Just When They Thought It Was Safe To Breathe, Executives Had To Adjust -- Again

By Paul Clorey

The pandemic was mostly done during late 2022 and early 2023. Supply chains were getting back to normal. Staff members were starting to go back to the office at least a couple of days a week.

It was about that time that the pandemic’s trap door opened. Some executives might have thought the mailroom staff hadn’t come back given the lack of checks in the mail. Fewer people were getting sick, but for some reason they could no longer find their checkbooks and credit cards to donate.

The war in Ukraine and hunger due to drought had executives at international relief organizations wondering how to do even the bare minimum but, somehow, they did better than that. Social justice remains a priority because for some reason Americans can’t find common ground on everything from basic rights to agreeing that we can disagree and still work together.

The past 12 months challenged the nonprofit sector’s most innovative minds. It has also been a year of rapid turnover in the sector’s suites.

Just as the sector has been influenced by events, so has this 26th edition of The NonProfit Times’ Power & Influence Top 50. Roughly one-third (30%) of those honored have not previously been inducted into the club. Women outnumber men on the list for the second time, 30 to 20. It also is arguably the most diverse list of honorees.

The honorees have distinguished themselves as initiators, innovators and leaders who can redirect and rebuild vital nonprofits and their operations. An important criterion of the list is that the honoree must be a working day-in, day-out executive.

The 2023 honorees were selected from a group of roughly 300 nominated top executives. A committee of The NPT editorial staff, contributors and a few leaders plugged into executive movement were involved in the selection process. This is not a lifetime achievement award. The executives must have had an impact during the previous 12 months.

The fine china will be rolled out for honorees and their guests as they are feted in Washington, D.C., next month during the annual NPT Power & Influence Top 50 Gala at The National Press Club. The event is sponsored by Data Axle, DMC Executive Search, Grant Thornton, JMT Consulting, Mitch-Stuart, and Moore.

One of the honorees will receive the NPT Influencer of the Year award. Turn the page and discover why these leaders are exceptional.
Leaders at foundations with assets exceeding $1 billion often lose touch level of intimacy in being at the street level. That’s how $238.2 million...
because to this day many are not in the room let alone at the table. She is a team as they make philanthropic investments worldwide, even if it sometimes shared. That’s the city manager in her. Data is what informs her and the importance of self-sufficiency.” From the foundation’s grant-making to the $45 million Democracy Frontlines, she is pushing philanthropy with $20 million from MacKenzie Scott to drive investments to communities known to be unduly impacted by food insecurity. 

You can’t ignore one number – 6.6 billion meals facilitated.

Jesús Gerena
Chief Executive Officer
UpTogether
Oakland, California

Gerena is a visionary leader who knows that good things happen when you give people resources and voice. He empowers people in historically undervalued communities. His words: “We do not need to help people more, we need to hinder them less. Poverty is not caused by personal failures, It’s rooted in system choice.”

Crystal Hayling
Executive Director
Libra Foundation
San Francisco, California

Hayling doesn’t reminisce about the good old days of American life because to this day many are not in the room let alone at the table. She is changing philanthropic balance and thinking regarding the “illusion of the importance of self-sufficiency.” From the foundation’s grant-making to the $45 million Democracy Frontlines, she is pushing philanthropy past “shoved goals” that keep the status quo.

Eileen R. Heisman
President & CEO
National Philanthropic Trust
Jenkintown, Pennsylvania

You’re in Cenista and buy a Kirkland product. It was made by a well-known national brand and relabeled. Heisman is democratizing donor-advised funds in the same way via private label branding. Unlike the commercial DAFs, Heisman’s first thought is of the sector, not the float on deposits, because she is a fundraiser at heart and sought after because she can straddle both worlds.

Melanie L. Herman
Executive Director
Nonprofit Risk Management Center
Leesburg, Virginia

Herman remains the go-to nonprofit executive when it comes to risk management within the tax-exempt space. She has authored more than a dozen books and resource guides on various risk management topics. While much of her consulting work is confidential, she has been the unflappable architect for some of the sector’s most important direction and implementation of risk mitigation.

