



MAY 7, 2020

THE IMPORTANCE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE DOLLYWOOD FOUNDATION'S MY PEOPLE FUND

JOHNSON, CALLIE VICTORIA

CJOHN213@VOLS.UTK.EDU
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

CHILDERS, DR. COURTNEY

CHILDERS@UTK.EDU
Faculty Advisor



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Introduction

This research project examines the effects and level of importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on the public and the organization. CSR is where a company performs actions that are not required and that are aimed to contribute to the societal goals of a philanthropic, activist, or charitable nature or supporting and volunteering resources for ethically oriented practices.¹ Since CSR is not required, it takes away time that the company can be using to directly increase revenue. Due to this, the importance of CSR is often questioned by top administration. This study attempts to use the case of the Smoky Mountain Wildfires and the Dollywood Foundation's CSR response of the "My People Fund" to test how the campaign impacted not only the public but the company itself.

In November of 2016, wildfires raged through Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg, Sevierville and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The devastating wildfires claimed the lives of 14 people, injured 134 and destroyed over 2,000 homes and buildings.² 10,000 acres were burned inside the national park with an additional 6,000 acres in other parts of the area and 14,000 residents and tourists were forced to evacuate.²



Smoky Mountains National Park Wildfire
Source: Chattanooga Fire Department

The Great Smoky Mountains Wildfires were the deadliest in the Eastern U.S. since the Great Fires of 1947.³ In addition, the fires were also the most deadly and destructive of the 2016 Southeastern United

States wildfires.³ The Great Smoky Mountain Wildfires are one of the largest natural disasters in the history of Tennessee.

The Dollywood Foundation established the “My People Fund” just 48 hours after the wildfires swept through the county on November 28, 2016. The “My People Fund” gave \$1,000 to every family whose home was lost or destroyed in the fires for six months.⁴ Due to the tremendous outpouring of donations and support, the “My People Fund” was able to increase the amount of the final distribution from \$1,000 to \$5,000 per family.⁴ The fund provided a total of \$10,000 per family over six months to more than 900 Sevier County families whose homes were destroyed in the wildfires. In total, \$8.9 million went directly to wildfire victims.

The foundation put together a three-hour telethon called *Smoky Mountain Rise: A Benefit for the My People Fund*. The star-studded event was packed with beautiful performances, emotional stories and a collective message of hope.



Smoky Mountains Rise Telethon

Source: Kenny Rogers website.

Performances included Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers, Chris Stapleton, Big & Rich, Chris Young, Amy Grant and many others. Appearances by Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam were made along with heartfelt video messages from Katy Perry, Carrie Underwood, Steve Harvey, Good Morning America, Today Show and many others. Celebrities including Paula Dean, cast members of Dolly Parton's *Christmas of Many Colors*, the Stapletons, members of the Tennessee Titans and many others answered phones during the event.⁵

In addition, the heroic efforts of first responders were celebrated during the live telecast. Viewers were also urged to visit Sevier County and the Great Smoky Mountains by showcasing the Sevier County hospitality and renowned entertainment venues.

Nearly \$500,000 of donations were committed before the telethon began. The Academy of Country Music, Taylor Swift, the Country Music Association and Kenny Chesney all contributed.⁶ Millions of people watched *Smoky Mountains Rise: A Benefit for the My People Fund* telethon that premiered on December 13 on GAC, AXS-TV, RFD and The Heartline Network and during several re-broadcasts. Donations came from generous people from coast to coast and raised more than \$9.3 million.⁷

In support of those on the front lines, the "My People Fund" donated \$200,000 to East Tennessee Fire Departments.⁷

In addition to the "My People Fund," the Dollywood Foundation launched a partnership with the Mountain Tough Recovery Team. This partnership was to continue to support these families in

the coming months by providing \$3 million for this effort.⁴ Additional contributions established and supported the Wildfire Scholarship Fund where every high school junior and senior in Sevier County whose homes were destroyed by the fires received a \$4,500 scholarship.⁴

The study examined each of these CSR efforts and the level of importance that the efforts had on the organization and the public affected. In a larger sense, the work of this study is to answer the top administrative question of are the CSR efforts worth it to companies. The study could raise the level of understanding of CSR and its value. More organizations could adopt socially responsible qualities, which would improve the workplace and the community around it.

