



# Reflections from the Inside: Philanthropic Leaders on Racial Justice and Grantmaking

by Rick Cohen

## Editor's Note

*This retrospective look at the past two decades of philanthropy's approaches to race was primarily based on interviews with 21 racial justice and equity leaders in the field. This article shares their stories, experiences and reflections on how the sector has changed and evolved in addressing race over the past 20 years and into the present. In some cases, they found themselves responding to factors outside of their institutions – incidents and dynamics in which nuances of race beyond the easily observable manifestations of racial animus propelled them to sharpen or deepen their understandings. In others, the impetus came internally, from the intersection of the quality and composition of foundation leadership with the foundations' social justice missions. This led to grantmaking that wasn't simply "designated" for specific racial or ethnic groups, but aimed at addressing and rectifying racial disparities that result from complex dynamics.*

*We offer this mix of reflections recognizing that there was progress made in earlier stages of the field that can easily be forgotten and yet still holds lessons – in spite of being too soon lost in the collective discourse, or buried in reports on foundation shelves. We know it is not comprehensive, and many key moments and actors are still missing, but we believe it helps share a slice of the path of this work.*

*Though philanthropy may have too great a tendency for self-congratulation, it is important to acknowledge progress where it has been made, and lift up possible guideposts for those coming into the work more recently either as new grantmakers or perhaps those moving at a different pace. Yet as critical as the needs are in the communities we aim to serve, we similarly must continue to push for deeper impacts and greater progress. We share these funders' perspectives – all of whom have seen both struggle and progress, and offered examples of each – as a way to help consider where we have been and to encourage us to go further.*

## Philanthropic Approaches to Racial Justice: A Brief Overview of Historical Markers

Among foundations that have incorporated a racial equity or justice lens into their grantmaking, the evolution has not been a straight line over the years. Conversations with grantmakers – both current executives and program officers at foundations as well as people who have left philanthropy – suggest that foundations' paths toward a more intentional racial equity focus have been as varied as the foundations themselves.

### Civil Rights and Anti-Poverty Frames

A good starting place for reviewing modern philanthropy's progress along this path is foundations' support, beginning in the late 1950s, of traditional civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equality, the National Urban League, and the National Council of Negro Women. Among the larger supporters of these civil rights movement organizations were the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Some smaller but also critically important foundations active in the civil rights arena were the Taconic Foundation, the Field Foundation, and the Stern Family Fund. Other foundations such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the

New World Foundation and the Norman Foundation funded voter registration efforts. Doing so was not without risk – foundations found themselves heavily criticized by some members of Congress for their support of civil rights organizations and campaigns.

The civil rights and equality framework characterized much of the grantmaking by foundations interested in race for the next 20 years. But the promise of equality presaged by the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was not borne out, with persistent racial inequities continuing in education, employment and health indicators.

Following the civil rights victories and with growing numbers of people of color working in philanthropy, interviewees with a longer historical view of foundation activity in this arena described the emergence of complacency on race within philanthropy – a belief that the nation had moved beyond racism. Many foundations from the 1970s through the 1990s were focused on tackling symptoms of poverty – and while often recognizing people of color as key "target populations," still approached strategy without incorporating a strong analysis of the role racism plays in economic and educational disparities between people of color and Whites.

As Gladys Washington, program director at the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, reflects, "'Black' was code for 'poor,' and philanthropy was more charitable in nature.

The approach was simply to deal with the symptoms of poverty, but often did not engage the people impacted in developing solutions or strategies.”

“Racism was often treated as a backdrop or a historical remnant, but not central in grantmaking strategy,” explains Lori Villarosa, executive director of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, who was previously on the program staff at the C.S. Mott Foundation through most of the 1990s until 2002. This era also gave rise to policy proposals focused on rectifying the individual behaviors of the “underclass” and to increasing right-wing attacks on civil rights remedies such as affirmative action. While in some cases the attacks reinvigorated more traditional civil rights funding, the political climate further diminished the inclination of some anti-poverty funders to tackle issues of racism head on. “Even in liberal philanthropy, regressive dynamics were at play, such as Saul Alinsky-style arguments that race and identity politics were divisive,” explains Villarosa.

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Alvin Starks, who worked as a racial justice grantmaker at Open Society Foundations, the Arcus Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation during the past decade, shared his perspective on this period preceding his entry to philanthropy. “The pre-structural racism era was primarily understood as civil rights advocacy, which is a good thing. We created legal conditions to build inclusion for people of color communities, but those communities couldn’t move through those doors [on their own] ... More needed to be done to move things forward.” The limitations of otherwise laudatory civil rights funding, with widening disparities in social conditions despite the support of the civil rights movement, would later lead to explorations of the deeper nuances of structural racism and how foundations might address those concerns.

### **Emergent Approaches in the 90s: Institutionalized Racism, Racial Justice and Diversity**

In the 1990s some foundations began moving beyond civil rights and older anti-poverty frames to focus on institutional racism and race relations. For example, in 1991, the Levi Strauss Foundation (the corporate foundation of Levi Strauss & Co.) was the first national foundation during this period to explicitly name “institutional racism” as the focus of its grantmaking. Its Project Change experimented with community task forces to address racial prejudice and institutional racism in four communities where the company had plants – Valdosta, Georgia; El Paso, Texas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Knoxville, Tennessee.

