

50+ Legacy Donors and Counting:

# How WGVU Public Media Transformed Its Giving Program with FreeWill

## The Opportunity/Challenge

For decades, WGVU Public Media has served as a trusted source of education, storytelling, and community connection across West Michigan. As the region's local PBS and NPR station, WGVU reaches audiences across dozens of counties through television, radio, and digital platforms.

But when it came to planned giving, the organization faced a familiar challenge. While WGVU had long-standing donor relationships and a strong base of support, its planned giving efforts were largely passive. Conversations happened occasionally, and materials were available if donors asked, but there was no structured strategy, and there was limited visibility into who had already included WGVU in their estate plans.

"I handle everything planned giving," shared Molly O'Brien, Major Gifts Officer. "But we didn't really do anything actively, no campaigns or anything like that." At the same

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It's plug and play. You're really like another part-time staff for us. I'm so busy every day, and to be able to just, here's the next campaign you should do, that's been invaluable.

Molly O'Brien  
Major Gifts Officer

## The Opportunity/Challenge (CONTINUED)

time, the opportunity was clear. With a loyal and aging donor base, WGVU was well-positioned to grow legacy giving, if they could activate it in a more intentional, scalable way.

## The Solution

To move from awareness to proactive engagement, WGVU Public Media partnered with FreeWill and quickly adopted a full-funnel approach to planned and non-cash giving. The team leaned into FreeWill's structured planned giving campaign calendar, implementing a consistent cadence of initiatives throughout the year, including Make-A-Will Month, National Estate Planning Awareness Week, tax-smart giving campaigns, and seasonal bequest efforts tied to moments like Kindness Week.

"It's like having another part-time staff member," said O'Brien. "I'm so busy every day, and to be able to just plug it in, schedule it, and press send – it's huge."

Prior to FreeWill, WGVU averaged just 1–2 stock gifts per year. In the year following launch, the organization received six stock gifts, with continued growth in both stock and IRA giving driven by targeted Smart Giving campaigns.

The impact on IRA giving has been especially striking. Since launching FreeWill at the start of fiscal year '25, WGVU's annual IRA gift volume has nearly tripled, from 441 gifts in FY24 to 1,233 in FY26 (through April, with two months still remaining in the fiscal year) while the average gift size grew from \$351 to \$513.

"We know people are aging into IRA/QCD giving," O'Brien shared, "but having the consistent campaigns and outreach that FreeWill suggests has ensured we are informing donors about this way to give."

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We didn't really know who all of our planned giving donors were before —we had maybe heard of a few but now we're seeing a number like 52 in our database of people who have left us a gift. In less than two years, that kind of growth has been incredible for us.

**Molly O'Brien**  
Major Gifts Officer

## The Solution (CONTINUED)

WGVU also activated a unique channel few nonprofits leverage at scale: television. Through its PBS streaming service, the team produced planned giving and smart giving spots that reached audiences directly in their homes. Over a 16-month period, these placements generated more than 220,000 impressions and nearly 1,400 click-throughs.

FreeWill also helped surface previously invisible planned giving activity, turning what had been an unknown pipeline into an identifiable group of supporters. “We didn’t really know who had included us in their plans before,” O’Brien shared. “Now we can actually see those donors and steward them better.”

To extend impact beyond digital tools, WGVU hosted an in-person estate planning event in partnership with a local attorney introduced through the FreeWill Fellows network. FreeWill Fellows are trusts and estates professionals across the country who help bridge the gap when donors need more advanced planning support beyond FreeWill’s online tools. The event drew strong engagement, with over 35 registrants and ultimately led to additional community education sessions.

FreeWill’s Marketing Library and tracking tools also became core resources for the team, supporting everything from email campaigns to print mailers and providing real-time visibility into performance. Across all efforts, WGVU has identified more than 50 planned giving donors in less than two years, transforming legacy giving into a measurable and growing revenue stream.

“We’re just really appreciative of the partnership,” O’Brien noted. “FreeWill truly feels like another member of our team.”

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It’s really nice to see what’s paying off and where we’re spending our time. We can go right into the portal and see how things are doing—it just makes everything a little smarter in how we’re working.

Molly O’Brien  
Major Gifts Officer

## Results

34

primary bequests

\$222K

in primary bequests

\$1.6M+

in secondary bequests

\$1.56M+

in tertiary bequests