Methods

The purpose of the study is to measure the effects of CSR and determine its impact on an organization. The study specifically looks at the Smoky Mountain Wildfires and Dollywood's CSR response of the campaign, "My People Fund." The study attempts to measure the effects of the "My People Fund" campaign on its targeted audience, those affected by the Smoky Mountain Wildfires, and determine how the campaign impacted Dollywood itself. International Review Board (IRB) approval for the study was sought and granted on March 12, 2020. This study was conducted in two phases. Phase one consisted of an examination of secondary sources such as news coverage, scientific studies and surveys. The information gathered in phase one assisted in the development of the interview process in phase two. Phase two consists of interviews centered around the creation and effects of the "My People Fund." Due to Covid-19, phase two could not be conducted at this time. Phase two will be carried out as planned post-pandemic.

Phase One

News outlets all across the nation covered the Dollywood Foundation, the creation of the “My People Fund” and the *Smoky Mountain Rise: A Benefit for the My People Fund* telethon. Due to Dollywood’s target audience being in Tennessee and the surrounding areas, the study focused on examining local new coverage of the CSR efforts. For example, News Channel 5 in Nashville, Tennessee was predicted to be an important source due to its location being within Dollywood’s target audience and being the capital of the state, thus increasing its prominence and reach. However, some national coverage was studied such as coverage by HLN, an American basic cable news channel owned by CNN.

The Dollywood Foundation archives were also studied to gain important background information. The archives listed information on every stage of the “My People Fund.” The amount of families served, scholarships funded, donations to fire departments and telethon outcomes were all detailed in the Dollywood Foundation archives. This information was influential in the determination of the impact of the fund and forming questions for the interview process in phase two.

Additionally, a study that specifically surveyed how the “My People Fund” impacted the public and how the public recovered was a significant secondary source. Studies on CSR, brand loyalty, consumer trust and employee loyalty were also included in the study. These secondary sources served as vital background information about CSR and the impact that it has on the public and the organization itself. The knowledge gained in phase one influenced the creation and implementation of the interview process in phase two.

Phase Two

Interviews will be analyzed to determine the impact that CSR had on Dollywood during the campaign of “My People Fund.” Additionally, an examination of common themes from employees to find any connections that might prove to be important in the creation and execution of successful CSR campaigns will take place.

The study population includes Dollywood marketing employees who assisted with the creation and execution of the “My People Fund” campaign. These interviews allow the study to examine the impact that the campaign has on the organization and the steps that went into the creation of the campaign. This information helps with measuring the importance of CSR and how the public was assisted in the campaign. The age of the study population is 18 years and older.

Participants will first hear about the project through a recruitment email that can be found in Appendix A. The email is planned for distribution one month before the desired interview date. All emails and files will be through the UT Vault, a service provided by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville that provides secure and quick communication and file transfers. The principal investigator's contact information is on the email and will be available to have any question-and-answer sessions as necessary. When participants agree to an interview, the principal investor will ensure that participants understand all the information about the study by detailing the study's purpose and methods before setting up an interview time with the participant. On the day of the scheduled interview, the principal investigator will once again detail the study and have the participants sign the consent form before beginning the interview with the participants. The consent form can be found in Appendix B.

To minimize the risk of participants being identified, no participant information besides participants' affiliation with Dollywood will be published. In addition, steps of protection from participants being identifiable include the destruction of audio recordings and the code key prior to analysis. Audio recordings will be transcribed and then destroyed before analysis. When transcribing the data, participants will be assigned a code name. This will ensure that identifiers are stripped. The code key will be destroyed prior to the analysis.