Shaking the nation out of a sense of racial complacency, the civil unrest in the South Central area of Los Angeles in 1992 following the Rodney King verdict revealed racial fissures that went far beyond issues of diversity and changed how many foundations approached race. As in the aftermath of previous civil disturbances, there was an increase in funding for programs aimed at improving race relations and valuing diversity following what happened in South Central. But some foundations, particularly those with people of color on staff, began to move beyond the civil rights and equality frame to a more explicit racial justice approach in grantmaking. They responded by supporting the creation or expansion of new organizations in Los Angeles that emphasized grassroots organizing led by people of color – signaling a growing recognition in philanthropy that what happened in South Central wasn’t simply a riot, but in many ways a rebellion against ongoing racial injustice. Los Angeles in particular saw increased investment in community organizing groups across race from both national and regional funders, growing and strengthening

a new infrastructure of people of color-led institutions that are among the most effective racial justice organizing groups in the country.

The foundation grantmaking that evolved in the wake of South Central is still evident today in new organizations that emerged “from the ashes” like the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Association, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE), Action for Grassroots Empowerment and Neighborhood Development Alternatives (AGENDA), and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. And pre-existing organizations like the Community Coalition and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center were strengthened in this period as they responded to the civil unrest and built cross-racial alliances. Some of the growth of these organizations can be attributed to Liberty Hill Foundation’s Fund for a New Los Angeles, established in 1993 to provide larger and longer-term grants to new community-based activist groups and to anchor institutions.

The role of Liberty Hill in the wake of South Central points out another dimension of foundations developing a more conscious, reflective and analytical approach to grantmaking for racial justice. Liberty Hill was an early member of a collection of progressive public foundations associated with young donors that joined together under the umbrella of the Funding Exchange. A Territory Resource in Seattle (now Social Justice Fund Northwest) and FEX members such as the Fund for Southern Communities in Atlanta, the Chinook Fund in Colorado, the Vanguard Public Foundation in the San Francisco Bay Area and the

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Haymarket People’s Fund in Massachusetts all engaged in grantmaking with degrees of attention to the challenge of institutional racism. As part of their grantmaking models, they often invited those from the communities they served to play significant roles in the determination and distribution of grants. Like these public foundations, a number of smaller family foundations such as the Needmor Fund in Toledo, the Norman Foundation in New York City, the McKay Foundation in San Francisco, and at that time the Public Welfare Foundation in Washington, D.C. made institutional racism a theme, if not the focus, of their grantmaking.

While many foundation efforts were primarily focused on how communities could move from cross-racial dialogue to local action on common concerns, these smaller progressive funders and public foundations like FEX members increasingly supported a new breed of organizing group that challenged the historical, non-racial Alinsky model and advanced more explicit multiracial organizing<sup>1</sup> – such as the Center for Third World Organizing.

Many of the antecedents of today’s work on structural racism were seeded in this post-L.A. phase when the growing recognition of the need for deeper transformation was running up against the limitations of traditional civil rights and community development work. During this era, in addition to the efforts noted above, a number of national foundations also began exploring new program areas tackling the issue of institutional racism much more explicitly.

From 1994-1996, the C.S. Mott Foundation undertook an exploratory phase of grantmaking directly tackling “institutional racism” and “improving race relations.” In 1997, the board doubled the budget of its U.S. Race and Ethnic Relations Program and adopted a new program objective: combating root causes of institutional and societal racism, and building understanding and appreciation of racial diversity, primarily through support of dialogue leading to transformative action at the local, regional and national levels.<sup>2,3</sup>

Also during this period, in 1996, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched its Capitalizing on Diversity grantmaking focus to “promote, facilitate and assist efforts that seek reconciliations and consensus building across racial, cultural and ethnic barriers so as to strengthen democracies.” Kellogg also engaged VISIONS Inc. to provide anti-racism training sessions for staff, board and grantees.<sup>4</sup>

While the Rockefeller Foundation had a long history of funding civil rights, community development and education, among other issues, in the late 1990s it launched a more explicitly race-focused three-year initiative called National Conversations that led to two funding portfolios: Race, Policy & Democracy, and Racial Justice Innovations.<sup>5</sup>

Also in the late 1990s, in partnership with national funders such as Ford, Kellogg, Mott, and The California Endowment, some community foundations were also engaging in more intentional work addressing diversity and increasingly considering aspects of institutional racism. In 1999, the consulting firm Rainbow Research convened 60 community foundations in peer learning retreats to discuss how to reduce racism in their communities. While there were major variations in how explicitly and intentionally the community foundations were practicing this work, as evidenced by baseline data reported from 116 foundations, the report reflects momentum in the discourse among often otherwise less risk-prone community foundations.

