

Tough Conversations:

When a Donor Passes Away

*What to Say to Honor a Donor's Life and
Support Their Loved Ones*



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What to Say to Honor a Donor's Life and Support Their Loved Ones.

When a donor dies, it's not just a line in a database. It's a moment to pause, acknowledge the loss, and offer something real to the loved ones left behind. This guide helps you write a note or letter that creates a meaningful moment in the midst of sorrow.

You don't have to be poetic. You just have to be present.

1. The Role You Play

You may not be a close friend or family member, but you *are* someone who saw and valued the donor's impact. That matters.

The spouse, family, or loved one may not expect to hear from you. This makes your note even more powerful.

If the donor had children, consider how your message might also bring comfort or meaning to them. A short memory or a story of impact can help them see the lasting good their parent brought into the world. It also reminds them they're part of that legacy.

2. Simple Structure to Follow

Use this 3-part structure for your note:

1. Acknowledge the loss directly and by name.
2. Share what the donor meant to your work or a specific memory.
3. Close with warmth and human presence.

"I was heartbroken to hear about Harold's passing. His generosity changed lives. And we felt his kindness every time we spoke. Thinking of you and sending our warmest care."

"Patricia helped bring so much good into the world through her giving. But even more than that, we just loved her spirit. She will be deeply missed."

3. Things You Can Say (*Copy-and-paste options*)

Openers:

- "I was so sorry to hear about [Name]'s passing."
- "All of us here were heartbroken to learn of [Name]'s death."
- "We just wanted to reach out with love and sympathy."

Middle lines:

- "[Name] made so much possible through their support."
- "Every time we tell the story of [impact], we'll be thinking of them."
- "Their legacy lives on in the people they helped."
- "[Name] wasn't just a donor to us. They were someone we genuinely enjoyed knowing."

Closers:

- "Sending our deepest sympathy."
- "You're in our thoughts during this hard time."
- "From all of us here, thank you for sharing [Name] with us."

4. Use a Story to Make the Moment Personal

Storytelling isn't just for fundraising appeals. A short, sincere story can create a sense of meaning and connection for grieving loved ones... including their children.

Tell a quick story about:

- A specific moment or quote from the donor
- Something their giving made possible
- How they showed up in small but memorable ways

"Last year, [Name] stopped by just to drop off hand warmers for our volunteers. It was such a small gesture, but so *them* — thoughtful, kind, and looking out for others."

"There's a student named Suzy who got to stay in school because of [Name]'s support. That story became one of our team's favorites. We still tell it."

"Your parent's support helped build something that's still doing good today—and will for a long time to come."

You can also use these stories in a one-on-one call or meeting with the surviving spouse or family. It doesn't have to be long, just meaningful.

5. Optional But Powerful: Offer a Small Gesture

You don't need a big tribute to make someone feel seen. Here are simple gestures that can create a meaningful moment:

- Make a donation in the donor's name and tell the family
 - Include a photo of the donor at an event (if appropriate)
 - Share a specific moment or quote you remember from them
 - Send a card a month later or on the one-year anniversary
 - Write the loved one into the ongoing story: "We want you to know that [Name]'s impact is still part of what we do every day."
 - If appropriate, offer something to the donor's children: a copy of a story their parent made possible, a program from an event, or even a note acknowledging their parent's legacy
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6. What *Not* to Do

- Don't focus on the organization's loss. Center your focus on the donor and their family.
 - Don't default to generic phrases like "they're in a better place."
 - Don't over-explain your connection. You don't need to justify your note.
 - Don't delay too long. A timely note matters.
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Final Words to Remember

You don't have to say something profound. You just have to say *something*. And when you do, you remind the family that their loved one mattered.

That's not just good stewardship. It's human.

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