Results

Phase One: Secondary Research Findings

The importance of CSR remains in question. Many are curious to see if CSR efforts are worth a company's time and resources. Previous studies searched for a link between involvement in CSR programs and higher economic and financial value. Before this can be studied, it must first be asked if consumers are responding and changing behaviors through CSR efforts. The answer lies within how consumers identify the brand and identify a business.⁸ A brand image can lead to positive attitudes and feelings that can be transferred to the business through the consumer.⁸ How a customer views the values and causes of a brand is becoming more important to the purchasing process. A Corporate Citizenship poll conducted by Cone Communications finds that "84 percent of Americans say they would be likely to switch brands to one associated with a good cause."⁹ Similarly, a Hill & Knowlton Interactive poll reveals that 79 percent of Americans take corporate citizenship into account when deciding whether to buy a particular company's product and 36 percent consider corporate citizenship an important factor when making purchasing decisions.¹⁰ Consumer loyalty is also an key aspect of how consumers react to businesses and impact the effectiveness of CSR efforts. Consumer loyalty is defined as the non-random and

repeated buying behavior of the same brand or group of products.¹¹ One study over the topic found not only that consumers prefer companies and brands with CSR efforts, but that the association of social responsibility leads consumers to develop behavioral attitudes such as increasing brand loyalty and the willingness to pay more for a brand.⁸

Going back to the original question of CSR affecting higher economic and financial value, if consumers are switching brands due to CSR, increasing loyalty to responsible brands and continuing to buy products from a responsible brand even if prices increase, it could be argued that there has been an increased economic and financial value due to CSR. Companies could potentially overcome competitors, increase repetitive buying and raise prices with no significant decrease in demand all while helping the community.

It is important to note that the CSR efforts chosen must make logical sense for the company. If a consumer sees a company completing a CSR campaign that does not align with the company's traditional values and actions, consumers will reject the efforts and most likely claim the company is only doing it for attention. A study on corporate responsibility overload identifies three major categories of consumers' perceptions of CSR actions; other-center, self-centered and win-win.¹² When companies act with altruistic reasons, the outcome is an other-centered perception of CSR. The consumer sees the company acting because it feels morally committed and is acting in a sense of responsibility.¹² Self-centered reasons are seen as completing CSR as a means to increase an organization's profits. A combination of the two approaches is the win-win option where the efforts are values-driven and receive profit attributions. As more companies start engaging in CSR efforts, consumers become more critical as strategies such as

greenwashing, which occurs when an organization spends more effort on marketing itself as being socially responsible than actually helping the community, take place.^{12, 13} Overall, consumers have positive views of CSR and are satisfied with the development of new programs; however, once consumers become skeptical of CSR programs, a company will be challenged to earn back trust.¹² If CSR efforts are done in a meaningful way to both the company and the consumer, amazing positive aspects occur resulting in increased consumer dedication to a company. One study found that 92 percent of participants have a more positive reaction to a company that supports a cause they care about.¹⁴

In addition to CSR helping the company with consumers, employees' loyalty to the company has been shown to increase. Whether the actions are through economical, legal, environmental or social dimensions, employee loyalty rises when organizations practice CSR efforts.¹⁵ As seen in Figure 1, employee loyalty can increase in the forms of strong intention to stay with the organization, strong belief in the values and goals of the organization, and determination to put forth improved effort for the organization.¹⁵

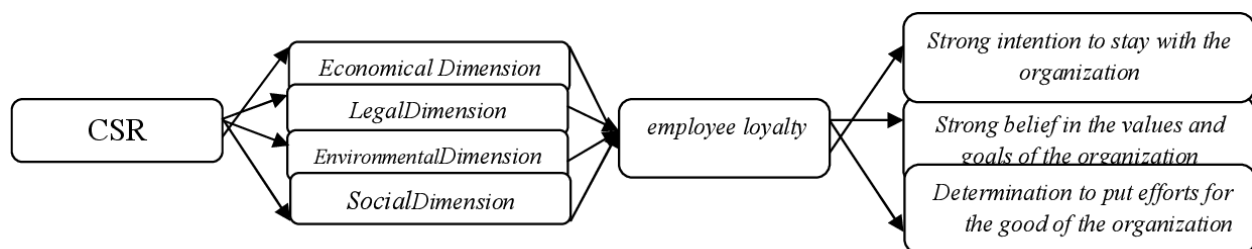


Figure 1

Employee Loyalty through CSR Model

Source: The Relationship between CSR and Employee Loyalty

If employees stay with an organization, companies save money and time by not having to find and train a new employee. When employees have a strong sense of belief in the values and goals of the organization, employees advocate on behalf of the company. Employees will be proud of where they work and will want to spread the good name of their company, furthering the consumer effects of CSR. Employees' determination to put forth efforts for the good of the organization increases motivation to go to work and lowers counterproductive behaviors such as skipping work.¹⁶ Time theft, or being paid for hours not worked, affects almost 75 percent of U.S. businesses according to an American Payroll Association study.¹⁷ Time theft costs companies \$400 billion annually in lost productivity.¹⁸ Figure 2 shows the growing prevalence of this problem for organizations.

