Little proof of Trump’s big giving

Developer often boasts of philanthropy, but probe finds it’s largely a facade

**by David A. Fahrenthold**

In the fall of 1996, a charity called the Association to Benefit Children held a ribbon-cutting in Manhattan for a new nursery school serving children with AIDS. The boldface names took seats up front.

There was then-Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani (R) and former mayor David Dinkins (D). TV stars Frank and Kathie Lee Gifford, who were major donors. And there was a seat saved for Steven Fisher, a developer who had given generously to build the nursery.

Then, all of a sudden, there was Donald Trump.

“Nobody knew he was coming,” said Abigail Disney, another donor sitting on the dais. “There’s this kind of ruckus at the door, and I don’t know what was going on, and in comes Donald Trump. [He] just gets up on the podium and sits down.”

Trump was not a major donor. He was not a donor, period. He’d never given a dollar to the nursery or the Association to Benefit Children, according to Gretchen Buchenholz, the charity’s executive director then and now.

But now he was sitting in Fisher’s seat, next to Giuliani.

“Frank Gifford turned to me and said, ‘Why is he here?’” Buchenholz recalled recently. By then, the ceremony had begun. There was nothing to do.

“Just sing past it,” she recalled Gifford telling her.

So they warbled into the first song on the program, “This Little Light of Mine,” alongside Trump and a chorus of children — with a photographer snapping photos, and Trump looking for all the world like an honored donor to the cause.

Afterward, Disney and Buchenholz recalled, Trump left without offering an explanation. Or a donation. Fisher was stuck in the audience. The charity spent months trying to repair its relationship with him.

“I mean, what’s wrong with you, man?” Disney recalled thinking of Trump, when it was over.

For as long as he has been rich and famous, Donald Trump has also wanted people to believe he is generous. He spent years constructing an image as a philanthropist by appearing at charity events
For Trump, deeds often don’t match his words

and by making very public — even nationally televised — promises to give his own money away.

It was, in large part, a facade. A months-long investigation by The Washington Post has not been able to verify many of Trump’s boasts about his philanthropy.

Instead, throughout his life in the spotlight, whether as a businessman, television star or presidential candidate, The Post found that Trump had sought credit for charity he had not given — or had claimed other people’s giving as his own.

It is impossible to know for certain what Trump has given to charity, because he has declined to release his tax returns. In all, The Post was able to identify $7.8 million in charitable giving from Trump’s own pocket since the early 1980s.

In public appearances, Trump often made it appear that he gave far more.

Trump promised to give away the proceeds of Trump University. He promised to donate the salary he earned from “The Apprentice.” He promised to give personal donations to the charities chosen by contestants on “Celebrity Apprentice.” He promised to donate $250,000 to a charity helping Israeli soldiers and veterans.

Together, those pledges would have increased Trump’s lifetime giving by millions of dollars. But The Post has been unable to verify that he followed through on any of them.

Instead, The Post found that his personal giving has almost disappeared entirely in recent years. After calling 420-plus charities with some connection to Trump, The Post found only one personal gift from Trump between 2008 and the spring of this year. That was a gift to the Police Athletic League of New York City, in 2009. It was worth less than $10,000.

The charity that Trump has given the most money to over his lifetime appears to be his own: the Donald J. Trump Foundation.

But that charity, too, was not what it seemed.

The Trump Foundation appeared outwardly to be a typical, if small, philanthropic foundation — set up by a rich man to give his riches away.

In reality, it has been funded largely by other people. Tax records show the Trump Foundation has received $5.5 million from Trump over its life, and nothing since 2008. It received $9.3 million from other people.

Another unusual feature: One of the foundation’s most consistent causes was Trump himself.

New findings, for instance, show that
the Trump Foundation’s largest-ever gift — $264,631 — was used to renovate a fountain outside the windows of Trump’s Plaza Hotel.

Its smallest-ever gift, for $7, was paid to the Boy Scouts in 1989, at a time when it cost $7 to register a new Scout. Trump’s oldest son was 11 at the time. Trump did not respond to a question about whether the money was paid to register him.

At other times, Trump used his foundation’s funds to settle legal disputes.
involving Trump’s for-profit companies and to buy two large portraits of himself, including one that wound up hanging on the wall of the sports bar at a Trump-owned golf resort. Those purchases raised questions about whether Trump had violated laws against “self-dealing” by charity leaders.

In advance of this article, The Post sent more than 70 questions to the Trump campaign.

Those questions covered the individual anecdotes and statistics contained in this article, including the tale about Trump crashing the ribbon-cutting in 1996, as well as broader questions about Trump’s life as a philanthropist.

Exactly when, before this spring, did Trump last give his own money to charity?

What did Trump consider his greatest act of charity in recent years?

Trump’s campaign did not respond until Saturday afternoon, after this article was published online; it sent a written statement saying that Trump “has personally donated tens of millions of dollars … to charitable causes.”

Trump officials did not respond when asked to provide evidence of the tens of millions of dollars in gifts.

The result of The Post’s examination of Trump’s charity is a portrait of the GOP nominee, revealed in the negative space between what he was willing to promise — and what he was willing to give.

“All of this is completely consistent with who Trump is. He’s a man who operates inside a tiny bubble that never extends beyond what he believes is his self-interest,” said Tony Schwartz, Trump’s co-author on his 1987 book “The Art of the Deal.” Schwartz has become a fierce critic of Trump in this election.

“If your worldview is only you — if all you’re seeing is a mirror — then there’s nobody to give money to,” Schwartz said. “Except yourself.”

‘An ardent philanthropist’

In several interviews with The Post this year, Trump has declined to supply details about his giving, saying that if charities knew what Trump had donated they would badger him to give more.
Politics

Searching for evidence of Trump’s personal giving

The Washington Post has contacted more than 400 charities with some ties to the GOP nominee in an effort to find proof of the millions he has said he donated to them. We’ve mostly been unsuccessful.
“I give mostly to a lot of different groups,” Trump said in one interview.

“Can you give us any names?” asked The Post’s Drew Harwell in May.

“No, I don’t want to. No, I don’t want to,” Trump responded. “I’d like to keep it private.”

Of the $7.8 million in personal giving that The Post identified, about 70 percent — $5.5 million — went to the Trump Foundation, which was founded in 1987. All of that giving came before 2009; since then, the foundation’s tax records show no donations at all from Trump to his foundation. Its coffers have been filled by others, including $5 million from pro-wrestling executives Vince and Linda McMahon.

At least $1.1 million of Trump’s giving has come in the last six months.

That includes a gift that first brought Trump’s charity — and the gap between the promises and the substance of his giving — to the center of his presidential campaign.

In January, Trump skipped a GOP primary debate in a feud with Fox News and held a televised fundraiser for veterans. In that broadcast, Trump said he’d personally donated to the cause: “Donald Trump gave $1 million,” he said.

Months later, The Post could find no evidence Trump had done so. Then, Corey Lewandowski — Trump’s campaign manager at the time — called to say the money had been given out. In private. No details. “He’s not going to share that information,” Lewandowski said.

In reality, at that point, Trump had given nothing.

Trump didn’t give away the $1 million until a few days later, as the news media sought to check Lewandowski’s false claim. Trump gave it all to the Marine Corps-Law Enforcement Foundation, which helps families of fallen Marines. Trump bristled at this reporter’s suggestion that he had given the money away only because the media were asking about it.

“You know, you’re a nasty guy. You’re really a nasty guy,” Trump said. “I gave out millions of dollars that I had no obligation to do.”

Later, in August, Trump also gave $100,000 to a church near Baton Rouge. He sent the check after visiting the church during a tour of flood-ravaged areas.

For years, Trump built a reputation as somebody whose charity was as big as his success.

That identity was expressed, for a time, in Trump’s biography on his corporate website. His image had two seemingly equal parts.

“He is the archetypal businessman,” the biography said, “a deal maker without peer and an ardent philanthropist.”

In the books he wrote or co-wrote about himself, Trump frequently praised charitable giving in the abstract — casting it as a moral response to his vast wealth.

“We’ve benefited from the American Dream and we feel the duty to give back to the community,” he wrote of his family in “The America We Deserve” in 2000. “Those who don’t are nothing more than
parasites.”

In the same books, Trump seemed to regard charity differently when he encountered it in his day-to-day life.

In those cases, it sounds like a hassle.

A game he can’t win, and hates playing.

“The people who run charities know that I’ve got wealthy friends and can get them to buy tables,” Trump said in “The Art of the Deal,” explaining why he’d turned down a charity request from New York Yankee Dave Winfield. “I understand the game, and while I don’t like to play it, there is no graceful way out.”

One rare time when Trump describes finding joy in the act of charity comes in 2008’s “Trump: Never Give Up.”

“I can remember a friend who asked me why I had so many charity events at my properties,” Trump wrote. “I said to him, ‘Because I can!’… It’s a great feeling, and it makes all the work that goes into acquiring all those beautiful properties and buildings worth it.”

But that’s not entirely a story about how Trump gives money away.

It’s also a story about how Trump
makes money.
Charities pay him to rent out his clubs and banquet rooms for fundraiser galas. At the Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, they can pay $275,000 or more for a single night. Sometimes, Trump has given donations from the Trump Foundation to the charities that are his customers.

But in some of those cases, he still comes out ahead.

“It cost, I think, 20-some thousand,” said William Hertzler, of the German-American Hall of Fame, who rented space at Trump Tower when the hall inducted Trump in 2012. Trump was the 15th person inducted, the year after magicians Siegfried and Roy. Trump gave a $1,000 donation from the Trump Foundation.

Hertzler said the hall of fame was okay with that. “He came down” to attend the gala, held in the same tower where Trump lives, Hertzler said. “His time is very valuable.”