### **Post 9/11: A Shifting Context**

Like the South Central civil disturbances, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 shook some in philanthropy again to rethink how they approached questions of race in their grantmaking. The 9/11 attacks unleashed a wave of racial, ethnic and religious backlash against Muslims, along with discriminatory local and national security policies and practices. Not only Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims, but immigrants of many nationalities have been deeply impacted by increased government and community scrutiny since 9/11. In the first decade of the 21st century, these developments motivated a small number of foundations toward a greater awareness of issues of race and ethnicity, moving from concerns about explicit racial animosity to recognition of the disproportionate racial and ethnic impacts of post 9/11 national security and immigration policies and practices. Funders in this arena such as Atlantic Philanthropies, Open Society Foundations, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, some community foundations, and smaller progressive and family foundations have supported the emergence of new racial justice leadership in largely immigrant communities and populations.

Also adding to something of a conservative backlash was an event just days before 9/11. The NGO Forum, parallel to the U.N. World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, received the support of a number of large

U.S. foundations, including \$10 million from the Ford Foundation. The NGO Forum issued a controversial declaration that described Israel as a “racist, apartheid state” responsible for “racist crimes including war crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing.” Although the NGO Forum blowback was largely directed against Ford, it shook many in philanthropy and led to retrenchments that were only exacerbated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Reflecting on other trends of this period, Villarosa notes, “We had been seeing a small but growing number of peer funders focusing more explicitly on racial justice within philanthropy during the 1990s. However, the conflation of political backlash, immediately followed by the economic crisis when the high tech bubble burst, led to scaling back at many foundations and some of these emerging more direct racial programs were more vulnerable.” With initial support from Mott, she and a board of racial justice advocates – the majority of whose organizations had been funded by the Mott Foundation during the 1990s – launched the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) in January 2003 to “increase the amount and effectiveness of resources aimed at addressing institutional and structural racism.”

The first decade of the new millennium witnessed a number of changes in society occurring in rapid fashion that moved foundations to act on issues of race. As the 2000s progressed, for example, census data showed dramatic demographic shifts taking place in the country. States like California and Texas were rapidly becoming “majority-minority,” and demographers predicted that by 2040 the nation as a whole would no longer be majority-White. Foundations committed to working on race could be seen shifting their analysis and strategies to take into account structural, systemic underpinnings of racial inequities, and the capacities needed to support change efforts led by those most affected by racism. Of particular note, at the Council on Foundations conference in 2004, Susan Berresford (then president of the Ford Foundation) committed a \$10 million match to the Fulfilling the Dream Fund managed by Public Interest Projects aimed at continuing the battle to preserve affirmative action.<sup>6</sup> Through the five years of the fund, 38 foundations and three individual donors joined.

### Sharpening Focus on Structural Racism

In terms of societal events, the devastation of much of New Orleans and surrounding areas as a result of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 again revealed racial fissures and structural issues for foundations to confront. As the aftermath of

Katrina evolved, the disproportionate and severe impacts of the storm on Black communities, particularly in the Lower Ninth Ward, revealed historic and continuing inequities as Black residents frequently found themselves displaced and scattered throughout the region – with little help from the Federal Emergency Management Administration and other major disaster relief nonprofits. Foundations with more of a structural analysis of the impact of Katrina devoted resources to community organizing, though others tried to deracialize their responses and supported community-wide planning initiatives that often went nowhere. Of significant interest in the Katrina response was the capitalization of a new foundation, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, accompanied by grantmaking of some foundations with a consciousness of the racial justice dimensions of what occurred there – notably the Foundation for the Mid-South, the Kellogg Foundation and the Marguerite Casey Foundation.

Along with historical markers like Katrina, there were emerging issues that captured the attention of more astute grantmakers who could discern the differences between providing resources targeting racial minorities and developing grantmaking agendas that attacked the roots of structural racism. For example, Lori Bezahler of the Edward W. Hazen Foundation and Sherry Magill of the Jessie Ball Dupont Foundation discuss issues in public education (or the privatization of public education) and the inadequacies of education reform solutions such as charter schools, vouchers and high-stakes testing that may actually perpetuate and exacerbate racial inequities. Formerly with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Neighborhood Funders Group, Garland Yates notes the powerful impact of the nation’s foreclosure crisis, which sucked a tremendous amount of wealth out of Black and Latino communities. Yates implies that foundations that were addressing the foreclosure crisis, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, also had to address structural issues, because it was not possible to cogently analyze and respond to the pattern of subprime lending and mortgage foreclosure without using a structural lens. In a way, as Yates suggests, the inadequacy of traditional responses to a societal phenomenon such as massive foreclosures across the nation brings a structural analysis into sharp relief.

The same applies to the crisis of many cities. Kimberly Roberson, program director at the C.S. Mott Foundation, describes the foundation’s attention to the economic woes of the city of Flint. Describing Flint’s troubles, Roberson

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observes that “we can’t go with the rising tides that are lifting all boats, because all boats are not being lifted.” This is an important appreciation of why foundations have to think in targeted and structural terms, because across-the-board improvements don’t necessarily undo systemic gaps and inequities. A similar dynamic is evident in the bankruptcy of Detroit, a majority African-American city, whose financial circumstances constitute a case study of structural inequities with a strong racial component. For foundations engaged in Detroit such as Skillman, Kresge, Kellogg and Ford, targeted responses are warranted because, as in Flint, solutions aimed at lifting all boats in Detroit would simply reinforce and perpetuate historical imbalances.

