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The nicest guy you never knew

When James Widener Ray died last October, at the age of 53, official Seattle didn't notice.

His death didn't make the news. He wasn't the talk of the town bigwigs. His name wasn't widely known even in his neighborhood of the past two decades, Capitol Hill. That was no accident. It turns out James Ray was one of the richer people in Seattle, who lived on the city's largest single-family lot, 3.7 acres overlooking Interlaken Park.

But he wasn't out to flaunt it. He was out to give it all away. Quietly.

"I call him Seattle's secret philanthropist," says Charlette LeFevre, co-director of the Seattle Museum of the Mysteries, who knew Ray. "For years he went around giving money to little groups that don't normally get any attention.

"He never tried to take any credit for it. He was just real."

Ray's generosity might have remained mostly unsung were it not for his final act: He donated his entire estate, an estimated \$78 million, to his equally unknown private charity, the Raynier Institute.

The gift ranks in the top 20 in size in the nation last year, and it is the second largest in Seattle, behind the giving of Microsoft mogul Bill Gates.

And still, few noticed. Until Ray's sister sued for the money.

That attracted the attention of the Capitol Hill Times, a neighborhood weekly. Last week it ran a story on Ray and the family legal battle. The editor, Doug Schwartz, said he'd never heard of Ray, either.

"He was flying beneath the radar," Schwartz says.

Partly that was because Ray had bipolar disorder. He didn't work. His money was inherited from the Widener family of Philadelphia, which made a fortune in the meat and railroad industries.

It was also because his interests were so unconventional.

He loved music and gave \$1 million to the Experience Music Project. He gave \$500,000 to a Seattle program called Youth Advancement Through Music and Art, which uses the arts to reach out to at-risk kids.

Yet he also gave \$129,000 to the Seattle Metaphysical Library, a set of "transdimensional" readings housed in Ballard.

He gave \$33,000 to the Seattle Theosophical Society, which investigates "unexplained laws of nature."

He donated his books on Freemasonry, magic and secret societies to the Museum of the Mysteries, a "paranormal science" museum on Capitol Hill known for its UFO exhibit.

He gave to save the snow leopard. To preserve the cemetery where Ben Franklin is buried. To help disabled kids ski.

"He was this eclectic renaissance man," says Beth McCaw, a lawyer for Raynier Institute.

The institute, in a small office across the street from the Comet Tavern on Capitol Hill, has only two part-time employees. When it gets the money — assuming Ray's will is upheld in court — it will start giving it away.

It will be a major philanthropic force, even in this city of the millionaire foundation. And it will be for kids, animals, musicians and mystics.

It'd be nice if Seattle knew more about the man who left this one-of-a-kind gift. But a friend says that's the thing about James Ray: He didn't need to be known.