‘Advancing Trump’s interests’

In his early days as a developer — when he was a New York celebrity but not yet a national one — Trump made some high-profile personal gifts to charity. He gave $1 million to a Manhattan Vietnam Veterans’ memorial in 1983. Then, after taking over the renovation of the city-owned Wollman Rink in Central Park, Trump said he donated some of its proceeds to charities.

But, even then, Trump was looking for ways to have other people support his charitable causes.

“He wanted me to get as much money as I could from the contractors. And I was a good soldier, and so I went out and put the arm round them [saying], ‘I need you to buy a table at the United Cerebral Palsy gala,’” said Barbara Res, a longtime Trump employee who recalled being sent out on job sites in advance of charity galas hosted by Trump’s then-wife Ivana.

Usually, Res said, the contractors paid. “They whined. And I pushed.”


He became a national celebrity — and made his charity a key part of his brand.

“I don’t do it for the money. I’ve got enough, more than I’ll ever need,” Trump wrote on the book’s first page.

So, Trump said in interviews, if he made money off the book in which he wrote he didn’t need money, he would give it to charity.

“To the homeless, to Vietnam veterans, for AIDS, multiple sclerosis,” Trump told the New York Times two years later. “Originally, I figured they’d get a couple of hundred thousand, but because of the success of ‘The Art of the Deal,’ they’ll get four or five million.”

So in 1987, Trump signed the forms to incorporate the Donald J. Trump Foundation. The paperwork warned that he could not use the charity’s money to help political candidates. Nor could he use it for the benefit of “any member, trustee, director or officer” of the charity.

That first year, Trump made himself
He put in $144,050.

Then he used $100 of the foundation’s money to buy a two-person membership to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Trump did not respond to a question about whether the membership was for his own use. If it was, it may have been a violation of the laws against “self-dealing.”

“You’ve got to pay for it yourself; you can’t have your foundation pay for it,” said Lloyd Mayer, a professor teaching tax law at Notre Dame Law School. He said this payment, small as it was, appeared to provide a benefit directly to Trump. In which case Trump — not the charity — should have paid.

In the foundation’s first four years, Trump put in a total of $1.9 million, proceeds from the best-selling book and from the poor-selling “Trump, The Game.”

He was the Trump Foundation’s only donor.

Though that was not for lack of trying.

“If you could ask your accountants to write a check to the ‘Donald J. Trump Foundation,’ I will distribute the money in my name and yours and will let you have a list of the charities which benefitted,” Trump wrote in a letter to boxer Mike Tyson in 1988, according to news reports from the time.

Trump had helped Tyson with business dealings and believed Tyson owed him $2 million. He wanted it to go to the Trump Foundation instead. That doesn’t seem to have happened — tax records show no donations from Tyson.

The largest donation in the history of the Trump Foundation was made in 1989. The Central Park Conservancy wanted to restore the Pulitzer Fountain, a turned-off, crumbling feature next to the famous park. The city wouldn’t pay for it, saying the money was needed elsewhere.

So owners of the 15 buildings around the fountain — who would benefit directly from its restoration — were asked to pay a voluntary “tax.” The tax was $0.50 per square foot.

At the time, Trump owned one of those 15 buildings: the Plaza Hotel. Its front door faced the fountain.

Today, the Plaza is about 1 million square feet.

If it was the same in the 1980s — hotel officials weren’t sure — that would have led to a tax of $500,000 or so.

The conservancy’s records show that Trump’s hotel paid some of the “tax” — between $100,000 and $250,000 — in 1988.

In 1989, the Trump Foundation also paid $264,631 to the Central Park Conservancy. It appeared that Trump’s charity had contributed to an effort that enhanced the view outside Trump’s business.

“It shows you what this [foundation] is all about. Which is basically just about advancing Trump’s interests,” said Brian Galle, a professor of tax law at Georgetown University. The Central Park Conservancy declined to comment.

In 1990, Trump’s businesses started
to go south, plunging him into a period of heavy debt. In 1991, his creditors limited his living expenses to $375,000 a month.

At that time, Trump’s giving to charity collapsed. He gave $0 to the Trump Foundation in 1991. Around the same year, Trump tried again to get somebody else to pay his charitable donations for him.

In late 1990, the all-female band Precious Metal was going to shoot a video for their remake of “Mr. Big Stuff.” Trump made headlines by agreeing to star as the title character, in return for a charitable donation.

“I want to give it to my favorite charity, and it’s just 10 grand,” Leslie Knauer, the lead singer for the band, recalled Trump saying.

They shot the video, Knauer said. Then, a few days later, the band got a call.

“You know, $10,000 really isn’t a Trump kind of donation,” Trump said, according to interviews Knauer gave at the time. He wanted $250,000.

The move backfired. The band re-shot the video with a look-alike. Knauer said they gave Trump nothing.

In that low period of Trump’s finances, his generosity dried up even to those close to him.

For instance, Res — the executive who had spent years leaning on Trump’s contractors to buy tables at his wife’s fundraisers — came to Trump to ask for a favor of her own.

“I got an award from a group called the Professional Women in Construction,” she recalled. There was a gala. There were tables. She’d sold a number to subcontractors she knew.

But, usually, the winning woman’s employer was the big spender, buying multiple tables or paying for high-level sponsorships. That was Trump.

He didn’t.

“He showed up at the door and bought one ticket,” said Lenore Janis, the leader of the Professional Women in Construction at the time. The ticket cost $100.

“And then he said to me, the president of the organization, ‘I have a few things that I want to say. I will need the microphone,’” Janis said.

She said no. But Trump found somebody who said yes. “He got up there and for 15 minutes he blew his own horn,” Janis said, so that anybody watching would think he’d written a big check.

Afterward, Janis said her son photocopied the check and hung it on his wall.

“Oh, my God, a check signed by Mr. Trump!” Janis recalled him saying. “And I said, ‘It should have been, like, $20,000. … Grow up.’ ”

‘The most clueless person’

As the 1990s went on, Trump’s finances slowly climbed out of the red.

And in 1995, he made one of the most famous charitable gestures of his life.

That year Trump gave a donation to
help finance a Manhattan parade honoring veterans on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.

At the time, press reports pegged his gift at $200,000. In recent interviews, one of the organizers said he thought it was higher, closer to $500,000.

“He certainly put his money where his mouth was, and he certainly helped us when we were in pretty bad shape,” said Vince McGowan, who helped organize the event.

Trump, who had obtained five deferments to avoid the Vietnam-era draft, was named a grand marshal, and he marched near the front of the huge column of veterans. He was later honored with an invitation to visit the Pentagon and meet the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Trump describes this gift in his most recent book, called “Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America.”

“I donated a one-million-dollar matching grant,” he wrote.

As the 1990s went on, Trump also increased his giving to the Trump Foundation: $6,500 in 1992, $8,500 in 1993, then $74,432 in 1994, after Trump said he’d sold photos of his wedding to Marla Maples and given the proceeds to his charity.

As it rose again, the Trump Foundation continued to be used to benefit its namesake.

The best illustration of that was the charity to which the foundation gave its two largest gifts of the 1990s. The Trump Foundation gave $50,000 in 1995, and another $50,000 in 1999, to a nonprofit called the National Museum of Catholic Art and History.

Those gifts, not previously reported, seemed like an odd choice for big charitable dollars.

The museum was housed for much of the 1990s in a former headquarters for “Fat Tony” Salerno of the Genovese crime family in East Harlem. It had few visitors and little art. A Village Voice reporter, visiting in 2001, said the collection included a photo of the pope, some nun dolls bought from the Home Shopping Network, and — just off the dining room — “a black Jacuzzi decorated with simmering candles, gold-plated soap dishes, and kitsch angel figurines.”

Trump is not Catholic.

But he and the museum had a mutual friend.

Ed Malloy, who was then the chairman of the museum’s board, was the head of the powerful labor group, the Building and Construction Trades Council. News reports from the time indicate that he was a business ally of Trump’s: Union members worked on Trump buildings, and Malloy helped Trump line up vital financing from a union pension fund.

“Contributing to this museum — you know, it only made sense in the context of relationships,” said Wayne Barrett, the Village Voice reporter, in a recent interview.

The Trump campaign did not respond to requests for comment about these donations.
Malloy died in 2012.

The Catholic museum shut down in 2010.

“I cannot give you a comment. I don’t want to be quoted on anything,” said Christina Cox, the museum’s former director, when The Post reached her by phone.

At times, Trump seemed to make light of others’ expectations about his generosity.

In 1997, for instance, he was “principal for a day” at a public school in an impoverished area of the Bronx. The chess team was holding a bake sale, Hot & Crusty danishes and croissants. They were $5,000 short of what they needed to travel to a tournament.

Trump had brought something to wow them.

“He handed them a fake million-dollar bill,” said David MacEnulty, a teacher and the chess team’s coach.

The team’s parent volunteers were thrilled.

Then disappointment.

Trump then gave them $200 in real money and drove away in a limousine.

Why just $200?

“I have no idea,” MacEnulty said. “He was about the most clueless person I’ve ever seen in that regard.”

The happy ending, he said, was that a woman read about Trump’s gift in the New York Times, called the school and donated the $5,000. “I am ashamed to be the same species as this man,” MacEnulty recalled her saying.

At a nursery school a year earlier, Trump had crashed the ribbon-cutting for the event aimed at helping children with AIDS.

Once he was onstage, Trump played the part of a big donor convincingly. Photos from the event show Trump smiling, right behind Giuliani, as the mayor cut the ribbon. During the “celebratory dance” segment of the program, Trump mugged and did the macarena with Giuliani, Kathie Lee Gifford and a group of children.

“I am just heartsick,” Buchenholz, the executive director, wrote the next day to the donor whose seat Trump had taken. Buchenholz provided a copy of the email.

“I immediately said ‘no,’ but Rudy Giuliani said ‘yes’ and I felt I had to accede to him,” Buchenholz wrote. “I hope you can forgive me.” Buchenholz said that Fisher did remain a donor, despite the snub.

