

# **Pulling for the Underdog: 100 Days of Gratitude, Day 48: Laura Callanan**

---

 [denniswhittle.blogspot.com/2018/09/100-days-of-gratitude-day-48-laura.html](https://denniswhittle.blogspot.com/2018/09/100-days-of-gratitude-day-48-laura.html)



**100 Days of Gratitude, Day 48: Laura Callanan**

---



---

Laura Callanan

But today I want to talk about Laura Callanan. Some years ago as I was stepping back from day-to-day involvement in GlobalGiving, Mari engaged McKinsey & Company to help consolidate lessons from the first 10 years and envision how GlobalGiving could deliver on its potential for real impact in its next decade and beyond. Since I had worked with so many management and strategy consultant teams at the World Bank, I had - how to put this? - low expectations. Upstart has already made a splash, and I have no doubt it will reach maturity in due course and go off to college itself. I hope to play a small role in supporting her to make that happen.

We will shortly announce the next CEO of GlobalGiving. It's an emotional time for Mari and me, since GlobalGiving has been our "baby" for so many years. But just as kids mature and go away to school, GG is ready (coincidentally, at age 18) to go on without us. Though we will remain active on the board, we will not micro-manage or meddle. Instead, we will watch with pride as the organization moves to the next stage of life, flourishing and growing into something more extraordinary than we can currently imagine.

The truth is that Mari and I were far from the only "parents" of GlobalGiving. I wrote earlier on this blog about Donna Callejon, who joined us as the first "adult" member of the team in 2003. Without Donna, GG might not even be alive to go to college. I have also written about Dave Goldwyn, Tom Bird, and Fran Hauser, former board chairs who were instrumental in steering through the early stages of adolescence and into high school. Many others that I have blogged about (and some I will in the future) also played key roles.

That all changed when Laura Callanan arrived at our office. From the first meeting, it was clear that this woman wasn't your typical clever but predictable consultant, who maintains an ironic distance while forcing everything into a pre-determined, standardized framework dictated by their firm.

Instead, Laura threw herself into the gestalt of what we were doing, becoming a sort of strategic optometrist for a team comprised of some people who were near sighted and some farsighted. Laura would hold various mirrors and lens up to the management team and say "Does this make it clear? No? How about this? OK, now is this one clearer or fuzzier?" Then she would go away and grind some custom lenses, and come back for more trials.

One day, after months of this, she brought in some lenses and the team's reaction was "Wow - that is it! We can see both up close and far clearly now!" So we locked in those lenses, and they became the strategic framework that enabled GlobalGiving to grow to serve more than 20,000 projects in 170 countries - providing nearly \$350 million from 800,000 individual donors and some of the world's most innovative companies and foundations.

Most consultants walk away from one job to the next. But we clicked so well with Laura that we asked her to join the board - and within a short period the board elected her as chair.

This year, Laura oversaw the search and recruitment process for our new CEO. As we wrestled with the large pool of exception candidates, she helped us keep our eye on the prize - i.e., the heart and soul as well as strategic promise of GlobalGiving. I am confident that the result will speak for itself in the next chapter of our growth.

Laura could easily have rested on her laurels at McKinsey - or at Rockefeller Foundation or the National Endowment for the Arts, where she held senior roles. Her status would have been high, and the work (though stressful) would have been predictable, remunerative, and low-risk. But here's the thing: Laura has guts and vision, too: A couple of years ago, she

decided to leave that security behind and become an entrepreneur herself, launching Upstart Co-Lab - an initiative to unleash a whole new way to invest in creativity and artists as a means to spur innovation and new solutions to the world's most pressing problems.