. I wanted my kids to read *Little House on the Prairie* cause I'd read it when I was a kid and I loved that book. My colleague wanted to take her students on a field trip to the Museum of Modern Art. The art teacher wanted to do a wall to wall quilt with her students and she needed fabric and thread and sewing needles for that.

And while we were talking in the teacher's lunchroom about these projects and these other things we wanted our students to have, it just occurred to me that there were people out there who would help teachers like us if they could see exactly where their money was going. And this is years and years before crowdfunding was a word or a thing, but it just kind of made sense.

**HOFFMAN:** So it starts taking off in the Bronx. You've got a kind of a local community. When did it start kind of coming to you, those like, "Well, no, actually in fact this is the entire country – and ultimately probably the world – but this is certainly the country. This isn't just a New York project."? How did that realization, that idea, that "Okay, now this is going to be a whole lot more work to do this." How did that enter into your mind?

**BEST:** So we started DonorsChoose in 2000. In 2001, September 11 happens and teachers at the public schools beside Ground Zero start posting projects on our site to recover from the attacks on the World Trade Center. There was a math teacher whose students' calculators were sealed at the disaster site. Her classroom had been relocated to a basement and she was requesting new calculators. There was a high school art teacher in the Bronx who wanted to bring in an artist who had immigrated from Afghanistan so students could meet someone from that country.

There was a first grade teacher whose students had been saved by a particular group of firemen and her kids wanted to thank the fireman who had saved them by doing a musical performance in front of their fire ladder company for which they needed musical instruments. So here were all these projects focused on 9/11 recovery and I thought that might be the moment when at least local media would pay attention to this experiment in democratized philanthropy – because at the time people were yearning to participate in the 9/11 recovery effort. Red Cross had almost too many blood donations to put to good use, and here was this really vivid direct way for people to help.

**HOFFMAN:** So 9/11 obviously has certain emotional resonance to what's going on today. You know, we obviously have this kind of uneven response to the pandemic. We have some people going, "Look, this is really serious and we should really try to save old people, respiratory lives" and stay at home and understand the exponential curves. There's other people going, "Hey, we should pack the churches, you know, by Easter." What are some of your reflections when you think about this in a Charles way and a DonorsChoose way about what are good reflections for this moment?

**BEST:** Gosh, well on the education front personally, our 10- and 12-year-old are just outside this room and they have each a Chromebook and a public charter school that's teaching them through distance learning. And there are lots of books in the house and art supplies and Lego's and they're going to be okay, as much as you know, it might be a little bit of extra work for my wife and I.

But then I think that when kids, especially kids in low income communities, cannot go to school, their home circumstances – the resources available in their homes – are going to define their education. And that means that coronavirus threatens to widen educational inequity in America, to deepen that fissure in our country. And yet at the same time, those kids' teachers know exactly what those students need to keep learning from home.

They know which of their students are experiencing homelessness and need hygiene items or groceries to be able to focus on their schoolwork. They know which of their kindergartners need crayons and construction paper and Magnatiles. They know which of their students need great books to read.

And so what we have been doing as business and government agencies rushed to equip health workers and as food banks ramp up to feed the hungry, we've been in a mad dash to develop a mechanism for public school teachers and high poverty communities to send their students personalized education care packages containing the stuff their kids need to keep learning from home – and shipping those directly to students' homes. So that's what we've been on a rush to build.

And it actually represents a pivot from our model. Our model takes several weeks for a teacher's project to get crowdfunded and when that project is crowdfunded, we only ship materials to a verified school address. So neither of those things are gonna work in this situation. What we need is for teachers to be able to identify just the resources their kids need to keep learning from home, to instantly verify that those resources are appropriate and on mission, to instantaneously fund those resources, and to let teachers ship those resources directly to their students' homes. All of that is not something that our system has been capable of doing.

So for the last three weeks we've been working around the clock to develop what you could think of as an education-only gift card that a public school teacher at a high

poverty school can spend on all manner of books but not on romance novels or religious texts; that they can spend on groceries but not candy; that they can spend on hygiene items but not beauty products. And then directly input their students addresses as shipping destinations with everything happening instantaneously. And as of yesterday afternoon, it's operational.

**HOFFMAN:** That's very cool. So have people started taking the donations and processing the donations into that already?

**BEST:** Yes, yes. Bill and Melinda Gates just made a major grant to match people's donations. And yeah, we're off to the races.

**HOFFMAN:** And what do you think are the other things that people should think about? It's great that DonorsChoose is living up to its spirit, which is, you know, it takes a network, it takes a village. We know that people are out there, have a heart, want to contribute, and actually can leverage this very motivated group of teachers to go enable that and go directly to children. So that's very classic DonorsChoose, classic pivot. It's awesome.

Are there any other kind of reflections that you'd share as to how people should try to pull together in a face of a crisis like this? Cause this is definitely unique in my lifetime as the kind of depth of crisis, because you've got not just the impact on the impoverished, but like half the jobs are in SMBs and SMBs are broadly, you know, in many areas shut down. What are some other kind of reflections on how we should bring our village to bear on this crisis, if any?