Trump and Giuliani did not respond to questions about the event.

A spokeswoman for Fisher said he did not recall it.

Buchenholz said her group did not receive any donations from Trump until three years later. The charity was holding a gala on a cruise ship. Trump bought tickets and paid with $2,000 from the Trump Foundation.

‘Unusual and alarming’

If Trump had never run for president, the cost of his charitable shortfalls would have fallen only on his conscience.

He had not, apparently, faced any kind
of scrutiny for the way he ran the Trump Foundation. Former IRS officials say that’s not surprising. They said the IRS largely relies on the honor system: It asks charities to flag their own bad behavior, reporting if they made a prohibited political gift or committed an act of self-dealing.

The Trump Foundation never did.

“So it was invisible,” said Marc S. Owens, the former longtime head of the IRS office dealing with nonprofits.

During his run for president, Trump has faced new consequences.

Trump paid a $2,500 penalty tax, after The Post reported that his foundation had made a political gift in 2013 to a committee aiding Florida Attorney General Pamela Bondi (R).

Also, earlier this month, New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman (D) ordered the Trump Foundation to cease its fundraising — after The Post revealed that it had been soliciting funds from the public without obtaining a special registration required by state law.

Schneiderman’s office is also investigating the Trump Foundation, examining its acts of possible self-dealing. In a written statement, Schneiderman called reports about the foundation “unusual and alarming.”

Tax-law experts said it’s possible that the Trump Foundation will be — or perhaps already is — under investigation by the IRS. The IRS has declined to comment.

Trump also has faced political attacks from Clinton and other Democrats, who have mocked his foundation as evidence of his character.

“The Trump Foundation … took money from other people and bought a six-foot portrait of Donald,” Clinton said during the third presidential debate. “I mean, who does that?” she said.

Trump’s response was that, in effect, it could have been worse.

At least he didn’t buy something more expensive than a painting.

“Trump Foundation, small foundation. People contribute, I contribute. The money goes 100 percent — 100 percent goes to different charities, including a lot of military,” Trump said. “I don’t get anything. I don’t buy boats. I don’t buy planes.”

The next night, Trump and Clinton were together again, this time in Manhattan at the Alfred E. Smith dinner, which benefits Catholic charities.

In the program for that event, Trump’s official biography echoed the language he had used about himself for years.

Despite all that had been revealed about his charitable giving during the course of his campaign, Trump stuck with the old self-image. He was a man whose identity had two equally important sides.

“Mr. Trump is the archetypal businessman,” the bio said, “a deal maker without peer and an ardent philanthropist.”

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Alice Crites contributed to this report.
For Trump, deeds often don’t match his words
Almost four months after promising $1 million of his own money to veterans’ causes, Donald Trump moved to fulfill that pledge Monday evening — promising the entire sum to a single charity as he came under intense media scrutiny.

Trump, now the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, organized a nationally televised fundraiser for veterans’ causes in Des Moines on Jan. 28. That night, Trump said he had raised more than $6 million, including the gift from his own pocket.

“Donald Trump gave $1 million,” he said then.

And as recently as last week, Trump’s campaign manager had insisted that the mogul had already given that money away. But that was false: Trump had not.

In recent days, The Washington Post and other media outlets had pressed Trump and his campaign for details about how much the fundraiser had actually raised and whether Trump had given his portion.

The candidate refused to provide details. On Monday, a Washington Post reporter used Twitter — Trump’s preferred social-media platform — to search publicly for any veterans groups that had received Trump’s money.

By Monday afternoon, The Post had found none. But the search seems to have caught the candidate’s attention.

Later Monday evening, Trump called the home of James K. Kallstrom, a former FBI official who is chairman of the Marine Corps-Law Enforcement Foundation. The charity aids families of fallen Marines and federal law enforcement officers.

Trump told Kallstrom that he would give the entire $1 million to the group, according to Kallstrom’s wife. Sue Kallstrom said she was not sure whether the money had been transferred yet.

Other big donors to Trump’s fundraiser had already made their gifts weeks before. Why had Trump waited so long?

“You have a lot of vetting to do,” Trump said Tuesday in a telephone interview conducted while he was flying to a campaign
rally in Albuquerque.

For this particular donation, it would seem that little new vetting was required because Trump already knew the recipient well. The Marine Corps-Law Enforcement Foundation had already received more than $230,000 in donations from the Donald J. Trump Foundation — a charity controlled by Trump but largely funded by others. Last year, the group gave Trump its “Commandant’s Leadership Award” at a gala in New York.

When asked Tuesday whether he had given the money this week only because reporters had been asking about it, Trump responded: “You know, you’re a nasty guy. You’re really a nasty guy. I gave out millions of dollars that I had no obligation to do.”

Trump’s call on Monday night stood in contradiction to an account given Friday by Corey Lewandowski, Trump’s campaign manager.

“The money is fully spent,” Lewandowski said then. “Mr. Trump’s money is fully spent.”

On Tuesday, Trump said Lewandowski would not have been in a position to know that.

“I don’t know that Corey would even know when I gave it out,” he said.

In the same interview, Trump said the fundraiser had raised about $5.5 million for veterans overall. He said he was not sure how much of it remained to be given away.

That also contrasted with the account last week from Lewandowski, who said that about $4.5 million had been raised and that Trump’s effort had fallen short of the promised $6 million because some unnamed big donors had backed out.

On Tuesday, Trump said no major contributors had reneged. “For the most part, I think they all came through,” he said. “Some of them came through very late.”

Trump also said he had never actually promised that the fundraiser had raised $6 million. “I didn’t say six,” he said.

But, in video of the event, Trump tells the crowd, “We just cracked $6 million! Right? Six million.”

Trump was told that he did, indeed, say “$6 million.”

“Well, I don’t, I don’t have the notes. I don’t have the tape of it,” he said. “Play [the tape] for me. Because I’d like to hear it.” Before the video could be cued up, Trump had moved on.

The story of his nighttime gift seemed to highlight a unique quality of Trump’s: his acute sensitivity to losing face on social media. He had routinely rejected questions
about the fundraiser for veterans if they were posed in person.

“Why should I give you records?” Trump said in an interview with The Post this month, when he was asked about the money. “I don’t have to give you records.”

Then, on Monday, a Post reporter publicly queried multiple veterans groups on Twitter, asking whether they had received personal donations from Trump. None had.

Hours later, after 10:38 p.m. Eastern time, Trump responded on Twitter: “While under no obligation to do so, I have raised between 5 & 6 million dollars, including 1million dollars from me, for our VETERANS. Nice!”

And sometime that same evening, Trump called to make the donation to James Kallstrom’s group. Sue Kallstrom wasn’t sure what time the call was, only that it happened after she went to bed at 8 p.m.

“I guess he wants to take care of the vets,” she said. Among its other good works, the foundation provides $30,000 educational grants to the children of the fallen. “The foundation is thrilled, because the [money] is going to help a lot of people. Especially the children.”

Trump’s campaign has said the remainder of the donations would be given out by Memorial Day. Trump said he would ask his staff to send The Post a list of the groups that would receive that money, but his staff did not immediately provide it.

But it did appear that Trump’s staff was preparing to disburse more gifts. In Boston on Tuesday, the founder of the city’s annual Wounded Vet Bike Run got a phone call.

“For some reason, a Trump campaign worker reached out to me today, and asked for our nonprofit number, and I gave it to ’em,” said Andrew Biggio, the group’s founder.

The annual motorcycle ride raises money to help veterans and their families, including giving away cars and retrofitting motorcycles for the disabled. He said the staffer did not tell him how much money to expect. “I have no idea what’s coming down the pike,” Biggio said.

In recent weeks, other veterans groups had been struggling to figure out how to ask for some of Trump’s remaining money. Trump had provided no formal way to apply.

Biggio said he had not formally applied but was pretty sure how he had come to be on Trump’s radar.

“I served in Iraq with Donald Trump’s bodyguard’s son,” Biggio said.

Jose A. DelReal contributed to this report.
Four months later, Trump says he gave to veterans

Four months after a fundraiser, Trump promises $1 million to one veterans group

Warren is Clinton’s new weapon against Trump

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Donald Trump, responding to a reporter’s question about the timing of his donation...
Philanthropy in GOP nominee’s name, but with others’ money

by David A. Fahrenthold

Donald Trump was in a tuxedo, standing next to his award: a statue of a palm tree, as tall as a toddler. It was 2010, and Trump was being honored by a charity — the Palm Beach Police Foundation — for his “selfless support” of its cause.

His support did not include any of his own money.

Instead, Trump had found a way to give away somebody else’s money and claim the credit for himself.

Trump had earlier gone to a charity in New Jersey — the Charles Evans Foundation, named for a deceased businessman — and asked for a donation. Trump said he was raising money for the Palm Beach Police Foundation.

The Evans Foundation said yes. In 2009 and 2010, it gave a total of $150,000 to the Donald J. Trump Foundation, a small charity that the Republican presidential nominee founded in 1987.

Then, Trump’s foundation turned around and made donations to the police group in South Florida. In those years, the Trump Foundation’s gifts totaled $150,000.

Trump had effectively turned the Evans Foundation’s gifts into his own gifts, without adding any money of his own.

On the night that he won the Palm Tree Award for his philanthropy, Trump may have actually made money. The gala was held at his Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, and the police foundation paid to rent the room. It’s unclear how much was paid in 2010, but the police foundation reported in its tax filings that it rented Mar-a-Lago in 2014 for $276,463.

The Donald J. Trump Foundation is not like other charities. An investigation of the foundation — including examinations of 17 years of tax filings and interviews with more than 200 individuals or groups listed as donors or beneficiaries — found that it collects and spends money in a very unusual manner.
For one thing, nearly all of its money comes from people other than Trump. In tax records, the last gift from Trump was in 2008. Since then, all of the donations have been other people's money — an arrangement that experts say is almost unheard of for a family foundation.