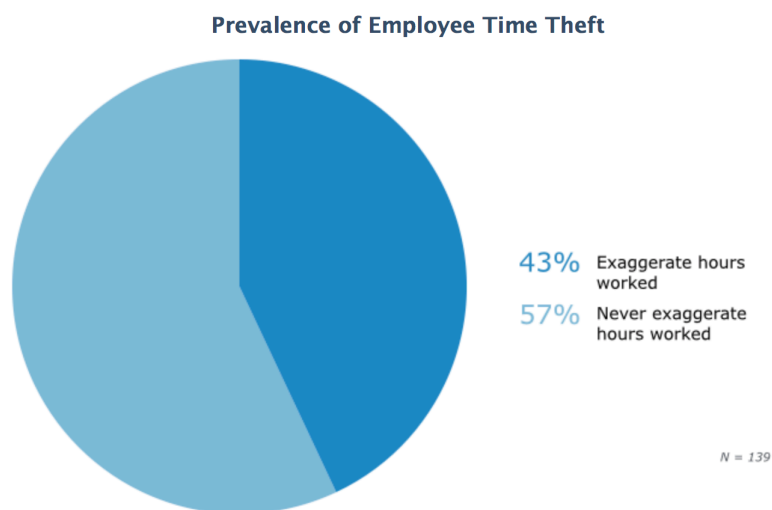


Figure 2
Prevalence of Employee Time Theft
Source: Human Resources Time and Attendance Software

If organizations can minimize the prevalence of time theft through socially responsible behaviors that motivate its employees, all parties win in the scenario. Employees will have a greater sense of purpose while working, and, therefore, will work harder in their roles.

My People Fund

The “My People Fund” was launched by the Dollywood Foundation to help in the emotional and economic crisis that The Great Smoky Mountains Wildfires created. Before examining the effects of the “My People Fund” on the Dollywood Foundation itself, observing the effects on the public are important. A report on the “My People Fund” Evaluation surveyed people who had been affected by the fires and found that cash transfers, compared to specific donations, were the most important recovery aspect in the natural disaster.¹⁹ Due to receiving \$1,000 per month for five months, a \$5,000 cash transfer at the end of the program and the majority of recipients

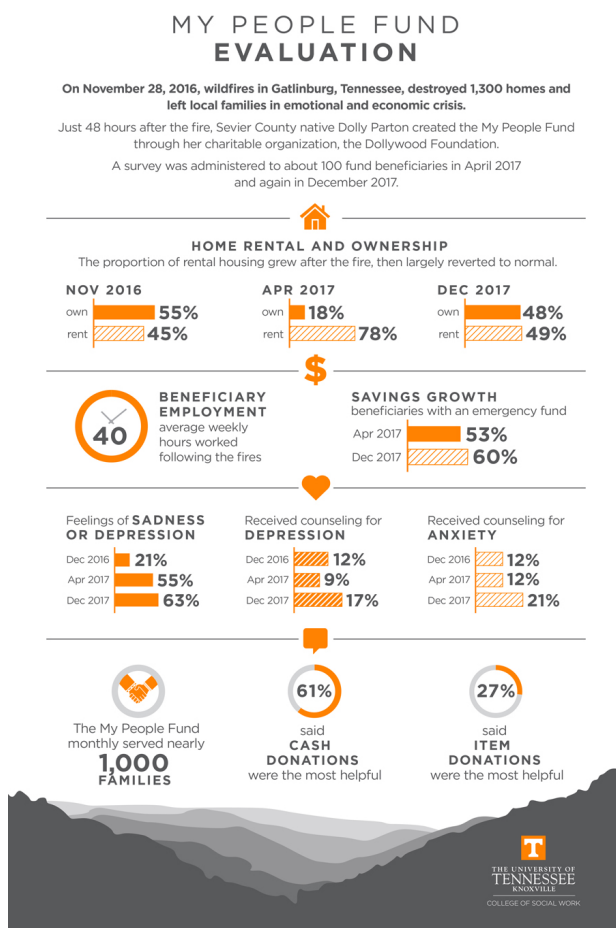


Figure 3
My People Fund Evaluation
Source: Final Report on ‘My People Fund’ Evaluation

maintaining employment in the aftermath of the fire, many reported significant signs of financial recovery.¹⁹ Figure 3 explains the details of the participants’ responses to the survey.

