

DR MARY ARCHER

Dr Mary Archer is the chairman of Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and the president of the National Energy Foundation, which promotes energy efficiency and renewable energy. Here, she talks to Coutts about her own experiences in the world of philanthropy.

What are your motivations for getting involved in philanthropy and which causes do you feel most passionate about?

My personal motivations originate from my childhood when I was taught that those who are fortunate have a duty to support those who are less fortunate, and that much is required of those to whom much is given. In my school days, I remember, for example, going out to help the elderly in the local community, so we were always schooled in the thought of giving something back.

It therefore became natural and, as my life has progressed, I have always felt a strong duty to give something back. I have been very fortunate and am in a privileged position where I am able to act as a philanthropist and to influence my family's philanthropy.

I have a personal interest in a miscellaneous collection of causes. I feel very strongly about the environment and sustainability and for ten years I was the chairman of the National Energy Foundation.

Another passion of mine is church music. I have been the president of the Guild of Church Musicians since 1989. We have such a wonderful heritage of church music and liturgy in this country so I'm a big supporter of the training to high standards of organists and choir masters up and down the country.

Another current passion is the 2020 Vision, a project aiming to create a world-class academic medical centre in Cambridge associated with Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Trust.

How do you balance heart and mind in choosing charities to support?

I think it will always primarily come down to decisions of the heart, but the mind definitely comes into it. You have to think about whether the charity is efficiently run, whether the money is going where it should, whether they have got sensible plans in place for the future and whether the annual report is giving you confidence regarding governance, etc.

In this respect, you can treat a charitable donation like a business investment, and you should seek a return, not financial, but in terms of the extra good that your donation has enabled. You need to look at whether your chosen charity is going to provide that kind of return.

But I think you also have to engage your heart. Otherwise, why would you give?

How do you involve your children in philanthropy? How did you initiate conversation on this topic with them?

We have a Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) account, which my husband regularly pays into, but the rest of the family can then make suggestions or bids in terms of how that money is spent.

Both my children have their own charitable interests. My elder son is interested in the plight of people, while my younger son is more interested in the subject of sustainability and particularly the plight of orang-utans.

While I didn't do or say anything explicit about philanthropy to my children while they were growing up, I hope they imbibed something from a household where both parents have always been involved in philanthropic activities. We have regular family business meetings (and we should have more) where philanthropy forms part of the agenda.

How do you think that the current downturn will affect charitable giving?

Inevitably, the banks are going to be reducing their charitable giving and their sponsorship programmes will also reduce. The residual value of estates is also going to diminish because of the downturn in property prices and quite a lot of charities get a sizeable proportion of their income from legacies, of which estates can form a part.

What do you find most rewarding about your involvement in philanthropy?

The things I support are the things I believe in. What I find most rewarding is, firstly, the sense that one is on the side of good and hopefully adding to the good that these organisations do. I also enjoy hearing about what has happened in the organisations I support via newsletters or the personal accounts of the people involved.

Is giving time as important as giving money? Why?

It's more important in some cases. Volunteers can be vital to an organisation. For example, our staff members at the hospital where I work donate their own time to helping our elderly patients at mealtimes. That time is much more important than giving money – time is a very precious commodity.

What advice would you give others looking to get involved in philanthropy?

I think you first have to ask yourself what your passions are and what you want to see more or less of in the world, whether that's on a global or local scale. Then you have to seek out the organisation or organisations that can further those ends.

Otherwise, it's not exactly advice, but the encouragement I would give is that it will give you a warm glow if you do it right. It sounds self-centred, but you will feel better about yourself.