Trump then takes that money and generally does with it as he pleases. In many cases, he passes it on to other charities, which often are under the impression that it is Trump's own money.

In two cases, he has used money from his charity to buy himself a gift. In one of those cases — not previously reported — Trump spent $20,000 of money earmarked for charitable purposes to buy a six-foot-tall painting of himself.

Money from the Trump Foundation has also been used for political purposes, which is against the law. The Washington Post reported this month that Trump paid a penalty this year to the Internal Revenue Service for a 2013 donation in which the foundation gave $25,000 to a campaign group affiliated with Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi (R), who was at the time considering whether to open a fraud investigation against Trump University.

Trump's foundation appears to have repeatedly broken IRS rules, which require nonprofit groups to file accurate paperwork. In five cases, the Trump Foundation told the IRS that it had given a gift to a charity whose leaders told The Post that they had never received it. In two other cases, companies listed as donors to the Trump Foundation told The Post that those listings were incorrect.

Last week, The Post submitted a detailed list of questions about the Trump Foundation to Trump's campaign. Officials with the campaign declined to comment.

Trump and his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, have both been criticized during their campaigns for activities related to their foundations.

Critics have charged that the giant Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton Foundation, which employs more than 2,000 people and spends about a quarter of a billion dollars a year, has served as a way for businesses and powerful figures across the world to curry favor with one of America's most powerful families. The Clinton Foundation has also been credited by supporters and critics alike for its charitable efforts.
Trump has claimed that he gives generously to charity from his own pocket: “I don’t have to give you records,” he told The Post earlier this year, “but I’ve given millions away.” Efforts to verify those gifts have not succeeded, and Trump has refused to release his tax returns, which would show his charitable giving.

That leaves the Trump Foundation as the best window into the GOP nominee’s philanthropy.

In the past several days, questions about Trump’s foundation have focused on the gift to Bondi’s group in 2013. At the time the money arrived, Bondi’s office was considering whether to launch an investigation into allegations of fraud by Trump University — accusations that Trump denies.

The investigation never started. Aides to Bondi and Trump say the gift and the case were unrelated. But Democrats have seized on what they see as a clear example of political influence improperly funded by Trump’s charity.

“The foundation was being used basically to promote a moneymaking fraudulent venture of Donald Trump’s. That’s not
what charities are supposed to do,” Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine, Clinton’s running mate, said Friday. “I hope there’s a significant effort to get to the bottom of it and find out whether this is the end.”

A threadbare operation

Trump started his foundation in 1987 with a narrow purpose: to give away some of the proceeds from his book “The Art of the Deal.”

Nearly three decades later, the Trump Foundation is still a threadbare, skeletal operation.

The most money it has ever reported having was $3.2 million at the end of 2009. At last count, that total had shrunk to $1.3 million. By comparison, Oprah Winfrey — who is worth $1.5 billion less than Trump, according to a Forbes magazine estimate — has a foundation with $242 million in the bank. At the end of 2014, the Clinton Foundation had $440 million in assets.

In a few cases, Trump seemed to solicit donations only to immediately give them away. But his foundation has also received a handful of bigger donations — including $5 million from professional-wrestling executives Vince and Linda McMahon — that Trump handed out a little at a time.

The foundation has no paid staffers. It has an unpaid board consisting of four Trumps — Donald, Ivanka, Eric and Donald Jr. — and one Trump Organization employee.

In 2014, at last report, each said they worked a half-hour a week.

The Trump Foundation still gives out small, scattered gifts — which seem driven by the demands of Trump’s businesses and social life, rather than by a desire to support charitable causes.

The foundation makes a few dozen donations a year, usually in amounts from $1,000 to $50,000. It gives to charities that rent Trump’s ballrooms. It gives to charities whose leaders buttonholed Trump on the golf course (and then try, in vain, to get him to offer a repeat donation the next year).

It even gives in situations in which Trump publicly put himself on the hook for a donation — as when he promised a gift “out of my wallet” on NBC’s “The Celebrity Apprentice.” The Trump Foundation paid off most of those on-air promises. A TV

**Trump stopped donating to his own foundation**

Initially, the purpose of the Donald J. Trump Foundation was to donate money from its namesake. From 2001-08, it took donations from others, and Trump reduced his giving, eventually stopping altogether.

![Graph showing donations over time](graphic)
production company paid others. The Post could find no instance in which a celebrity’s charity got a gift from Trump’s own wallet.

Another time, Trump went on TV’s “Extra” for a contest called “Trump pays your bills!”

A professional spray-tanner won. The Trump Foundation paid her bills.

A rarity among charities

About 10 years ago, the Trump Foundation underwent a major change — although it was invisible to those who received its gifts.

The checks still had Trump’s name on them.

Behind the scenes, he was transforming the foundation from a standard-issue rich person’s philanthropy into a charity that allowed a rich man to be philanthropic for free.

Experts on charity said they had rarely seen anything like it.

“Our common understanding of charity is you give something of yourself to help somebody else. It’s not something that you raise money from one side to spend it on the other,” said Leslie Lenkowsky, the former head of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and a professor studying philanthropy at Indiana University.

By that definition, was Trump engaging in charity?

No, Lenkowsky said.

“It’s a deal,” he said, an arrangement worked out for maximum benefit at minimum sacrifice.

In the Trump Foundation’s early days, between 1987 and 2006, Trump actually was its primary donor. Over that span, Trump gave his own foundation a total of $5.4 million. But he was giving it away as fast as he put it in, and by the start of 2007, the foundation’s assets had dropped to $4,238.

Then, Trump made a change.

First, he stopped giving his own money.

His contribution shrank to $35,000 in 2007.

Then to $30,000 in 2008.

Then to $0.

At the same time, Trump’s foundation began to fill with money from other people.

But in many other cases, his biggest donors have not wanted to say why they gave their own money, when Trump was giving none of his.

“I don’t have time for this. Thank you,” said Richard Ebers, a ticket broker in New York City who has given the Trump Foundation $1.9 million since 2011.

“No. No. No. I’m not going to comment on anything. I’m not answering any of your questions,” said John Stark, the chief executive of a carpet company that has donated $64,000 over the years.

Vince and Linda McMahon declined to comment.

So did NBCUniversal, which donated $500,000 in 2012. Its gift more than covered the “personal” donations that Trump offered at dramatic moments on “The
Celebrity Apprentice” — then paid for out of the Trump Foundation.

Trump’s donations to the Palm Beach Police Foundation offered a stark example of Trump turning somebody else’s gift into his own charity.

Tax experts said they had rarely heard of anything like what Trump had done, converting another donor’s gift into his own.

“I question whether it’s ethical. It’s certainly misleading. But I think it’s legal, because you would think that the other foundation that’s … being taken advantage of would look out for their own interests,” said Rosemary E. Fei, an attorney in San Francisco who has advised hundreds of small foundations. “That’s their decision to let him do that.”

After three years, the Charles Evans Foundation stopped using Trump as a middleman.

“We realized we don’t need to do it through a pass-through,” said Bonnie Pfeifer Evans, the widow of Charles Evans and a trustee of the now-defunct foundation.

In 2012, the Charles Evans Foundation stopped giving money to the Trump Foundation.

In 2013, according to tax records, the Trump Foundation stopped giving to the Palm Beach Police Foundation.

The police group, which gave Trump the award, did not know that Trump’s money had come from somebody else’s pocket. It could not explain why he gave in some years but not others — or why he gave in the amounts he did.

“He’s the unpredictable guy, right?” said John F. Scarpa, the Palm Beach Police Foundation’s president, before The Post informed him about how Trump got the money. He said Trump’s giving wasn’t the only reason he got the award. He also could be counted on to draw a crowd to the group’s annual event. The amount paid to Trump’s club was first reported by BuzzFeed.

The police group still holds its galas at Mar-a-Lago.

Acts of ‘self-dealing’

At the same time that it began to rely on other people’s money, the Trump Foundation sometimes appeared to flout IRS rules by purchasing things that seemed to benefit only Trump.

In 2007, for instance, Trump and his wife, Melania, attended a benefit for a children’s charity held at Mar-a-Lago. The night’s entertainment was Michael Israel, who bills himself as “the original speed painter.” His frenetic act involved painting giant portraits in five to seven minutes — then auctioning off the art he’d just created.

He painted Trump.

Melania Trump bid $10,000.

Nobody tried to outbid her.

“The auctioneer was just pretty bold, so he said, ‘You know what just happened: When you started bidding, nobody’s going to bid against you, and I think it’s only fair that you double the bid,’” Israel said in an
interview last week.

Melania Trump increased her bid to $20,000.

“I understand it went to one of his golf courses,” Israel said of the painting.

The Trump Foundation paid the $20,000, according to the charity that held the benefit.

Something similar happened in 2012, when Trump himself won an auction for a football helmet autographed by football player Tim Tebow, then a quarterback with the Denver Broncos.

The winning bid was $12,000. As The Post reported in July, the Trump Foundation paid.

IRS rules generally prohibit acts of “self-dealing,” in which a charity’s leaders use the nonprofit group’s money to buy things for themselves.

In both years, IRS forms asked whether the foundation had broken those rules: Had it “furnish[ed] goods, services or facilities” to Trump or another of its officers?

In both years, the Trump Foundation checked “no.”

Tax experts said Trump could have avoided violating the self-dealing rules if he gave the helmet and the painting to other charities instead of keeping them. Trump’s staffers have not said where the two items are now.

The IRS penalties for acts of “self-dealing” can include penalty taxes, both on charities and on their leaders as individuals.

In other cases, the Trump Foundation’s tax filings appeared to include listings that were incorrect.