Kenneth Hodder
National Commissioner
Salvation Army
Alexandria, Virginia

The Salvation Army is a lot more than buckets and bells for Hodder. The leadership of this Harvard-trained lawyer is steering many of the sector’s commissions and boards. His “The Way Out” initiative is pushing to double the Salvation Army’s homelessness response during a five-year period. Its 7,400 centers make him leader of the nation’s largest social service operation.

Daniel H. Gillison, Jr.
Chief Executive Officer
National Alliance on Mental Illness
Allentown, Virginia

Mental illness is finally getting the attention it deserves in the national discussion. Gillison launched a SMS/text message support option for NAMI HelpLine that is connecting with healthcare and community organizations. He’s helping to reimagine game night via a free virtual card game designed by young people, for young people to prompt conversations about life, relationships, and mental health.

Jo Ann Jenkins
Chief Executive Officer
AARP
Washington, D.C.

Jenkins must not sleep. She has changed Americans’ view of age, prepared people older than 50 for the next productive phase of life and scores the “you know what” out of just about every elected official with a brain with her more than 60,000 volunteers. Her book is “Disrupt Aging,” but she disrupts, positively, everything she touches.

Rebecca Masisak
Chief Executive Officer
TechSoup
San Francisco, California

Masisak is transforming the leading tech e-commerce social enterprise product donation platform into worldwide data-as-a-resource for civil society access. She has established partners in 250 countries. Masisak broke the mold when TechSoup got the Securities and Exchange Commission to approve a direct public offering for a nonprofit that raised $11.3 million.
Suzanne McCormick  
President & CEO  
YMCA of the USA  
Chicago, Illinois  
McCormick’s had a very active couple of years, bringing more youth voices into advocacy and amping the volume of those voices for participation in board decisions and leadership, a model for other nonprofits, youth-oriented or not. Her focus on mental health and her partnerships with others (the White House, Camp Counselors USA, Habitat for Humanity) builds bridges.

Mary A. Pittman, DrPH  
President & CEO  
Public Health Institute  
Oakland, California  
Pittman is showcasing how diverse stakeholders can work together and use data for healthier communities. Pittman built a workforce during COVID which would have been impossible had she not been an influencing voice in public health. Her ideas are shared throughout a network of 2,400 grassroots and community-based organizations in 29 states.

Shannon McCracken, CAE  
Chief Executive Officer  
The Nonprofit Alliance  
Washington, D.C.  
It is astonishing how much and how quickly one person can impact multiple sides of the nonprofit sector. McCracken has expanded an association for direct response fundraising to almost every aspect of running a nonprofit, especially regulation and professional education. She’s made room under the tent to strengthen all associations and charities. Her impact is felt nationwide.

Gail McGovern  
President & CEO  
American Red Cross  
Washington, D.C.  
If the sector was a rock band McGovern would be the quiet Beatle whose driving beat moved everything forward. By quiet, there’s no longer controversy surrounding one of the nation’s most important nonprofits. Her mantra of try new things and if it doesn’t work, try something else has been the foundation to resolving issues that long plagued ARC. She is an inclusive problem solver.

Alison Moore  
Chief Executive Officer  
Comic Relief US  
New York, New York  
Moore is so much more than a celebrity connector. She is a visionary on workforce issues who juggles entertainment, media and international management. The Kids Relief online gaming initiative, which supports young people’s ability to drive change, is simply genius with many nonprofit managers just now figuring out the importance of gaming.

Michelle Nunn  
President & CEO  
CARE USA  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Under Nunn’s leadership, CARE directly reached 174 million people in 111 countries. She was among the first executives to embrace digital currencies and turned the donations into crypto-based vouchers for women and groups in Africa and Latin America. She’s proving cryptocurrencies are a viable and effective option to deliver aid with CARE now accepting 70 digital currencies.

Una Osili, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean for Research and International Programs  
Lilly Family School of Philanthropy  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
Just about everyone’s favorite philanthropy economist, Doll leads up some of the most important sector-wide research. Her explorations are designed to be inclusive and accessible by all who are interested. She founded Giving USA for Life, a digital platform that provides new data tools for philanthropy and social impact.

Eboo Patel  
Founder & President  
Interfaith America  
Chicago, Illinois  
Patel was tying diversity to service long before it became a national mantra. He has worked with every entity imaginable to make faith a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division. Once a self-described “hair-on-fire activist,” he is pulling together faith-based and youth nonprofits to evolve to understanding others, as he personally did.