**BEST:** Yeah. Well I remember in the '07/'08 recession we predicted that people would not be able to give to nonprofit organizations. What we actually saw was a precipitous drop in average donation size and a major increase in people giving. Because when people are feeling insecure and anxious, sometimes that can actually generate more empathy for others who are in even more dire circumstances. And in times of crisis and anxiety and insecurity, sometimes people can actually be more altruistic, maybe because they think it could be them six months down the line needing help. So that's one thing.

I think another is just that DonorsChoose is kind of built on the fact that giving to a particular classroom and forging a relationship, not just consummating a donation, but feeling like you got to know a group of people is more powerful than the physical goods themselves that are delivered.

I can't tell you the number of times teachers will write us and say, "The classroom library that you just delivered, that's helpful. But what's most meaningful was that I as a teacher feel like there are people out there rooting for me, and my students are writing these letters saying 'I can't believe a stranger cares enough about my education that they personally chose my classroom's project to bring to life.'" And that sense of people out

there who you've never met rooting for you and reaching through the web to help you in physical ways? That's I think more powerful than the donation itself or the materials being delivered.

**HOFFMAN:** Cause it's the spirit and the intent that can carry a lifetime.

**BEST:** That's right.

**HOFFMAN:** One of the things you also brought up is talk a little bit about how you think about citizen philanthropists. What light should we shine on this for the rest of the world?

**BEST:** To us, citizen philanthropy means letting someone who only has \$5 to spare experience the full joy of giving. And that means searching for a project that speaks to their personal values and their background, and then seeing exactly where their \$5 is going and how it's spent. And then hearing back from the people they chose to help in a really vivid way. If we can do all that for someone giving \$5, then we can extend the experience that was only available to millionaire benefactors to everybody and expand the pie of charitable giving in America. So that's what citizen philanthropy is for us.

**HOFFMAN:** And is there any particular moment of citizen philanthropy that you think is a great thing to share?

**BEST:** So once upon a time there was a writer from *Fortune* magazine doing a story on Kiva and DonorsChoose as the two websites that *Fortune* thought were going to democratize philanthropy. And the writer, when we were done talking, he said he was decently compelled by our site, but his true passion was saving the salmon in the Pacific Northwest – which was his nice way of saying, “I don't think I'm going to be personally giving on your site, as much as I liked the story.” But before he left the room, I said, “Wait, hold up. Let's just see if there are any projects on DonorsChoose focused on salmon in the Northwest.” And there were three.

The second result was from a teacher at an Oregon public high school, teaching at a school where there was a nearby river where he had built a salmon hatchery with his students, and his students needed hip waders to be able to maintain and build out the hatchery. The top result was from a teacher on an island off Alaska, teaching in a one room schoolhouse. She wrote in her project essay that she was 45 minutes away from the nearest store by airplane. All of her students are native Alaskans. They had recorded their parents' folk tales about salmon, wanting to share that work and their research with the outside world, for which they needed a printer and a scanner. And so here was this guy with a passion for salmon in the Northwest and three projects to choose from.

**HOFFMAN:** So let's shift to how you leverage social networks and how you think social networks are part of the way in which a network is built around these schools, around these

teachers, around these children, and around their communities. So say a little bit about how you think about it, and then what's the way you bake that into how DonorsChoose operates.

**BEST:** That's how we want to engage social networks. And we also want to engage people around particular schools and teachers that they've developed a warmth toward, even if they don't know a given teacher or even if they've never gone to a particular school. That points to one of the major differences between DonorsChoose and all the crowdfunding platforms that launched in the years since.

Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of crowdfunding platforms are great ways to hit up the people you know, digital tools to tap all your friends on Facebook – and if you're lucky, your second degree friends on Facebook – and ask them to give. On DonorsChoose, only 25% of the dollars given to classroom projects come from teachers sharing with their networks and tapping their friends and family for support. 75% of the dollars given on our site come from you searching for projects and supporting a teacher and students whom you've never met before.

That has made DonorsChoose the magnet for teachers in low income communities and in rural communities, because our site is the one place where you don't have to have friends with disposable income. You don't have to have students' parents with money to bring a classroom dream to life. And so it's about building this community of people who love to support classrooms that they've never set foot in, based on a shared passion, and building that community rather than being a fundraising utility to hit up the people you know.

**HOFFMAN:** Yup. No. And actually crossing that bridge is so critical. Have you guys been evolving your kind of remote work and what kinds of things, and are there any kind of DonorsChoose moments or ideas within the remote work category?

**BEST:** One anecdote I'll share that hopefully will give some people heart is that we had our first all-remote all-hands meeting just a couple of days ago, and it went beautifully. I think it compared favorably to an in-person all-hands meeting in the pacing and how succinct people were, and how sensitive everybody was to those who are remote.

Usually there's an all-hands meeting and then there are the poor souls who are dialing in remotely, and because they represent 20% of the audience, people don't really optimize for their experience. But in an all-remote all-hands, we are all in the same boat. And I think we had the best all-hands meeting in our 20-year history when we had to go all remote because of coronavirus.

**HOFFMAN:** The fact that it's very possible to, people will have a lot of discoveries about on the remote work side.

All right Charles. It's great to see you. I look forward to talking, again. You know, whenever we can.

**BEST:** Thank you. And truly this is just such an honor to be on this podcast.