The most prominent example is the improper political donation to the group affiliated with Bondi, the Florida attorney general, in 2013. In that case, Trump’s staffers said a series of errors resulted in the payment being made — and then hidden from the IRS.

First, Trump officials said, when the request came down to cut a check to the Bondi group, a Trump Organization clerk followed internal protocol and consulted a book with the names of known charities.

The name of the pro-Bondi group is “And Justice for All.” Trump’s staffer saw that name in the book, and — mistakenly — cut the check from the Trump Foundation. The group in the book was an entirely different charity in Utah, unrelated to Bondi’s group in Florida.

Somehow, the money got to Florida anyway.

Then, Trump’s staffers said, the foundation’s accounting firm made another mistake: It told the IRS that the $25,000 had gone to a third charity, based in Kansas, called Justice for All. In reality, the Kansas group got no money.

“That was just a complete mess-up on names. Anything that could go wrong did go wrong,” Jeffrey McConney, the Trump Organization’s controller, told The Post last week. After The Post pointed out these errors in the spring, Trump paid a $2,500 penalty tax.
Donations not received

In four other cases, The Post found charities that said they never received donations that the Trump Foundation said it gave them.

The amounts were small: $10,000 in 2008, $5,000 in 2010, $10,000 in 2012. Most of the charities had no idea that Trump had said he had given them money.

One did.

This January, the phone rang at a tiny charity in White River Junction, Vt., called Friends of Veterans. This was just after Trump had held a televised fundraiser for veterans in Iowa, raising more than $5 million.

The man on the phone was a Trump staffer who was selecting charities that would receive the newly raised money. He said the Vermont group was already on Trump’s list, because the Trump Foundation had given it $1,000 in 2013.

“I don’t remember a donation from the Trump Foundation,” said Larry Daigle, the group’s president, who was a helicopter gunner with the Army during the Vietnam War. “The guy seemed pretty surprised about this.”

The man went away from the phone. He came back.

Was Daigle sure? He was.

The man thanked him. He hung up. Daigle waited — hopes raised — for the Trump people to call back.

“Oh, my God, do you know how many homeless veterans I could help?” Daigle told The Post this spring, while he was waiting.

Trump gave away the rest of the veterans money in late May.

Daigle’s group got none of it.

In two other cases, the Trump Foundation reported to the IRS that it had received donations from two companies that have denied making such gifts. In 2013, for instance, the Trump Foundation said it had received a $100,000 donation from the Clancy Law Firm, whose offices are in a Trump-owned building on Wall Street.

“That’s incorrect,” said Donna Clancy, the firm’s founder, when The Post called. “I’m not answering any questions.”

She hung up and did not respond to requests for comment afterward.

“All of these things show that the [Trump] foundation is run in a less-than-ideal manner. But that’s not at all unusual for small, private foundations, especially those run by a family,” said Brett Kappel, a Washington attorney who advises tax-exempt organizations. “Usually, you have an accounting firm that has access to the bank statements, and they’re the ones who find these errors and correct them.”

The Trump Foundation’s accountants are at WeiserMazars, a New York-based firm. The Post sent them a detailed list of questions, asking them to explain these possible errors.

The firm declined to comment.

Rosalind S. Helderman contributed to this report.
America is safer, but jihad threat is greater abroad

While U.S. defense has hard-earned since 9/11, efforts to limit radicalization have achieved little. \[\ldots\]

Trump’s charity runs on few of his own dollars

Philanthropists give to charity not just with other’s money but with their own. But with millions in his own, 

‘Stay calm. Be patient.’

In the weeks after live-streaming her boyfriend’s death, Diamond Reynolds barely bothered to cry. \[\ldots\]

Device-less in a world of Web-wired peers

For as long as teenagers can remember, the smartphone has been the symbol of their world. \[\ldots\]

Trump’s foundation a rarity among charities, experts say

The charitable organization of the man who famed himself as the donor of the Real Deal isn’t exactly unique. \[\ldots\]
Donald Trump spent more than a quarter-million dollars from his charitable foundation to settle lawsuits that involved the billionaire’s for-profit businesses, according to interviews and a review of legal documents.

Those cases, which together used $258,000 from Trump’s charity, were among four newly documented expenditures in which Trump may have violated laws against “self-dealing” — which prohibit nonprofit leaders from using charity money to benefit themselves or their businesses.

In one case, from 2007, Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Club faced $120,000 in unpaid fines from the town of Palm Beach, Fla., resulting from a dispute over the height of a flagpole.

In a settlement, Palm Beach agreed to waive those fines — if Trump’s club made a $100,000 donation to a specific charity for veterans. Instead, Trump sent a check from the Donald J. Trump Foundation, a charity funded almost entirely by other people’s money, according to tax records.

In another case, court papers say one of Trump’s golf courses in New York agreed to settle a lawsuit by making a donation to the plaintiff’s chosen charity. A $158,000 donation was made by the Trump Foundation, according to tax records.

The other expenditures involved smaller amounts. In 2013, Trump used $5,000 from the foundation to buy advertisements touting his chain of hotels in programs for three events organized by a D.C. preservation group. And in 2014, Trump...
Use of money in four new cases appears to violate laws that govern charities

spent $10,000 of the foundation’s money on a portrait of himself bought at a charity fundraiser.

Or, rather, another portrait of himself.

Several years earlier, Trump used $20,000 from the Trump Foundation to buy a different, six-foot-tall portrait.

If the Internal Revenue Service were to find that Trump violated self-dealing rules, the agency could require him to pay penalty taxes or to reimburse the foundation for all the money it spent on his behalf. Trump is also facing scrutiny from the New York attorney general’s office, which is examining whether the foundation broke state charity laws.

More broadly, these cases also provide new evidence that Trump ran his charity in a way that may have violated U.S. tax law and gone against the moral conventions of philanthropy.

“I represent 700 nonprofits a year, and I’ve never encountered anything so brazen,” said Jeffrey Tenenbaum, who advises charities at the Venable law firm in Washington. After The Washington Post described the details of these Trump Foundation gifts, Tenenbaum described them as “really shocking.”

“If he’s using other people’s money — run through his foundation — to satisfy his personal obligations, then that’s about as blatant an example of self-dealing [as] I’ve seen in awhile,” Tenenbaum said.

The Post sent the Trump campaign a detailed list of questions about the four
cases but received no response.

The Trump campaign released a statement about this story late Tuesday that said it was “peppered with inaccuracies and omissions,” though the statement cited none and the campaign has still not responded to repeated requests for comment.

The New York attorney general’s office declined to comment when asked whether its inquiry would cover these new cases of possible self-dealing.

Trump founded his charity in 1987 and for years was its only donor. But in 2006, Trump gave away almost all the money he had donated to the foundation, leaving it with just $4,238 at year’s end, according to tax records.

Then, he transformed the Trump Foundation into something rarely seen in the world of philanthropy: a name-branded foundation whose namesake provides none of its money. Trump gave relatively small donations in 2007 and 2008, and afterward, nothing. The foundation’s tax records show no donations from Trump since 2009.

Its money has come from other donors, most notably pro-wrestling executives Vince and Linda McMahon, who gave a total of $5 million from 2007 to 2009, tax records show. Trump remains the foundation’s president, and he told the IRS in his latest public filings that he works half an hour per week on the charity.

The Post has previously detailed other cases in which Trump used the charity’s money in a way that appeared to violate the law.

In 2013, for instance, the foundation gave $25,000 to a political group supporting Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi (R). That gift was made about the same time that Bondi’s office was considering whether to investigate fraud allegations against Trump University. It didn’t.

Tax laws say nonprofit groups such as the Trump Foundation may not make political gifts. Trump staffers blamed the gift on a clerical error. After The Post reported on the gift to Bondi’s group this spring, Trump paid a $2,500 penalty tax and reimbursed the Trump Foundation for the $25,000 donation.

In other instances, it appeared that Trump may have violated rules against self-dealing.

In 2012, for instance, Trump spent $12,000 of the foundation’s money to buy a football helmet signed by then-NFL quarterback Tim Tebow.

And in 2007, Trump’s wife, Melania, bid $20,000 for the six-foot-tall portrait of Trump, done by a “speed painter” during a charity gala at Mar-a-Lago. Later, Trump paid for the painting with $20,000 from the foundation.

In those cases, tax experts said, Trump was not allowed to simply keep these items and display them in a home or business. They had to be put to a charitable use.

Trump’s campaign has not responded to questions about what became of the helmet or the portrait.
The four new cases of possible self-dealing were discovered in the Trump Foundation’s tax filings. While Trump has refused to release his personal tax returns, the foundation’s filings are required to be public.

The case involving the flagpole at Trump’s oceanfront Mar-a-Lago Club began in 2006, when the club put up a giant American flag on the 80-foot pole. Town rules said flagpoles should be 42 feet high at most. Trump’s contention, according to news reports, was: “You don’t need a permit to put up the American flag.”

The town began to fine Trump, $1,250 a day.

Trump’s club sued in federal court, saying that a smaller flag “would fail to appropriately express the magnitude of Donald J. Trump’s … patriotism.”

They settled.

The town waived the $120,000 in fines. In September 2007, Trump wrote the town a letter, saying he had done his part as well.

“I have sent a check for $100,000 to Fisher House,” he wrote. The town had chosen Fisher House, which runs a network of comfort homes for the families of veterans and military personnel receiving medical treatment, as the recipient of the money. Trump added that, for good measure, “I have sent a check for $25,000” to another charity, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

Trump provided the town with copies of the checks, which show that they came from the Trump Foundation.

In Palm Beach, nobody seems to have objected to the fines assessed on Trump’s business being erased by a donation from a charity.

“I don’t know that there was any attention paid to that at the time. We just saw two checks signed by Donald J. Trump,” said John Randolph, the Palm Beach town attorney. “I’m sure we were satisfied with it.”

Excerpt from a settlement filed in federal court in 2007.