For foundations today, the structural dimensions of race in the U.S. are all-encompassing, no matter what the issue. The structural dimensions emerge in discussions of the efforts of states, particularly but not only in the South, to enact restrictive laws on voting rights all but explicitly aimed at suppressing turnout in communities of color; in controversies around laws and cases such as “stand your ground” statutes and the “castle doctrine” that feed into negative stereotypes and make Black people particularly vulnerable to violence and homicide; in efforts of foundations joined by President Obama to address the problems of education, criminal justice, employment and income associated with Black men and boys; and in the struggle to move the nation toward comprehensive immigration reform. In these and other arenas, the foundations that appreciate the analytical power of a structural racism lens are reshaping their grantmaking in creative ways.

## Changing the Frame: How Foundations Talk About Race

In interviews conducted for this article, leaders in philanthropy often noted how difficult it is for foundations to have conversations about race.

### Moving the Conversation Beyond Diversity

Gail Christopher, vice president at W.K. Kellogg Foundation, shares that “it’s much more comfortable to say ‘diversity and inclusion,’ but not ‘race.’ To actually be explicit, that’s recent. We’ve made progress but we have a long way to go. Boards need to be more diverse; and once they are diverse, they need to learn how to deal with it and the conscious and unconscious biases they are going to bring. The model of philanthropy is not one that lends itself easily to equity, or racial equity.”

Reflecting back on her 10 years as a program officer at the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, Kolu Zigbi makes a similar observation that the language of the racial conversation was “one of two things ... colorblind or diversity, and the diversity conversation was just about diversity in the philanthropic community.”

For Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and president of PolicyLink and former senior vice president of the Rockefeller Foundation, the lack of racial justice and equity analysis in grantmaking was a sector-wide issue in philanthropy. Reflecting on her time at Rockefeller, she recalls, “The fact that these foundations were doing work that was touching racial justice in America, but without a racial justice lens, really said to us that we needed to focus not just on one foundation, but to find people in other foundations who were coming to similar conclusions – and see if we couldn’t lift up racial practice and heighten sensitivity to it throughout philanthropy.”

### Racial Equity as Distinct from Equality

Lauren Casteel, vice president at the Denver Foundation, recalls the environment in which the racial equity lens developed in philanthropy. “I think the shift was really working in partnership and growing more comfortable in calling out the issues of power and privilege between funders and grantees; and similarly beginning to recognize that it’s necessary to link those issues of power and privilege to issues of racial, ethnic and income distinctions,” she says. “And also literally over time people began to understand the demographics ... Part of this shift was explicitly working to figure out how to have a respectful dialogue with grantees, if in fact one wants to affect change with communities of color.”

For Casteel, “the field has begun to articulate the difference between equality and equity,” which she believes is a crucial factor in appreciating the difference between problems in race relations and structural racism.

Some funders shared concern that the diversity dialogue might actually be used in some circumstances as a diversion. According to Starks, “The diversity framework is really operating as a muzzle toward racial justice advocacy, in which changes in the composition of foundation staffing get substituted for substantive changes in foundation grantmaking.” He adds, “It takes a lot of courage to do race, as well as historical and political insight. It’s easier to have a race relations discussion rather than challenging the structures.”

Zigbi reflects on why it is important for foundations to shift from individual to structural understandings of racism. “We have a long history of racism in this country,” she says, “but most people don’t know how it’s been embedded in such important legal structures that seem to be colorblind. When you raise the question of structural racism in the food system, for example, people are only able to speak to the anecdotal, to the symptoms of structural racism. Even in a simplistic way they cannot articulate it ... And I think funders can play an important role – it’s basic information and communication – but we are very far from that.”

## Language: Naming Race

Nonetheless, the conversation remains difficult and one that many foundations with a commitment to addressing race still try to avoid in explicit terms. Former Marguerite Casey Foundation director of programs and evaluation, Cynthia Renfro, observes that the preference in philanthropy to keep the conversation focused on diversity is maintained in part by the feeling of some people that the nation is now a “post-racial society,” and that difficult conversations about race are somewhat passé. Even in progressive circles, many view racial justice work as a subset of economic justice work. Focusing on economic disparities in a social justice framework, they believe, achieves the objectives of racial justice without the divisiveness of pitting people of color versus Whites—or worse, people of color against each other. Renfro doesn’t see it that way. “If it’s not stipulated explicitly,” she says, “you lose the issue of race.”

At the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, one of the first in the South to address the debilitating effects of racial inequities, Gladys Washington describes the foundation’s shift in nomenclature from “program officers” to “network officers,” reflecting their functional roles of trying to be “inclusive of those voices” in Black communities. For foundations coming to grips with the systemic, structural dimensions of race in the South, Washington says, “it changes the foundation’s leadership; it changes the way decisions get made.”

