

Joel Stein



Sweet Charity

It's time to give back—to the founder of my new foundation

HAVING WRITTEN A BOOK, CREATED my own cologne, amassed nearly a million Twitter followers, been cited in a Supreme Court decision, modeled for *W* magazine and smoothly bragged about all this in my *TIME* magazine column, I have reached the point in my career when I need my own charity. My foundation will serve many needs, such as allowing me to pose with celebrities in glossy local magazines, divert attention after writing offensive columns and network with high-ranking Tampa-based military personnel.

Talent agencies such as CAA and William Morris Endeavor have employees whose sole job is to help celebrities build charities. They work with people like Trevor Nielsen, president of the Global Philanthropy Group, which helped build charities for Kobe Bryant, Madonna, Ashton Kutcher and Ben Stiller. One of the first questions Nielsen asked me, which I did not at all expect, was what I wanted my charity to do. I told him that wasn't important to me, but I definitely wanted to call it the Joel Stein Foundation. Or better yet, the Joel Stein Joel Stein Foundation.

Nielsen, who has developed a series of questions to help people discover what they're passionate about, insisted I figure out who I'd be helping besides Joel Stein Joel Stein. So I told him about an idea I had to take the smartest kids from bad schools and give them the college-admission help that rich students get: SAT-prep classes, application consultants, cocaine. "That is a fantastic idea," Nielsen said. "You probably would get a large return on investment." Then he told me that to seed my charity, I'd need "a few hundred thousand dollars." When I said the Joel Stein Joel Stein Foundation wasn't comfortable putting up that kind of

cash, he suggested I find a partner and rename my charity something like the Richard Branson Joel Stein Foundation.

Before I started my fundraising efforts, I called Scott Barbeau, co-founder and CFO of Spark Ventures, which funds an orphanage and a school that serve 350 kids in Twapia, Zambia. To make the charity self-sustaining, it started raising chickens and selling them in Zambia, but then the Chinese came in with cheaper chickens, so now it's trying to market high-end organic chickens to Zambians. This scared me a little, since if the Chinese were this competitive over the Zambian chicken market, it was going to be really hard for beneficiaries of the Joel Stein Joel Stein Foundation to beat them out for spots in the Ivy League.

Looking for a new, less poultry-intensive plan, I called Andrew Morton, who does philanthropy law for athletes, actors and singers. He told me that, like 19 out of 20 people who call him, I didn't want to start my own charity. "In the 1970s, athletes just did things for the United Way," he said. "Now we live in this whole Facebook, social media, look-at-me kind of world where celebrities think, I can

throw a football, so I'm a philanthropist. No, you're a guy who can throw a football." Morton suggests that they—and I—think about using influence differently. "There are two types of missions," he said. "You can have a mission to do stuff. You can also have a mission of raising awareness." If I have learned one thing in my personal and professional life, it's that I am far more an awareness guy than a do-stuff guy.

Morton introduced me to "philanthropy branding"—fitting the issue to my persona. "It's what you need to do if you want to have impact now," he said. "Angelina Jolie: refugees. Bono: AIDS. George Clooney: Darfur." Joel Stein: the overeducated elite. Best of all, I could still talk about the Joel Stein Joel Stein Foundation without paying Morton his usual \$9,000 fee to file the paperwork. Instead, my charity could operate through a fiscal sponsorship with non-profit incubators such as the Edward Charles Foundation and the Giving Back Fund, which charge a small percentage of revenue for back-office services but would still allow me to put the Joel Stein Joel Stein Foundation below my name when I'm on the *Today* show.

Searching for a fiscal sponsor, I found out that actor Hank Azaria has a charity that does exactly what I was hoping to do, for kids in Los Angeles. I called him and discovered that he even set it up just like I wanted to: his ex-assistant runs it, and he throws a celebrity poker tournament to raise money. He did everything perfectly except that the name of his charity, Determined to Succeed, does not have his name in it even once.

But Azaria was open to the idea of having me sponsor a few events through the Joel Stein Hank Azaria Foundation. "If it has the same result, it's fine with me," he said. "I can still have the illusion of being humble with my own foundation and still get the publicity I so desperately crave." I thanked him and got off the phone before he could ask me for top billing.