In the other case in which a Trump Foundation payment seemed to help settle a legal dispute, the trouble began with a hole-in-one.

In 2010, a man named Martin Greenberg hit a hole-in-one on the 13th hole while playing in a charity golf tournament at Trump’s course in Westchester County, N.Y.

Greenberg won a $1 million prize. Briefly.

Later, Greenberg was told that he had won nothing. The prize’s rules required that the shot had to go 150 yards. But Trump’s course had allegedly made the hole too short.

Greenberg sued.

Eventually, court papers show, Trump’s golf course signed off on a settlement that required it to make a donation to a group of Greenberg’s choosing. Then, on the day that the parties informed the court they had settled their case, a $158,000 donation was sent to the Martin
Greenberg Foundation.

That money came from the Trump Foundation, according to the tax filings of both Trump's and Greenberg's foundations.

Greenberg's foundation reported getting nothing that year from Trump personally or from his golf club.

Both Greenberg and Trump have declined to comment.

Several tax experts said that the two cases appeared to be clear examples of self-dealing, as defined by the tax code.

The Trump Foundation had made a donation, it seemed, so that a Trump business did not have to.

Rosemary E. Fei, a lawyer in San Francisco who advises nonprofit groups, said both cases clearly fit the definition of self-dealing.

“Yes, Trump pledged as part of the settlement to make a payment to a charity, and yes, the foundation is writing a check to a charity,” Fei said. “But the obligation was Trump’s. And you can’t have a charitable foundation paying off Trump’s personal obligations. That would be classic self-dealing.”

In another instance, from 2013, the Trump Foundation made a $5,000 donation to the D.C. Preservation League, according to the group and tax filings. That nonprofit group’s support has been helpful for Trump as he has turned the historic Old Post Office Pavilion on Pennsylvania Avenue NW into a luxury hotel.

The Trump Foundation’s donation to that group bought a “sponsorship,” which included advertising space in the programs for three big events that drew Washington’s real estate elite. The ads did not mention the foundation or anything related to charity. Instead, they promoted Trump’s hotels, with glamorous photos and a phone number to call to make a reservation.

“The foundation wrote a check that essentially bought advertising for Trump hotels?” asked John Edie, the longtime general counsel for the Council on Foundations, when a Post reporter described this arrangement. “That’s not charity.”

The last of the four newly documented expenditures involves the second painting of Trump, which he bought with charity money.

It happened in 2014, during a gala at Mar-a-Lago that raised money for Unicorn Children’s Foundation — a Florida charity that helps children with developmental and learning disorders.

The gala’s main event was a concert by Jon Secada. But there was also an auction of paintings by Havi Schanz, a Miami Beach-based artist.

One was of Marilyn Monroe. The other was a four-foot-tall portrait of Trump: a younger-looking, mid-’90s Trump, painted in acrylic on top of an old architectural drawing.

Trump bought it for $10,000.

Afterward, Schanz recalled in an email, “he asked me about the painting. I said, ‘I paint souls, and when I had to paint you, I asked your soul to allow me.’ He was
touched and smiled.”

A few days later, the charity said, a check came from the Trump Foundation. Trump himself gave nothing, according to Sharon Alexander, the executive director of the charity.

Trump’s staff did not respond to questions about where that second painting is now. Alexander said she had last seen it at Trump’s club.

“I’m pretty sure we just left it at Mar-a-Lago,” she said, “and his staff took care of it.”

The website TripAdvisor provides another clue: On the page for Trump’s Doral golf resort, near Miami, users posted photos from inside the club. One of them appears to show Schanz’s painting, hanging on a wall at the resort. The date on the photo was February 2016.

david.fahrenthold@washpost.com
Trump used charity’s money to settle his legal disputes

IN THE NEWS

40 years later: The murder of Orlando Letelier
Wells Fargo CEO raked over coals by Congress

Use of money in four new cases appears to violate laws that govern charities
“Arnold and Tim, if you’d come up, we’re going to give you a nice, beautiful check,” Donald Trump said. He held up an oversize check, the kind they give to people who win golf tournaments. It was for $100,000. In the top-left corner the check said: “The Donald J. Trump Foundation.”

Along the bottom, it had the slogan of Trump’s presidential campaign: “Make America Great Again.”

This was in February.

The beginning of it.
Trump was in Waterloo, Iowa, for a caucus-day rally at the Five Sullivan Brothers Convention Center — named for five local siblings who had been assigned to the same Navy cruiser in World War II. They all died when the ship went down at Guadalcanal.

Trump had stopped his rally to do something presidential candidates don’t normally do. He was giving away money.

Arnold and Tim, whom he had called to the stage, were from a local veterans group. Although their big check had Trump’s name on it, it wasn’t actually Trump’s money. Instead, the cash had been raised from other donors a few days earlier, at a televised fundraiser that Trump had held while he skipped a GOP debate because of a feud with Fox News.

Trump said he had raised $6 million that night, including a $1 million gift from his own pocket. Now Trump was giving it, a little at a time, to charities in the towns where he held campaign events.

“See you in the White House,” one of the men said to Trump, leaving the stage with this check that married a nonprofit’s name and a campaign’s slogan.

“He said, ‘We’ll see you in the White House,’ ” Trump repeated to the crowd. “That’s nice.”

After that, Trump lost Iowa.
He won New Hampshire.
Then he stopped giving away money.

But as far as I could tell, just over $1.1 million had been given away. Far less than what Trump said he raised. And there was no sign of the $1 million Trump had promised from his own pocket.

So what happened to the rest of the money?

It sounded like an easy question that the Trump campaign could answer quickly. I thought I’d be through with the story in a day or two.

I was wrong.

That was the start of nine months of work for me, trying to dig up the truth about a part of Trump’s life that he wanted to keep secret. I didn’t understand — and I don’t think Trump understood, either — where that one check, and that one question, would lead.

I’ve been a reporter for The Washington Post since 2000, covering everything from homicide scenes in the District to Congress to the World Championship Muskrat Skinning Contest. (People race to see who skins a dead muskrat the fastest. There’s also a beauty pageant. Some women compete in both.)

By the time I got to that Trump event in Waterloo, I’d been covering the 2016 presidential election for 13 months, since the last weeks of 2014. But I had the track record of a mummy’s curse: Just about every campaign I had touched was dead.

I had, for instance, covered former New York governor George Pataki’s (failed) attempt to get people to recognize him in a New Hampshire Chipotle. Pataki dropped out. I read the collected works of former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee and
made a list of everything the old Baptist preacher had ever condemned as immoral or untoward. The subjects of his condemnation ranged from college-age women going braless to dogs wearing clothes to Beyoncé. Huckabee condemned me. Then he dropped out, too.

I went to St. Louis to write about a speech given by former Texas governor Rick Perry. In the middle of the speech, Perry dropped out.

So by the time the New Hampshire primaries were over, the candidates I had covered were kaput. I needed a new beat. While I pondered what that would be, I decided to do a short story about the money Trump had raised for veterans.

I wanted to chase down two suspicions I’d brought home with me from that event in Iowa. For one thing, I thought Trump might have broken the law by improperly mixing his foundation with his presidential campaign. I started calling experts.

“I think it’s pretty clear that that’s over the line,” Marc S. Owens, the former long-time head of the Internal Revenue Service’s nonprofit division, told me when I called him.

Then Owens kept talking, and the story started deflating.

In theory, Owens said, nonprofit groups like the Trump Foundation are “absolutely prohibited” from participating or intervening in a political campaign. But, he said, if the IRS did investigate, it wouldn’t likely start until the Trump Foundation filed its paperwork for 2016. Which wouldn’t be until late 2017. Then an agent would open a case. There went 2018. Finally, Owens said, the IRS might take action: It might even take away the Trump Foundation’s tax-exempt status.

In 2019. Or maybe not ever.

Owens doubted that the IRS — already under scrutiny from the GOP-run Congress after allegations it had given undue scrutiny to conservative groups — would ever pick a fight with Trump.

“I don’t think anything’s going to happen” to Trump, Owens said. “But, theoretically, it could.”

My other suspicion was that Trump was still sitting on the bulk of the money he had raised for veterans — including the $1 million he had promised from himself.

I asked Trump’s people to account for all this money. They didn’t.

Then, finally, I got a call.

“The money is fully spent,” Corey Lewandowski, then Trump’s campaign manager, told me in late May. “Mr. Trump’s money is fully spent.”

But, Lewandowski told me, the details of Trump’s $1 million in gifts were secret. He wouldn’t say which groups Trump had donated to. Or when. Or in what amounts.

This was an important assertion — that Trump had delivered on a signature campaign promise — made without proof. I didn’t want to just take Lewandowski’s word for it.

So I tried to prove him right.

I spent a day searching for Trump’s money on Twitter, asking vets’ organi-
zations if they’d gotten any of it. I used Trump’s Twitter handle, @realdonaldtrump, because I wanted Trump to see me searching.

Trump saw.

The next night, he called me to say he had just then given away the $1 million, all in one swoop, to a nonprofit run by a friend. That meant when Lewandowski said Trump’s money was “fully spent,” it was actually still in Trump’s pocket.

On the phone, I asked Trump: Would you really have given this money away if I hadn’t been asking about it?

“You know, you’re a nasty guy,” he said. “You’re really a nasty guy.”

A few days later, Trump held a news conference in Trump Tower, where he answered my other question. Where was the remainder of the money Trump had raised from other donors, four months earlier? Turns out, it had been sitting in the Trump Foundation, unspent. In this news conference, Trump announced that he had given the last of it away — and he lashed out at the media for asking him to account for the money.

“Instead of being like, ‘Thank you very much, Mr. Trump,’ or ‘Trump did a good job,’ everyone said: ‘Who got it? Who got it? Who got it?’ And you make me look very bad,” Trump said. “I have never received such bad publicity for doing such a good job.”