It is a mistake, however, to talk about philanthropy, even progressive foundations, as though the issues and reception are relatively similar around the nation. Compared to many, foundations in the Deep South have had a different experience to contend with. The southern foundations that went into racial justice grantmaking – Mary Reynolds Babcock in North Carolina, the Lyndhurst Foundation in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Jessie Ball Dupont in Jacksonville, Florida – were by and large led by White southerners who had grown up in segregated school systems, with motivations bred by the experience of watching the societally debilitating effects of intentional, official racial segregation. Recently, Grantmakers for Southern Progress released a report, *As the South Goes: Philanthropy and Social Justice in the US South*, based on interviews showing that “traditional Southern funders” (as GSP categorized them) “have discomfort with both the language and the underlying concept of social justice. These funders see social justice as an outdated term with negative connotations of the civil rights movement and as being too confrontational and divisive.”<sup>7</sup> While GSP did not ask specifically about race, those funders labeled as social change or social justice funders gave a mixed response about the viability of explicitly addressing race in their work.

## Seeding and Sustaining Structural Racism Work

Susan Batten, currently the president and CEO of the Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE) and formerly with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, calls for “more direct investments to support organizing for policy and systems change.” She is concerned about the future of racial justice grantmaking work. “We have stuff to ride on now,” she contends, “but the issue for us is how to sustain this work, how do we ensure that there is a point of view that is steeped around racial justice, an analysis of what’s driving the disparities today ... We have real work to do on the sustainability front.”

Peggy Saika, president of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP), suggests that what is needed is a democratization or socialization of philanthropic capital. In the absence of that kind of change, Saika suggests that the measure of progress regarding racial justice is “Are we more powerful on the ground and have we made changes on the ground?” She believes that “there has been progress [on issues of race], but not because of philanthropic investments.” Saika’s challenge is implicitly that there are limitations to what foundations can and cannot achieve with their grantmaking, given that the beneficiaries of most foundations’ racial justice grantmaking are hardly in control of the decision-making. To draw this point out, how effective can philanthropic grantmaking be when philanthropic capital is generated and often still controlled by socioeconomic classes and corporate institutions that in some ways benefit from institutional and structural racism?

Far from defeatism, these observations are pragmatic reflections of the difficulty of addressing structural racism in this society. They reflect the limitations of what can and cannot be achieved through foundations and how difficult it is to fashion programs that don’t fall prey to an unintended focus on individual behavioral changes. While conceding that foundations “don’t have to work the same way or intervene the same way because of their different missions and focuses,” former Ford Foundation vice president Maya Harris argues that “having a shared framework for understanding racial justice, shared definitions of structural racism within an institution, is really important.” To this point, the foundation sector as a whole should be engaged in debate regarding what constitutes grantmaking that addresses conditions of structural racism in our society.

Funders who were interviewed recognized a range of intermediaries including identity-based affinity groups such as ABFE, AAPIP, Hispanics in Philanthropy, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and Funders for LGBTQ Issues; organizations such as PRE, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, and D5; consultants such as VISIONS and Marga Incorporated; and many well-known national racial justice experts such as John A. Powell of

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the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, Maya Wiley, formerly of Center for Social Inclusion, and others as advancing analysis around issues of structural racism.

Christopher of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation adds, “It’s all about having different players and hearing different voices. If you are the privileged group, you never have to know that it exists; but when you are invited and required to work with people that shift your understanding, you hear different perspectives and come up with different solutions.”

Roberson notes that “PRE and others have helped foundations develop and access tools that help their program officers understand how race plays out in the institutions and structures of our society. Many funders have predominantly been thinking about access to services and not about the systems that people bump into even if they gain access to those services.”

Sherry Salway Black, former senior vice president of First Nations Development Institute and Eagle Staff Fund, notes importantly that while there are foundations that she and others have worked with specifically focusing on better understanding the needs and dynamics of Native American communities, given the constant turnover within philanthropy, “there can be a continual need for education.”

### **Change from the Inside and Outside**

Institutions, whether philanthropic or not, by and large change not of their own volition – except in unusual circumstances of visionary leadership. Rather, they function within society, amongst their peers, and tend toward limited change unless prompted and pushed. Gara LaMarche tells the story of what happened at Atlantic Philanthropies when he stepped down as CEO. Concerned about the continuation of Atlantic’s role as a leading funder of social movements, some 50 to 60 civic leaders signed a letter to the Atlantic board of trustees that he believes had some impact. “I think the trustees really were taken by the fact that there was an audience that expected things of them and demanded things of them,” LaMarche recalls. “I’ve always wondered and lamented that there isn’t more concerted action aimed at individual foundations.”

The sector needs leadership with vision in order to make substantial progress. “Philanthropy has lost its vision to think and act big,” contends Silicon Valley Community Foundation CEO Emmett Carson. “Twenty-five years ago, we had people who made big bets, they had big visions of what they wanted the country to look like, and they were willing to put their own reputations on the line.” Echoing

LaMarche, Carson says that “today, philanthropy hires people not to make waves, not to be as challenging of the status quo.” In fact, he sees foundations writ large as resisting change. “Foundations like operating as a private club, like Augusta for golfing, without public scrutiny,” says Carson. “We used to have membership [association] leaders who challenged us, [but] now we have membership organizations that say, ‘Tell us what you want us to do and we’re here to satisfy your needs.’” If they challenge foundations on issues of race at all, “they challenge on the margin.”