Susanna Pollack  
President  
Games For Change  
New York, New York  
Gaming is now integral to influencing, advocacy and fundraising. There is no doubt that Pollack isn’t “camping” and doesn’t have a “cool down” period. GFC has become an important influencer in the sector. It is a “sandbox” in its own right and Pollack is “pwned” of this realm. (Sorry, you’ll have to look them all up.)

Jonathan Reckford  
Chief Executive Officer  
Habitat For Humanity International  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Reckford is more than the truth-teller at HFHI. He’s led the field to understand the economic realities of community, bringing together people from every sector. Reckford lives his words that service is the antidote to polarization, and that you don’t have to agree with people to work or engage with them. He’s chair of Leadership 18 and an active participant at global economic forums.

Marietta Rodriguez  
President & CEO  
NeighborWorks America  
Washington, D.C.  
Rodriguez is a walking ad for leveraging public-private partnerships, leading a network of 245 organizations and nonprofit partners helping low-income families with home ownership, foreclosure prevention and community building. Her knowledge of the program is firsthand. The NeighborWorks Center for Foreclosure Solutions is a model that can be used by others for their challenges.

Douglas Rutzen  
President & CEO  
International Center for Not-for-Profit Law  
Washington, D.C.  
There is no international civil society crisis that Rutzen hasn’t had a hand in trying to quell or at least reducing the beat. He is often called on to work behind the scenes in the response to many attacks on democracy and civil society, whether the backdrop is from the White House or from leaders abroad. He’s a vital connector to other nonprofit leaders working in desperate parts of the world.

MacKenzie Scott  
Philanthropist & Author  
Seattle, Washington  
It’s $15 billion and counting – all unrestricted, trust-based giving. Sector leaders have encouraged trust-based giving. Scott leaders have encouraged trust-based giving. The NeighborWorks Center for Foreclosure Solutions is a model that can be used by others for their challenges.

Barron Segar  
President & CEO  
World Food Program USA  
Washington, D.C.  
Check your wallet after you meet with Segar. It will be empty. He is one of the most effective fundraisers in his effort to prevent a couple million people from starving to death. The organization has had explosive growth on his watch and his depth of knowledge on the international politics of hunger will save lives and should spur more people into action.
Stahl spends his days convincing funders that the sector needs to be talent-investing. It is about the “human health” of an organization. He is not coming to this lately. It has been his focus for years. Academic institutions are finally catching up to what he has been preaching. His podcast on the inner working of organizations is an illuminating experience.

Suzman was greeted with a pandemic when taking over the top job and pivoted the organization to expand its already strong world health policies to focus on COVID-19. Billions of dollars were deployed for vaccine development and distribution to less resourced areas of the world. More importantly, he has instilled calm at a foundation known to be less than disciplined.

Timms received the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) from King Charles III, citing his service to the arts and philanthropy. GivingTuesday was his idea while leading 92Y. He’s an award-winning author on philanthropy and is now turning the staid Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts into a street party, connecting and influencing New York City’s cultural community.

Twersky was already the person behind many shifts in philanthropy through her push for funders and nonprofits to hear from those they seek to help. Now she is possibly the biggest philanthropic force in Georgia, also serving on the leadership team of the Blank portfolio of socially-minded enterprises, including the Atlanta Falcons, Atlanta United, PGA TOUR Superstore, and Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Vrana was an early booster of the unsexy sector infrastructure, pushing innovation and data use.

Whether it’s nodding your head in approval or side to side in disbelief, there is no arguing that Walker is unconventional in what the foundations chooses to fund. His varied professional background in law, finance and philanthropy, coupled with having grown up in poverty, push the foundation’s agenda to make $1 billion bets on human capacity and the potential of people.

This could get interesting in a hurry. Williams has been issuing statements on the horrific gun violence and just might have the community-by-community muscle to make a difference. She is evolving herself an international presence while keeping a focus on local issues. Williams understands that local impact emits energy waves of renovation.

Williams isn’t just a world class fundraiser. She is the embodiment of nonprofit leadership for the next decade. Williams is a sought-after thought leader on fundraising, DEI, the state of the sector, interpreting research and organizing to develop consensus. She lends her strategic thinking to numerous committees and boards throughout the sector.