Because my stories had led to this angry moment, I was on “Morning Joe” and CNN and Lawrence O’Donnell. The New York Times and Le Monde referenced my work. My dad wrote to say how proud he was of me. I read pundits predicting that the presidential race itself would change. They said the old trope about Trump — that he was a Teflon candidate, immune to accountability — was now disproved.

When I came home from my last TV hit, the kids, ages 4 and 5 months, were asleep. The house was quiet. I was still full of caffeine and do-gooder energy and decided to tidy up.

Among the clutter on the coffee table, I found my 4-year-old’s Party Popper, a bright yellow gun that fired confetti. For
some reason, I held the gun up to my eye and looked down the barrel, the way Yosemite Sam always does.

It looked unloaded.

Then, for some reason, I pulled the trigger.

When I got to the ER, I had a swollen face, metal-foil confetti in my hair and a faint odor of gun smoke. Finally, the doctor could see me.

“I shot myself in the eye with a glitter gun,” I said. I showed him the Party Popper, which I had brought with me, in case he wanted to send it off to the National Institute of Morons for further study.

I got home from the hospital with a scratched cornea and a tube of eye ointment. The next day, with some of my dignity permanently lost, I got started on a bigger story.

The idea for this story had come from our executive editor, Marty Baron. One night, as we both waited for an elevator, Marty offered a suggestion.

Why don’t you go beyond Trump’s promises to give to veterans, he said, and look at Trump’s giving to charity, period?

The logic was that Trump had just tried to wiggle out of a charitable promise he’d made on national TV. What, Marty wondered, had he been doing before the campaign, when nobody was looking?

That reporting process started with a lot of paper.

Working with one of The Post’s ace researchers, Alice Crites, I went digging for records that would reveal Trump’s charitable giving, going back to his early days as a Manhattan developer in the 1980s. We looked at old news clippings, detailing Trump’s public statements. And we looked at tax filings from the Donald J. Trump Foundation, which had been dug out of storage by New York state.

Those two sources told two very different stories.

In the news clippings, you could see that Trump had repeatedly made public promises to donate to charity. In the 1980s, for instance, Trump had promised to give away $4 million from sales of his book “The Art of the Deal.” In more recent years, he said he would give away $2.5 million he made off “The Apprentice.” And donated the profits from Trump University. All told, the pledges in those news clips made it seem that Trump had given away more than $12 million.

In more recent clippings, in fact, Trump’s presidential campaign staff said his actual giving had been far higher than that: “tens of millions” over his lifetime.

The state’s records showed something else.

They showed that the Trump Foundation — which Trump had set up to give away his own money — had received only a total of $5.5 million from Trump since 1987.

So where was all that other money that he said he had been donating?

“We want to keep them private. We want to keep them quiet,” Allen Weisel-
berg, the chief financial officer of Trump's business, had told me about the missing money. “He doesn’t want other charities to see it. Then it becomes like a feeding frenzy.”

Once again, I didn’t want to take his word for it.

So I set out — using Twitter — to try to prove Trump right.

I started making a list of charities I thought were most likely to have received money from Trump’s own pocket. Nonprofits that had received donations from the Trump Foundation. Charities whose galas Trump had attended. Causes he’d praised on Twitter.

In each case, I called the charity and asked if it had ever received a donation from Trump — and, if so, when. Then, I wrote the charity’s name and its response on a legal pad and posted pictures of the legal pad to Twitter.

My list started to grow: 100 charities. 150. 200.

In all those calls, a pattern began to emerge. In the years between 2008 and 2015 — when Trump wasn’t giving money to the Trump Foundation — he didn’t seem to have given much to other people’s charities, either. The only gift I could find in that range was from 2009, when he was credited with giving less than $10,000 to the Police Athletic League of New York City.

250 charities.

As the circus of the 2016 campaign
swirled around me — Twitter beefs, Trump’s criticisms of a Gold Star family and a Mexican American federal judge — I stayed focused on this small slice of Trump’s life. After a while, my 4-year-old daughter started talking about the Trump Foundation at dinner, just because her parents talked about nothing else. “He should give the money to the people, so the people get the money,” she said. “It’s not nice.”

I called 300 charities. 325.

This story started to remind me of one of the weirdest stories I’ve ever done: a 2014 tale about the federal government’s giant paperwork cave.

The cave was about 45 minutes north of Pittsburgh. The Office of Personnel Management kept federal employees’ personnel records in 28,000 file cabinets inside the caverns of an abandoned limestone mine. There were 600 federal employees down there. Cave clerks. Their job was to assemble and collate paperwork from the caverns and use that paperwork to compute how much individual federal employees would receive in benefits when they retired. The cave clerks worked in an absurdist parody of government inefficiency, which was as slow in 2014 as it was in the 1970s.

In reporting jargon, I’d tried the front door: I asked to tour the mine. OPM said no. So then I went looking for windows. I sought out ex-employees, who had firsthand knowledge of the place but weren’t beholden to OPM’s desire for secrecy.

I found them. By piecing together their recollections, I got the story that the government didn’t want me to find.

Now Trump himself was the abandoned limestone mine.

If he wouldn’t tell me what he had given away, I’d try to find the answer anyway — by talking to charities with firsthand knowledge of what he had given.

When I reached No. 325 on my list, I yanked on a window, and it gave.

“They ended up purchasing a Michael Israel portrait of Donald Trump,” said Matthew Ladika, the CEO of a Florida children’s charity called HomeSafe.

I had called this charity — which I knew had received $20,000 from the Trump Foundation — to ask if it had ever received anything else, from Trump’s own
pocket. It had not. But Ladika told me something I didn’t expect: the reason for that $20,000 gift from Trump’s charity.

Trump had used it to buy a portrait of himself.

The portrait had been painted by a “speed painter,” who was the entertainment at a charity gala at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Club. Melania Trump bought it for $20,000. But then, later, Trump paid for it with a check from the Trump Foundation.

That raised a new set of questions. Tax law prohibits “self-dealing,” which is when charity leaders use their nonprofits’ money to buy things for themselves. If Trump hung that portrait on the wall at one of his resorts, for instance, he’d be breaking the law. So where was the portrait now?

I asked Trump’s people. They didn’t respond.

I tried a Google Images search, feeding it a photo of the portrait, which showed Trump’s painted face.

“Best guess for this image: Orange,” Google said.

I got a screen full of oranges. Orange juice. Orange Julius. No portraits.

I kept looking, posting details of my search to Twitter. Soon I had attracted a virtual army, ready to join the scavenger hunt. I had begun the year with 4,700 Twitter followers. By September I had more than 60,000 and climbing fast. I began hearing from celebrities and even a few personal heroes, offering their assistance out of the blue. The barbecue columnist for Texas Monthly — an idol to me, as a journalist and a native Texan — was watching videos of other people’s parties taken at a Trump golf resort. He thought he’d spotted the painting in the background (he hadn’t). Kathy Griffin, the actress, called me with her memories about visiting the set of Trump’s “The Celebrity Apprentice.” Mark Cuban, the Dallas Mavericks owner, was sending me links on Twitter, new leads on Trump promises.

That army — almost all of them strangers to me — never found the first portrait. But soon there was a new target and a new scavenger hunt.

“Google ‘Havi Art Trump,’ ” said a strange voice on the phone one day, calling from the 561 area code. Palm Beach, Fla.

I did.

The Google search revealed a new portrait of Trump. This one was four feet tall, painted by Miami artist Havi Schanz. After a phone call, I confirmed that Trump had purchased it in 2014 at a charity auction run by the Unicorn Children’s Foundation. Once again, he had the Trump Foundation pay the bill.

I needed to find that portrait. I turned to my Twitter followers, putting out a photo of the new $10,000 portrait.

That was at 10:34 a.m.

By early evening I knew where it was.

“The Havi Painting was at Doral National in Miami, you can see two separate pics that tourists have taken of it,” wrote Allison Aguilar.

I’ve never met Aguilar. I learned later that she is a former HR manager who is now
a stay-at-home mother in Atlanta, writing short stories on the side. Days before, looking for the $20,000 portrait, she had scoured the website for Trump’s golf resort at Doral, in Florida, scanning more than 500 user-generated photos of the resort’s rooms, restaurants and golf course.

About halfway through, she had spotted another portrait in a photo, hanging on a wall at the resort.

Then she saw my tweet, saying that I was now looking for that portrait, too.

“Oh, now that I’ve seen,” Aguilar remembered thinking.

The TripAdvisor photo she found was dated February 2016.

Was the portrait still there?

The answer was provided by another stranger.

Enrique Acevedo, an anchor at the Spanish-language network Univision, saw my tweet that night, broadcasting that Aguilar had traced the portrait to Doral. Acevedo realized that Doral was just a few blocks from the Univision studios. He booked a room for that night.

“I used points,” Acevedo said. “I didn’t want to ... spend any money on Trump’s property, so I used points.” After his newscast ended, Acevedo checked in and started quizzing the late-night cleaning crews.

“Have you seen this picture?” he asked. “They said, ‘Oh yeah, it’s downstairs.’ ”

Bingo. Acevedo found the $10,000 portrait, paid for with charity money, hanging on the wall of the resort’s sports bar.

“Hey @Fahrenthold just checked and the portrait is still hanging at the Champions Lounge. How much did you say it cost the Trump Foundation?” he wrote on Twitter that night.

All of that — from my first request for help to Acevedo’s discovery — had taken less than 14 hours. Together, we had discovered Trump doing exactly what the
law said he couldn’t do: using his charity’s money to decorate his resort.

A Trump spokesman later offered the explanation that the resort was actually doing the foundation a favor, by storing its art free of charge. Tax experts were not impressed by this reasoning.

“It’s hard to make an IRS auditor laugh,” one told me. “But this would do it.”

On a morning in October, a month before Election Day, a window opened itself.