## **Moving the Needle on Structural Racism Analysis in Foundations**

What might it take to move philanthropy further – even the foundations that are already using a framework of structural racism – toward actions that appreciably advance the cause?

### **Intentional Focus on Racial Equity in Grantmaking**

For Harris, a grantmaking portfolio explicitly dedicated to racial justice is crucial. “[It is] really important to have an explicit commitment, to have a dedicated set of philanthropic resources for advancing racial justice, so that you’re conscious and deliberate, so that you can develop expertise across issues and constituencies,” she argues.

Others also offer perspectives on how and why they deeply embed a structural racism lens within issue-focused work. Lori Bezahler, president of the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, offers a powerful perspective based on her foundation’s intensive focus on education. “If we look at education as an obvious example, because there has been so much attention, if you really look at the interventions and hoped-for outcomes of popular educational reforms, they are not at all structural, instead they are highly individuated,” Bezahler contends. “They ignore the impact of related systems on educational success, yet they expect outcomes to be different.” She suggests that the reformers rely on “a very narrowly defined economic model, which is not a structural analysis.” While “in a very varied landscape, the language of equity permeates philanthropy,” she says, “the devil is in the details as it always is, how words come to mean different things for different people in different institutions.” She explains that how change happens in education is often “uninterrogated ideology,” and as such, bypasses a structural analysis that captures the need for systems change to achieve racial justice.

In contrast to Harris’s argument for an explicit racial justice grantmaking portfolio, Ray Colmenar sees a pro and con



## The Importance of Internal Leadership

While external forces, both indirectly and through direct engagement, have pushed and shaped the path of philanthropy, one consistent thread heard in the interviews was the importance of philanthropic leaders making racial justice a priority. In particular, many recognized critical moments where the leadership of people of color pushed for or allowed for greater change.

### The Changing Faces of Philanthropic Leadership

Lauren Casteel, now a vice president with the Denver Foundation but previously with the Hunt Alternative Foundation and other philanthropic institutions, noted that the era of the 1970s characterized by Jim Joseph's leadership at the Council on Foundations and the creation of ABFE countered a general philanthropic attitude on race that was "not intentional and just beginning to focus on diversity."

From the 1970s into the early 1990s, people of color in foundations started affinity groups based on racial and ethnic identities to advocate for more inclusion in philanthropy and for more grant dollars dedicated to communities of color. The first COF affinity group was ABFE, founded in 1971 in protest of the lack of African Americans on the council's board slate. It was followed by Hispanics in Philanthropy, founded in 1984; Asian Americans in Philanthropy, founded in 1990; and Native Americans in Philanthropy, founded in 1993. In 1993, the race-based affinity groups – along with Women & Philanthropy, the Women's Funding Network, Disability Funders Network, and Funders for LGBTQ Issues – joined together to form a coalition called Joint Affinity Groups to educate grantmakers about the value of inclusion and equity in foundations, increase understanding of the interrelatedness of multiple identities and issues, and advocate for greater equity in the distribution of philanthropic resources.

Reflecting on his experience at the Ford Foundation in the 1990s, Silicon Valley Community Foundation's Emmett Carson recalls a "golden age" of philanthropy leadership by people of color. To Carson, the institutional commitments of foundations in that era were strongly linked to the presence of Black philanthropic leaders, such as Franklin Thomas at the helm of the Ford Foundation, Anna Faith Jones, the head of the Boston Foundation and the first African-American woman to ever lead a major U.S. foundation,

and James Joseph as the head of COF, as well as program officers like Jim Burton at the Rockefeller Foundation, Lynn Walker Huntley at Ford, and Jackie Burton at the Lilly Endowment.

However, Carson also observed that philanthropic attention to racial issues dissipated rather than grew with inevitable staff transitions. When Joseph left COF, Carson believes that that institution's attention to race waned. "We were on the cusp of a breakthrough, having more people of color in every part of philanthropy," Carson recalls. "But if you look today, we have fewer people in leadership and in board positions than we've ever had."<sup>8</sup> From his perspective, the golden era was the first wave: "We patted ourselves on the back and said mission accomplished; but the first wave is never mission accomplished. The first wave is just the beachhead – you build on that or you don't."

