



INTERVIEW WITH AREND LUBBERS – JUNE 27, 2012

Our State of Generosity, a project of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (JCP) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), in partnership with the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF), Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC), and GVSU Libraries' Special Collections & University Archives present:

An interview with Arend Lubbers on June 27, 2012. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded at the Johnson Center for Philanthropy in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This interview is part of a series in the project, *Our State of Generosity* (OSoG). OSoG is a partnership of scholars, practitioners, and funders from four institutions – the Johnson Center; CMF; MNA; and MCSC – that collectively form the backbone of the state's philanthropic, voluntary, and nonprofit infrastructure. OSoG's mission is to capture, preserve, analyze, and share the developments, achievements, and experience that, over a period of 40 years, made Michigan a State of Generosity.

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Abridged: The following interview has been edited to assist readability. Extraneous verbal pauses and informal personal conversation not related to the topic of Michigan philanthropy have been deleted. Footnotes to the transcript have been added clarifying any factual errors in the memory of the person interviewed.

Text of the interview questions are as asked. Individuals interviewed have had the opportunity to add or edit their answers in order to provide their most accurate answers to the questions. For these reasons, the edited transcript may not exactly reflect the recorded interview.

Kathy Agard (KA): Don, [00:01:00] you were the president of Grand Valley at the time when the Kellogg Foundation decided that it had an interest in developing an academic center on philanthropy. That was about 20 years ago and they invited in all the presidents of the universities and you showed up and Grand Valley got the grant. I wonder if you could tell me what it was like – from Grand Valley what the thinking was at the University about why you went after the grant and what happened?

Arend (Don) Lubbers (AL): There was some activity before that grant that paved the way for it. There were some philanthropists in Grand Rapids; the ones I remember were Audrey and Jim Sebastian. There were others, perhaps Fred Keller was involved, even as a very young man at that

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time. [00:02:00] They were always asked to give money to local nonprofits through the United Way or other ways, and they raised some questions about the way nonprofits were managed. They wanted to have more data about the nonprofits. How effective are they? Are their claims legitimate or not? That is what I remember. As a result of that, a group of institutions joined together in consortium to provide aid to nonprofits in terms of management. This also set up some research capabilities so that these donors could really find out more about what was happening with their money. [00:03:00] There were many institutions, and some of the institutions had centers in Grand Rapids. Of course, all the state universities liked to be in Grand Rapids, so some of them joined; the local colleges, the West Michigan colleges and Grand Valley, and so it was a consortium of a considerable number of institutions. I think if I took the time to enumerate them, I could come up with all of them.

We started that task but Grand Valley was the one that persisted. It took money. We all put in some money. I remember thinking, can we afford to do this? I said, however, “we’re going to keep doing this,” [00:04:00] and I put in another \$150,000. I think the others fell by the way, because they didn’t want to put in the money and there was no one at the institutions that persisted. I was very persistent because Grand Valley had been founded by the community leadership and the political interests of the West Michigan region. Grand Valley had and has always had a strong tradition of community service, interested in what the community is doing and responding to what the community wants. That tradition helped us, and we just plowed forward. By the time Russ Mawby [00:05:00] called the meeting of the presidents of the private and the public institutions to talk about his ideas of philanthropy, we were quite far along. Then as he persisted and wanted to fund a center, he could see that Grand Valley was farther along than the other institutions in providing the service.

It was about that same time that we were really serious about a nonprofit curriculum. These two just came together very nicely, research for nonprofits, management consultant for nonprofits and a curriculum to educate people to be good nonprofit managers and executives. It all came together [00:06:00] and as that was coming together, the Kellogg Foundation, Russ particularly, could see what was happening here and that is why he selected us, I think. So often initiatives like that, when you are trying to get them started, a university will place them in an existing structure. That is usually fatal because that structure already has its purpose and understanding and interests and it is hard to do it. That is why we started a new kind of curriculum, separate from what existed, and a new kind of research capability and consulting capability, which was outside of anything that existed. I think that helped it to grow and sustain itself.