I got a phone call. It was a source, with a video.

The first few seconds were jumpy footage of a bus, lumbering through a bland Hollywood backlot. The soundtrack was indistinct mumbling. But then there was Trump’s voice.

“I moved on her, actually. You know, she was down in Palm Beach. I moved on her. And I failed. I’ll admit it,” he was saying. “I did try and f--- her. She was married.”

That was 17 seconds in.

On the bus were Trump and “Access Hollywood” host Billy Bush. The video, I figured out, had been shot in 2005. The two men were visiting the set of NBC’s “Days of Our Lives,” where Trump was to make a cameo appearance. In a blaze of network synergy, NBC’s “Access Hollywood” was there to see Trump arrive. Trump and Bush were wearing hot microphones.

On the bus, Trump told Bush about trying and failing to seduce a woman in Palm Beach. (“I took her out furniture shopping,” he said.)
Trump also described how he kissed and groped women, without asking first.

“And when you’re a star, they let you do it!” Trump said. The thing that stood out to me was the genuine wonder in his voice. He seemed to be saying: I can’t believe it either, but the world lets you get away with this.

This was not the first time Trump had been recorded having lewd conversations. BuzzFeed, in particular, had found tapes of Trump talking about women with shock jock Howard Stern. (“You could’ve gotten her, right? You could’ve nailed her,” Stern asked him once about Princess Diana, who at the time had recently died. “I think I could have,” Trump said.) But those had been excused, by some, because they were just words. Trump, it seemed, was playing an outrageous version of himself in public, for the entertainment of Stern and his audience.

But this video was different. This was Trump talking, in private, about his own conduct: how, when and why he groped women. It was not a story about words. It was about Trump’s actions, which these words revealed for the first time.

I first made myself into Paul Revere of the cubicles, raising alarms around the newsroom and setting people in motion. The Post’s video team started to edit, transcribe and subtitle the footage. They told me they would be ready to post a version of the video at about 3:30 p.m. That was my deadline.

I called NBC to see if they thought the video was a hoax. I reached out to a spokeswoman for Billy Bush and a publicist for Arianne Zucker, the soap-opera actress in the video who escorted Trump and Bush around the studio. And I reached out to Trump’s spokeswoman, Hope Hicks. I sent her the transcript of the video. I asked:

“1.) Does Mr. Trump have any reason to believe that it is not authentic, and that he did not say these things? 2.) Does Mr. Trump recall that conversation? If so, does he believe there is anything that was *not* captured in this transcript that would make him look better? 3.) Does Mr. Trump have any regrets about this conversation?”

Nobody answered right away.

In the meantime, I had to start writing. The story was easy to compose, since much of it was simply repeating what Trump had said. The only problem was the bad words.

The Post is a fairly fusty place when it comes to profanity. If a reporter tries to get a bad word into a story, the word is usually forwarded to top editors, who consider it with the gravity and speed that the Vatican applies to candidates for sainthood. That unwieldy system assumed that bad words would attack one at a time, like bad guys in a kung-fu movie.

But in this story, we were dealing with a whole army of bad words at once. The system was overloaded. When Trump said, “Grab ’em by the p----,” for instance, the editors weren’t sure people would be able to guess right away what “p----” was. They added a letter at the end: “p---y.”

Other words required a ruling from
the bosses.

“Go find out about ‘tits!’” I heard one editor tell another, while the story was being edited — Trump had used the word in criticizing a woman’s appearance. The second editor left to find a higher-ranking editor who could make a ruling. “‘Tits’ is all right,” he said when he returned.

At this point, 3:30 p.m. was getting closer.

We didn’t get any on-the-record response from NBC, Bush or Zucker.

Then we heard from Trump’s spokeswoman.

She’d read the transcript. She said: That doesn’t sound like Mr. Trump. She wanted to see the video. We sent it to them at 3:50 p.m., with a warning that we would publish the story soon — with or without their comment.

Then nothing. Our lawyers and editors were satisfied that the tape was legitimate and newsworthy. The story was edited and ready to go. 4 p.m. arrived. Terri Rupar, the national digital editor, was walking to her desk to hit the button and publish it without comment from Trump.

I yelled for Terri to stop.

Trump was admitting it.

“This was locker room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago. Bill Clinton has said far worse to me on the golf course — not even close. I apologize if anyone was offended,” he said in a statement that arrived at that moment.

The story published at 4:02 p.m. It became the most-read story of all time on The Post’s website, easily surpassing the past champion, a tale about a woman from Burundi who was believed dead but returned to crash her own funeral. At one point, more than 100,000 people were simultaneously reading the story about the video. The servers that measure The Post’s Web traffic actually broke because there was too much traffic.

Afterward, Trump’s deficit in polling averages increased, from a little over 3 points to more than 5 points. Prominent Republicans turned to denounce him. House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) said he was “sickened.”

Trump’s running mate, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, was whisked out of a campaign event — viewing a collection of autographed cardboard hot-dog buns in Toledo — without comment.

Trump himself made a second, more thorough apology in a 90-second Facebook video later that evening. “I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize,” he said.

I had to buy another suit, for TV appearances. My daughter, now fully over the idea that her father was on TV, began complaining when I came on and she had to switch off “Peppa Pig.” I had to quit doing the cooking at home. (Nobody complained about that.)

On Twitter I watched myself become a minor celebrity — all because of a story that had, essentially, fallen into my lap.

“My wife says that David @Fahrenthold is a time traveler from the future trying to carefully fix the darkest timeline. I
believe her,” wrote James Church, a professor at Austin Peay State University.

And, after I appeared on Fox News Channel to talk about the story, I heard from a man in Milwaukee. He called The Post but couldn’t say “Fahrenthold” in a way that the voice-mail system recognized.

He wound up in the voice-mail box of another reporter in Sports.

“I wanna kill him,” the caller said of me. “Thank you.”

The Post took this seriously. I met with the D.C. police and the FBI, and a security consultant the paper hired. She was a congenial woman, a former counterterrorism official. When she arrived at our house she terrified us far more than the actual death threat had.

“Your cars are parked too far away for a car bomb,” she said, looking out the front windows at the street. “They’ll probably cut your brake lines.” She recommended having a car patrol the neighborhood. She recommended a safe room.

She recommended stocking the safe room with provisions, in case we were under siege so long that we needed snacks.

I had to get back to work. My wife — who hadn’t complained about any of this, the long hours or the missed bedtimes or the early-morning TV appearances — stopped me, shaken at what I’d gotten us into.

When the leaked Trump video still seemed to have swung the 2016 campaign, I was interviewed by a German reporter, who asked, “Do you have the feeling …

“This is it, this is the peak of my career?”

The point of my stories was not to defeat Trump. The point was to tell readers the facts about this man running for president. How reliable was he at keeping promises? How much moral responsibility did he feel to help those less fortunate than he?

By the end of the election, I felt I’d done my job. My last big story about Trump started with an amazing anecdote, which came from a tip from a reader. In 1996, Trump had crashed a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a charity opening a nursery school for children with AIDS. Trump, who had never donated to the charity, stole a seat onstage that had been saved for a big contributor.

He sat there through the whole ceremony, singing along with the choir of children as cameras snapped, and then left without giving a dime.

“All of this is completely consistent with who Trump is,” Tony Schwartz, Trump’s co-author on his 1987 book “The Art of the Deal,” told me. “He’s a man who operates inside a tiny bubble that never extends beyond what he believes is his self-interest.”

“If your worldview is only you — if all you’re seeing is a mirror — then there’s nobody to give money to,” Schwartz said. “Except yourself.”

Election Day came. I thought my time with Trump had come to an end.

That night, my job was to co-write the
main Web story about the election. My colleague Matea Gold and I were supposed to pre-write stories for all the likely outcomes. I volunteered to write the one that said “Trump wins.”

Based on the polling data, it felt fantastical and pointless, like designing a Super Bowl ring for the Cleveland Browns.

“Biggest upset of the modern era?” I asked Post political reporter Dan Balz, trying to use the right tone in this story that nobody would ever read. Balz said that was right.

Then the polls started to close.

And it turned out that I am not a time traveler.

About 10 p.m., as the tide turned against Clinton, the editors started killing or reshaping stories they had assigned hours before. They axed CLINTON, a story about the history Clinton would make as the first woman to win the White House. They ordered a rewrite of GOP, which was supposed to tell readers how — with Trump defeated — the GOP was licking its wounds and looking ahead to 2020. Across the newsroom, paragraphs were being deleted en masse. An entire presupposed version of the future was disappearing. It wasn’t the future after all.

Finally, at 2:32 a.m., the Associated Press called Wisconsin.

Trump was over the top.

“PUB TRUMP WINS STORY,” I wrote to the editors, giving the order to publish the story I’d written earlier.

“Donald John Trump has been projected as the winner of the presidential election, according to the Associated Press. ... His victory on Tuesday was the biggest surprise of the modern presidential era. ...”

That night, I arrived home about 4 a.m. to a quiet house. I found a stale beer in the back of the fridge.

In the past, I’d always been able to step out of my job at times like this.

No matter how big the day’s story was, there was always a bigger world, which was still spinning unaffected by the murder I’d covered in Northeast Washington or the natural disaster or the congressional vote I’d just witnessed. But this story was too big to step out of.

As I sat on the couch with my nasty pale ale, it occurred to me that I would be living in the story, from that point on.

A few days later, I was interviewed by
another German reporter. He asked if these past nine months, the greatest adventure in my life as a journalist, had been for naught.

“Do you feel like your work perhaps did not matter at all?” he said.

I didn’t feel like that.

It did matter. But, in an election as long and wild as this, a lot of other stories and other people mattered, too. I did my job. The voters did theirs. Now my job goes on. I’ll seek to cover Trump the president with the same vigor as I scrutinized Trump the candidate.

And now I know how to do it.

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