In further signs of recovery, the majority of participants were able to move into their original housing type.¹⁹ Additionally, the uninsured rate of participants dropped 10 percent.¹⁹ Reported emergency saving amounts also increased substantially in participants.¹⁹ Nearly 1,000 families received immediate cash assistance from the Dollywood Foundation and their partners, the Mountain Tough Recovery Team.¹⁹ The study stated the importance of using the example of

the Dollywood Foundation's immediate cash assistance for future environmental and economic disasters.¹⁹

The "My People Fund" effectively helped many of those affected by the fires. Additionally, the CSR efforts from the organization aligned with its values and mission. It is no secret that Dolly Parton calls the mountains of East Tennessee her home. She often talks about the impact that growing up in Sevierville has had on her and her career. Parton praises the area and the people who live in East Tennessee almost every chance she gets.²⁰ Due to this, it was a very natural progression for the Dollywood Foundation to partake in immediate CSR efforts after the fires. As previously established, CSR campaigns are more effective if it makes logical sense for the organization to act. If the efforts cannot be connected naturally, consumers see the campaign as self-centered, negatively impacting the image of the company in the consumers' minds. The Dollywood Foundation was located right on the edge of the devastation of the wildfires, furthering the natural progression of assisting the community that is so close in proximity. The natural and heartfelt progression of events that lead to the Dollywood Foundation's CSR efforts helped both the community and the organization itself. The "My People Fund" was praised for its efforts by consumers and media alike.

Focusing on news coverage alone, the Dollywood Foundation gained a significant increase in publicity. 2,199 news results were found about the Dollywood Foundation and the "My People Fund" including 709 newspaper articles and 212 web-based publications. Other publication types include newswires and press releases, industry trade press, blogs, videos, magazines, journals, newsletters and research reports. The industries who published about the CSR efforts range from

Entertainment and Arts, Food and Beverage, Media and Telecommunications, and Business to Travel, Hospitality and Tourism. News stations all over Tennessee and surrounding areas commended the efforts of the Dollywood Foundation and the “My People’s Fund.”



“My People Fund” donates to East Tennessee Fire Departments

Source: Dollywood Foundation

Phase Two: Future Research

Although interviews with the Dollywood Marketing team will be completed at a later time in phase two, preliminary conversations predict that the significant increase in publicity as well as an amplified positive brand image considerably boosted Dollywood’s attendance at the park. Additionally, receiving national coverage most likely helped Dollywood to grow the sentiment of its brand.

With Dollywood’s main audience being in Tennessee and the surrounding states, the foundation more than likely increased its consumer loyalty by helping those affected by the fires. By giving back to its community and its main audience, the Dollywood Foundation presumably increased

the loyalty of its consumers. Many probably agreed that because Dollywood helped so many in a time of need, the organization deserved the support of consumers. Following this thought process, people were proud to be going to Dollywood due to its CSR efforts. The research would predict that more consumers bought passes and season passes than ever before despite the rising prices over the years.

It is also predicted that the overwhelming outpouring of support over the Dollywood Foundation's CSR efforts with the fires has inspired the foundation's other CSR efforts. For example, Dollywood's Imagination Library, a non-profit branch of the Dollywood Foundation that mails free books to children across four countries, has grown and increased their reach over the past few years.

Employees would also be inspired by the Dollywood Foundation's "My People Fund." Employees become more committed to the organization if they believe in its mission and values. Dollywood has always been dedicated to the community and followed through in East Tennessee's time of need. This effort probably inspired employees and increased their dedication to the company. It is also likely that more employees wished to stay with the organization.

In phase two, interviews will take place to confirm these predictions. Questions will focus on the background and establishment of the "My People Fund" and the inspiration that has taken place among the community and the employees. An interview guide can be found in Appendix C.