### Accountability and Transparency

Nevertheless, there was ongoing attention to these issues in various parts of the philanthropic sector from the 1990s through today. Equity work continued through the identity-based affinity groups, with several reports together and individually recognizing the still disproportionately small numbers of both leadership of color and grantmaking to communities of color. Progressive organizations like the National Network of Grantmakers, and particularly its People of Color Caucus, were actively pushing a racial justice agenda within their work. And, as previously noted, there were changes occurring within the philanthropic dialogue on the importance of racial justice issues through the work of those intermediaries and others, such as NCRP, PRE and more. Even within mainstream philanthropy, there were numerous efforts as evidenced by countless reports cited in a 70-plus page compendium on diversity in philanthropy by the Foundation Center in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

In this contested space marked by feelings of frustration and dwindling progress on issues of equity within philanthropy, along with continued efforts by some to move the needle, the Greenlining Institute issued a report that led to legislation introduced in California in 2006 to mandate disclosure of California foundations' data on diversity and inclusion. This tactic brought a renewed level of focus to the issue of leadership in foundations, and their attentiveness to issues of race and racial justice. Assembly Bill



624, introduced by Assemblymember Joe Coto, created a politicized dynamic regarding diversity issues in philanthropy – with the sector organizing nationally against potential government scrutiny of foundations' records on diversity and equitable grantmaking.

Some in philanthropy called for voluntary alternatives, leading in 2007 to the Diversity in Philanthropy Project, a time-limited campaign by 50 foundations and allied leaders to expand diversity in the field. Its work focused on three areas: promoting voluntary diversity and inclusion initiatives; advocating for a national system of data collection, analysis and accountability; and supporting the advancement, organization and distribution of knowledge resources.<sup>10</sup> The D5 Coalition was the culmination of this effort, a five-year initiative led by COF, The Foundation Center, various regional associations of grantmakers, members of JAG, and the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Now in its last year, D5 brought together an unprecedented array of leaders committed to supporting diversity and inclusion in the philanthropic sector and society.

### **Diversity and Inclusion: To What End?**

While modifying the composition of a foundation's staffing and governance is no guarantee that it will better address structural racism, at some level the content of racial justice grantmaking cannot be divorced from empowering people of color in foundation leadership positions – people who have the passion and expertise to bring new perspectives and experiences to crafting foundations' grantmaking. From her experience as a consultant to other foundations, her work at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and now leading ABFE, Susan Batten attributes the movement within philanthropy towards a stronger racial justice perspective to “select leaders, foundation leaders of color, positioned in the field who see this as a personal mission – and they push it.” As an example, Batten cites the group of foundations and foundation leaders, including a large number of African Americans in visible leadership roles, who have pledged to support efforts aimed at improving the life chances of Black males.

Speaking of The California Endowment's shift toward racial equity grantmaking, Ray Colmenar cites both the leadership of Robert K. Ross, its African-American CEO, and supportive board members. “One advantage of The Endowment is certainly Bob Ross,” he says. “But you also had board members who were activists and equity advocates. The board cared about equity as a

process, and participation of communities and communities of color – that was key.”

Maya Harris, a former vice president at the Ford Foundation, underscores the importance of leadership from the top, which she describes as a “leadership mandate” for racial justice. The latitude and endorsement of the foundation's leadership plays a huge role in a foundation's evolution from a commitment to racial issues to incorporation of a racial justice or structural racism lens in grantmaking.

Adrienne Mansanares at the Denver Foundation echoes Harris' observation, suggesting that where racial justice grantmaking thrives, it is “because we have people in power setting the framework for these portfolios.”

But others noted that such leadership for change can occur at all levels within the foundation, as evidenced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's internal affinity group, RESPECT, started 15 years ago by staff. The group initially convened as an informal place for staff concerned with issues of racial equity, class and power to exchange ideas and discuss challenges. “Foundation staff recognized that as discomfiting as it may be, dialogue about race is necessary if we are to grow as individuals, organizations and communities.”<sup>11</sup> Another effort seeded by Annie E. Casey, Kellogg, The California Endowment, and Atlantic Philanthropies was the Race and Equity in Philanthropy Group, coordinated by Marga Incorporated Consulting, with a primary focus on sharing lessons on internal issues of inclusion and equity.

Notwithstanding frustrations about philanthropy writ large, evolving leadership, particularly among people of color, has led to growing dialogue around issues of racial justice embedded within foundation grantmaking. The importance of leadership inside – and outside – foundations cannot be dismissed. As these observations from philanthropic leaders demonstrate, the leadership that is needed isn't just about titles, or who gets to be included in the club of foundation CEOs and trustees. Rather, leadership is exhibited and demonstrated by foundation CEOs and program officers when they demonstrate the courage of their convictions to address structural racism, when they move beyond passive “diversity thinking,” and when they push for dialogue and debate that goes beyond most foundations' comfort levels.

to the idea of a specific racial justice grantmaking portfolio. “For the purposes of sustainability and resource investment, it’s better to integrate racial justice as a core value and principle across an entire organization,” he notes, “[but] the risk could be that it gets lost or the risk that it gets too diffused.”

With decades of foundation experience to draw upon, Yates expresses a bottom-line concern. “Relatively speaking, in spite of some shifts in the landscape to be more favorable to supporting racial equity strategies, there are still far too little resources going to those strategies, and particularly to organizations founded and guided by people of color. ... And, in that context, a stark reality is my belief that strategies with indigenous origins tend to lag behind in garnering mainstream philanthropic support as well.”

