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Generosity has rough edges

SANDY BANKS

I walked into the penthouse reception prepared to skewer Donald Sterling. But I had barely gotten through the door when I wound up in a group hug with the Clippers' owner and the NBA's top draft pick, heartthrob Blake Griffin.



Sterling might be a tight-fisted egomaniac, but he's also smart enough to know that it's hard to savage a man in print when he introduces you to the crowd as the "beautiful, fabulous writer for the Los Angeles Times. Here to make life better for underprivileged kids."

That's not *exactly* why I was at the Donald T. Sterling Charitable Foundation Summit, held Tuesday at his Sterling World Plaza in Beverly Hills.

You can't flip through our newspaper these days without spotting the giant ads Sterling buys promoting his awards and donations, his smiling face plastered among a jumble of names and cut-and-paste photos.

I wangled an invitation because I wanted to meet him. I was curious about the man — and the motives — behind the generosity. Sterling has been dogged for years by claims that he's a bigot. Was this simple image repair or true redemption, I wondered.

Two months ago, Sterling settled a housing discrimination lawsuit by the U.S. Justice Department for \$2.7 million. Four years ago, he spent millions to settle a similar lawsuit brought by a fair housing group.

Both accused him of trying to exclude blacks, Latinos and families with children from renting apartments in buildings he owns.

Yet there he was last week playing Santa, handing out \$1 million from his private charitable foundation to 10 high schools in South and East Los Angeles and 20 charities across Los Angeles County.

Like Skid Row's Para Los Niños, "another fabulous Hispanic charity in Boyle Heights, where I grew up," Sterling said.

And Roosevelt High, "with all the Hispanic kids," he said, "where nobody thought they



ALEX GALLARDO Los Angeles Times

MAGNATE: Clippers owner Donald Sterling and his wife, Rochelle, attend a game. Last week he played Santa.

could study and learn calculus until that teacher" — Jaime Escalante — came along.

Oops — Escalante taught at Garfield High, which also received a Sterling grant.

Sterling knew that Brooklyn Avenue had been renamed in the decades since he left East Los Angeles. "What is it now... Martin Luther King?" he asked. Right idea, wrong ethnic group. It's Cesar E. Chavez Avenue.

He assumed that Belmont High must be "mostly Asian" when counselor John Kim showed up to collect the school's check. It's 88% Latino, Kim corrected him.

And Sterling introduced grant recipient "Leroy Jenkins" as "one of the most fabulous men ever to run a charity."

Except it's *Leon*, not Leroy. And his "charity" is the NAACP.

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Sterling has one the largest real estate empires in Southern California, with 5,000 rental units in more than 120 apartment buildings.

And according to depositions from former employees in discrimination cases, Sterling liked Korean American tenants because they "will live in whatever conditions he gives them and pay the rent without complaining." He considered children "brats" and he didn't like renting to African Americans or Latinos because black tenants "smell," and "Mexicans

... just sit around and smoke and drink."

Sterling's lawyer called the claims "absurd" and told Times reporter Scott Glover that Sterling settled only to avoid costly litigation. "The shame of this is if lies are repeated often enough," the attorney said, "some people may actually believe them."

Or if you throw enough money around, some people might overlook them.

The Black Business Assn. gave Sterling its Humanitarian Award in 2008 and enlisted him to chair last year's awards dinner. "I don't feel like he's a racist," president Earl "Skip" Cooper told me Tuesday night.

And Leroy... er, Leon Jenkins' NAACP chapter honored Sterling last spring with its coveted Lifetime Achievement Award. Among his achievements: Giving away thousands of free Clippers tickets to underprivileged children, filling rows of empty Staples Center seats.

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Maybe Sterling is just generous. Or this could be the sort of "make-up" call a referee makes on the basketball court when he knows he's blown a foul. I didn't press him that night for an explanation. He was having so much fun, it didn't seem right to go for a "gotcha" moment.

I can see why people like

him. He has the sort of personal touch that makes it easy to buddy up. But I can also see how he gets in hot water. With his tasteless jokes and impolitic comments, Sterling is an easy target.

"He's his own worst enemy," said Darren Dickerson, a PR guy who has known Sterling since 2007, when they worked on an ad for the NAACP dinner.

Blame Sterling if you think the newspaper ads are ugly. "He's very, very hands on," Dickerson recalled, deciding every detail, right down to the placement of photos and size of the type.

Sterling, he said, is "shrewd, he's calculating, he's about the dollar. But is he motivated by race? I'd say no," said Dickerson, who's young and black and sometimes cringes listening to Sterling in public.

"He really, genuinely wants people to like him," Dickerson said.

"But he's like a big kid who tries too hard. It's like he's hanging out with the guys in the neighborhood and he can say anything he wants."

I could see that at the party; could imagine little Donny Tokowitz — his name before he changed it in college — growing up as a produce dealer's son in East Los Angeles; desperate to get the girl, to make the team, to satisfy his immigrant parents' dreams.

And I could hear it Tuesday night as he reminisced while lauding others. He's still in awe of those "magnificent athletes" back in the day at Jefferson High, still smarting over how he lost out to the Cardenas kid for the city rope-climbing title.

It took Cardenas "three seconds to the top." Sterling recalled. "I took second place, 4.2 seconds."

Sixty years later, Sterling is still climbing.

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OUR A2 VOICES

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 Wednesday: **Steve Lopez**
 Thursday: **George Skelton**
 Friday: **James Rainey**
 Saturday: **Sandy Banks**
 Sunday: **Steve Lopez**

Columnist drawings by
 RANDY GLASS For The Times