Discussion

CSR has been shown to increase positive brand image, consumer loyalty and inspire employees and increase their dedication. If completed as an others-centered or a win-win focus, consumers have had a great positive attitude and behavioral change from CSR efforts.

This study aims to help future CSR efforts within organizations. CSR efforts are helpful to both the community and the organization. Many believe that CSR efforts are a responsibility of organizations and give their loyalty to brands that give back to the community. More and more, consumers “call for corporations to be ethical and promote the virtues of good corporate citizenship, as well as obey the law while striving to make a profit.”²¹ According to an environmental survey, 83 percent of participants say companies have a responsibility to help support causes.¹⁴ Hopefully through this research organizations can see the value of CSR and follow the example of successful CSR efforts such as the Dollywood Foundation’s “My People Fund.”

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Recruitment Email

Appendix A

Greetings,

My name is Victoria Johnson and I am a principal investigator working with Dr. Courtney Childers at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. We are conducting a research study about the effects of corporate social responsibility and its impact on an organization. The study will be specifically looking at the Smoky Mountain Wildfires and Dollywood's corporate socially responsible response of the campaign, "My People Fund." Due to your involvement in this campaign, I am emailing to ask if you would like to participate in a 30-minute interview at the University of Tennessee in the College of Communication and Information Scripps Convergence Lab. Participation is completely voluntary and your information will be confidential.

If you are interested or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at cjohn213@vols.utk.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Callie Victoria Johnson

Consent Form

Appendix B

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: The Importance of Corporate Social Responsibility: An Examination of the Dollywood Foundations My People Fund

Researcher(s): Callie Victoria Johnson, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Courtney Childers, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a Dollywood employee who assisted in the creation of the "My People Fund."

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to measure the effects of corporate social responsibility and determine its impact on an organization. The study will be specifically looking at the Smoky Mountain Wildfires and Dollywood's corporate socially responsible response of the campaign, "My People Fund." The study will attempt to measure the effects of the "My People Fund" campaign on its targeted audience, those affected by the Smoky Mountain Wildfires, and determine how the campaign impacted Dollywood itself.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for 30 minutes.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to describe the creation and execution of "My People Fund" and Dollywood's corporate social responsibility efforts. One interview lasting 30 minutes will occur at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the College of Communication and Information Scripps Convergence Lab. The interview will be audio recorded.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, contact Callie Victoria Johnson at cjohn213@vols.utk.edu. Any information that has been collected for the research will not be used in the study and will be erased.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the effects of corporate social responsibility and its impact on an organization. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by storing all information including consent documents, scheduling and interview information securely on the University of Tennessee campus.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research or other purpose. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study.

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will need to pay for travel.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Callie Victoria Johnson at cjohn213@vols.utk.edu and (423)667-3109 or Courtney Childers at childers@utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Interview Guide

Appendix C

What does corporate social responsibly mean to you?

Can you walk me through the process of creating the My People Fund?

The Dollywood Foundation established the My People Fund just 48 hours after the wildfires occurred. How was Dollywood motivated to create the “My People Fund” within that short amount of time?

There are so many different layers to the My People Fund with the national telethon, monthly donations to fire victims, partnership with the Mountain Tough Recovery Team and the Wildfire Scholarship Fund. Was everything planned from the start or did different layers fall into place after the announcement was made?

What research went into the 48 hours between the fires and the announcement of the My People Fund?

Did any ongoing corporate responsibility efforts influence how the My People Fund was created?

Has the My People Fund inspired other corporate social responsibility efforts within the organization?

How do you think an organization can best remain ready to help their community in a moment’s notice when a disaster such as the Smoky Mountain Wildfires strike?

When your team first started the campaign, did you expect the number of donations and support that the nation contributed?

How was launching a partnership with the Mountain Tough Recovery Team essential to the My People Fund campaign?

How have you seen the My People Fund’s impact on the community?

Have you seen any changes within your organization after the campaign?

How was the campaign designed to engage and inspire both the community and employees?

Now, in 2020, looking back on the 2017 wildfires and My People Fund, how do you view the campaign and its impact?

Do you still see the effects of the My People Fund on the community and the organization today?

What do you think made the Dollywood Foundation's My People Fund so successful?