### Paths to Change in Foundations

For some foundations, the direction of change went from top staff to the board, often revealing the necessity of changing the board structure to fit the evolving nature of the foundation’s grantmaking and the communities it served. As Sherry Magill at the Jessie Ball Dupont Foundation explains, it was an increasing awareness of the composition of the community served by the foundation that compelled her and her colleagues to expand the board of trustees in order to add racial diversity. With Dupont, it took a court case addressing issues in the donor’s will to ensure that the foundation could be restructured to include African-American members.

Zigbi shares how voluntary board shifts by family leadership led to more equitable grantmaking at the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation. As the family opened and expanded their board to non-family members in an effort to gain more diverse leadership, the board discussions evolved to include questions such as “Who are we funding? What’s the racial make-up of their leadership and governance? What do we consider to be a people of color-led organization?” Program officers, she says, began to report on the numbers of people of color-led organizations and discovered an imbalance. In her portfolio, sustainable agriculture, the grantees were the least racially diverse. “It created an opportunity for me,” Zigbi recalls. “I had been interested in trying to bring more diversity into the portfolio. This enabled us to do some new grantmaking, and significantly increased the percentage of POC-led organizations in the portfolio.” The foundation also reports this grantmaking information on its website in an effort to be more transparent.

Supporting organizations led by people of color is key to

the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s approach to racial justice grantmaking, which according to Christopher seeks to “develop a national community of practice within the framework of racial healing.” Christopher explains that the challenge is “How do you create a culture that is based on healing and an understanding of unconscious bias?” She acknowledges that as a foundation, Kellogg’s credibility and impact in this arena depends on its grantmaking. “We can’t step into this area without funding those who got us to this place like the NAACP, the Urban League, and the National Congress of American Indians. We have to fund all those civil rights groups, otherwise we’re not real,” Christopher adds. “We did fund such a network of anchor institutions. Part of the healing was to get them to work together and see themselves as part of a larger whole.” The components of building a community of practice, in Christopher’s experience at Kellogg, involve “funding groups that bring a structural inequity lens to change the public discussion ... [then building] greater capacity at the community level to do the work.” For the latter, Kellogg issued an RFP expecting to generate 500 responses, but received double that number, from every state except Wyoming, and funded 120.

Black shares some of the qualities of racial justice grantmaking related more to the process of the foundation’s approach than a particular stream of funding. “You have a commitment from top to bottom, where it isn’t just three years, it’s intended to be systemic,” she explains. “It is really looking across society, looking for places where there can be structural change, and providing the support that is capable of doing that. You can often tell if it’s not for show, because the foundations are interested in learning too.”

### Showing Impact

While sharing others’ belief in the importance of philanthropic leadership around racial justice, Blackwell echoes Yates and Saika’s concerns about supporting groups in communities doing the real work. “The racial justice outcomes that we seek will require capacity that goes beyond that of philanthropy,” says Blackwell. “It is most important to get philanthropic resources to those directly working to achieve racial equity in the world. And the best insights about what to do will likely emerge from the ground. Philanthropy is an important partner; but partnering with activists, advocates, practitioners and community will be essential for authentic, lasting change.”

These conversations about the potential for more impactful foundation investments need to permeate foundation leadership at the highest level. “Trustees need to have a conversation on how racial equity relates to their mission,”

**“It is really looking across society, looking for places where there can be structural change, and providing the support that is capable of doing that.”**

says Zigbi. “What needs to happen is an understanding of how it builds power for your mission. Until trustees really get that, the range of good practices are not going to make a difference. There needs to be an understanding of how the organizational self-interest around their mission is served by really understanding and incorporating racial equity as a core piece.”

For some funders, the most important concern is being able to show how structural solutions produce the change they and their communities are seeking; and many have found that the concept of “targeted universalism” can reach their goals. “I think the thing that can move funders is seeing demonstrated results of how really thinking these things through has changed outcomes,” notes Roberson. She offers a recent example shared from Montgomery County, Maryland, which has the some of the highest graduation rates for African-American males. “One of the things they did was shift resources from some of their high-achieving schools to some of the low-achieving schools. The higher-achieving kids did not suffer; the lower-achieving kids did better. The successes are very real – and who doesn’t want high educational outcomes for all kids, with particular emphasis on the groups who don’t do as well?”

Carson adds, “My prescription for philanthropy is very simple: Do what your mission says to do, and follow where the facts lead. At the bottom line, foundations exist to ask tough questions and try difficult things, and help people put a frame on their world. We’ve had significant social changes for the better, but individual success does not equate to collective success.”

Well-meaning foundation CEOs, staff and trustees aside, moving and changing foundations requires advocacy, oversight, and watchdogs both inside and outside the foundation world so that philanthropy achieves what Carson envisions it is capable of doing. It is an agenda for the advocates of racial justice grantmaking and for the recipients of racial justice grants – or else the conversation about structural racism devolves into one-off “racial portfolio” grants little different from the more comfortable diversity conversations that have preceded this point. As long as it has the self-awareness and understanding that it’s not their role to create or define the movement, philanthropy is uniquely situated to support racial equity work with a long view.

In Bezahler’s words, “We want deep sustained change that is structural. Philanthropy is the only sector that can run the risk of being as aspirational as we want.”



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