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Well-paid young Seattle techie prefers giving to riches

Jessan Hutchison-Quillian, a young Google engineer in Seattle, uses his time and money to fight poverty and income inequality.



By [Jerry Large](#)
 Seattle Times staff columnist

When Jessan Hutchison-Quillian asked what I intended to say about him, I joked that I'd say he was trying to upturn the social order and that it was all the fault of his moms. Actually, that's really close to the truth.

Hutchison-Quillian, 27, wants this to be a more just and generous society. Achieving that can require some revolutionary action, and it's true that his upbringing helped shape his values.

What drew my attention to him is this: He graduated from the University of Washington at 19 (computer science, because it was fun); in June 2007 he took a job offered by Google and decided his pay, more than \$100,000, was way more than he needed to live comfortably, so he started giving a growing portion (40 percent now) to causes he believes in, and now he's helping other people embrace philanthropy.

That's not the usual pattern for a young person starting a career. Sometimes people who inherit wealth will choose to spread their good fortune, but Hutchison-Quillian was not born into money.

I'd expect someone like him to be more concerned with accumulating — things, money, a feeling of security. That we live in a time of extreme wealth and income inequality might make some of us more concerned about our own nest eggs, but Hutchison-Quillian is among those who choose to work at narrowing the divide.

A couple of things Hutchison-Quillian says about his giving. It isn't necessarily about being altruistic, and it isn't about sacrifice. He lives comfortably, and his giving is aimed at repairing some of the damage in the world, especially inequality in power and resources. And giving just feels good, even when you push your limits.

We sat down at Google's Fremont campus and started at the beginning.

Hutchison-Quillian was born in Seattle and split his time between Burien and Ballard after his moms split up when he was about 6. He said his moms (a teacher and a research scientist) are progressives, but not really activists, and they didn't try to force their views on him, he just absorbed them the way any kid would. He played his share of violent video games, and his parents even let him play with toy guns.

But for a long time he's felt a desire, "to do something for the social good, but I didn't know what that was."

A few things stand out as contributing to his giving philosophy. His family was not materialistic. He felt he had it all (love, comfort), and he knew not every child was so fortunate.

Also sometime in late elementary school or early middle school he became aware that families like his were under attack from people who believe gay couples are bad.

His first donation was in response to anti-gay rhetoric during the presidential campaign in 2004. He gave \$30, a lot for a teenager, to the Human Rights Campaign, which focuses on LGBT equality.

Hutchison-Quillian became more intentional about giving after Google hired him. He'd just turned 20, and he started working the data trying to figure out what his salary meant in relation to other people.

"The median income for a family in King County is around \$60,000 and I'm making two times that right out of college."

Income inequality affects everyone, he said. He cited "The Spirit Level," a book that gathered evidence that in societies with the most inequality, even people near the top pay a price, such as health consequences that rise with the level of inequality.

Hutchison-Quillian looked for formulas that would help him determine what a just income would look like. He considered reducing the amount he lived on by the difference between the average pay of white and black men because in part his salary is a result of white male privilege.

His salary goes up every year, but Hutchison-Quillian chooses to live on \$36,000 a year after taxes and savings. The rest he donates. He still travels, eats out, buys gifts for friends and in no way feels deprived.

He knew from the start that he didn't want his salary to shape his lifestyle or to let his idea of what he needed rise with his income.

Hutchison-Quillian decided he wanted to support progressive change, not just meet basic needs. Transformation is the only way to address the root causes of need.

And he wanted to give to efforts run by the people most affected by a given set of issues.

He joined [Resource Generation](#) so that he wouldn't be operating in isolation and he has become a leader in that organization of young people (most of whom, unlike him, inherited wealth) who use their resources to support social-change movements and causes.

His giving is done in thirds — local, national and international. And one-third is funneled through [Social Justice Fund Northwest](#), one-third through [Grassroots International](#) and a third to individual organizations whose efforts he feels passionately about and to groups suggested by family and friends.

At first, giving was something he did outside of work, but he began helping co-workers get involved in giving, and today he is the engineer for Google's corporate social-responsibility team.

People want to give, he said, but sometimes they agonize over choices and wind up doing nothing.

He showed me a phone app that members of the team designed.

It sends a notification each day with a suggestion for giving.

That day it was Second Chance Schools in South Sudan. Hutchison-Quillian touched a button and sent \$1. That's the default, but anyone can choose to give more or to match other gifts to the cause.

The app also offers a couple of alternatives each day, and over time makes suggestions based on an employee's previous choices or those of their friends.

The app makes giving simple and quick.

Deeper giving isn't always so easy. Hutchison-Quillian urges people to give beyond what at first seems comfortable, as he does.

Sometimes he worries that maybe he's giving too much, even that maybe he's chosen wrongly and should be trying to get rich, but those feelings don't last because they don't resonate with his values.

Besides, he said, no amount of money can buy you health or security. It's better to make a community with people who can help you in hard times.

"Err on the side of generosity," he said. "That's something I strive for."

Hutchison-Quillian doesn't expect everyone to go as far as he has, but he believes that most Americans want something better than aimless accumulation on the one hand and growing inequality on the other.

I hope his model for linking generosity and justice will inspire the rest of us to think differently about what success looks like.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com

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