(KA): What were your hopes when you – [00:07:00] did you have a difficult sell inside the university and then what were your hopes that the center might become?

(AL): There are many people doing good work within an institution. They are not particularly interested in another kind of good work. Their agenda is full; they don’t need it. So, no, you don’t



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always get support. Any time something new is proposed, how much is it going to cost, is it going to cost *us* money? Well, of course when Kellogg came in with a big grant that allayed that fear. On the other hand, we put some significant money into it before Kellogg did and that was why Kellogg did. [00:08:00] I just did some of those things and there were others like the provost, the administrative team who could see the point of it. We never had any internal hassles over some of those new programs or those initiatives, and then we would quietly just go about doing them.

(KA): Did you know Russ before?

(AL): Had I known Russ? I had met Russ before and we had been on one of the state organizations committees. He was instrumental in bringing colleges and universities together, so I had met him at some meetings before this meeting.

(KA): So you were not close friends?

(AL): No. We were not close friends. [00:09:00] I always admired him because he was always trying to make the Kellogg Foundation significant, without caring very much how significant he was. He never used all of that vast amount of money to aggrandize himself as some foundation executives do. He just used it to do what he wanted to do and he was always interested in philanthropy. That is my first memory of him as interested in encouraging philanthropy, not being a head of a philanthropic foundation, but wanting everybody to get involved in philanthropy. Because he understood, and this was an understanding that I shared with him, that America is unique [00:10:00] and that philanthropy has always propelled the American agenda. Philanthropy was going to change, as everything changes, and there were going to be new demands and new sources for philanthropy. Russ understood all of that and he was trying to create the pattern for philanthropy in the future of America and how it was going to support America's future as it had its past. I just admired that so much about him. We became friends as we worked together.

(KA): We all did. That's really great. Fast forward for me, so, your friend Dottie Johnson, and I say that as your professional colleague. Dottie decides to finally leave after 25 years of fabulous [00:11:00] service and she is going to graduate from CMF and move on with other things in her life. Tell me about how the library, the endowment and the naming happened.

(AL): At the time Dottie retired as chair and board member of the Council of Michigan Foundations, she was willing to come on the Grand Valley State University board of control. My contact with Dottie goes back to the time we came here in 1969 and Paul Johnson was on the board, and for years Paul was chair of the board. So, the Johnson family were all not only known to me [00:12:00] and were board members and contributors, they became personal friends. We always knew each other and knew what was happening and what was going on. It was a great synergy. Here you've got the Johnsons who were very much involved in Grand Valley from the very beginning, you've got Dottie founding the Council of Michigan Foundations [CMF] and then



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being on the Kellogg Foundation board. Some might say that was sort of interlocking directorates. When she was ready to retire from CMF, it was with this achievement of establishing CMF as the first state council of foundations in the nation. [00:13:00] Thoase associated with her in all of her philanthropic activities wanted to recognize her. So did Ranny Riecker.

She and Russ Mawby, living at the same time and dealing with the same issue in such a forceful and creative and successful way, led the way. Our board wanted to do something to honor her because of her connections to Grand Valley. Because we did have this philanthropic curriculum and research and consulting arm, it was quite natural that they would look to Grand Valley for being the place that would honor Dottie Johnson. [00:14:00] So, they did and that is how the endowment was raised and the library given. Knowing that the library, or the publications in the field of philanthropy don't begin to compare in number or depth of research in terms of length of time as history, literature, or chemistry, anything like that. The people who were interested in honoring her knew that there needed to be a library, there needed to be philanthropic publications and documentations. It was natural to [00:15:00] name that aspect of the center for her and to name the whole center for her.

(KA): That is a really good rendition of that. We needed to have someone talk us through, so I appreciate that. Putting on your presidential hat, you have raised lots of money in your life from individuals and from foundations and from corporations. Can you tell us a little bit about how philanthropy works in Michigan and a little bit about what you have found when you are on the other side of the table, asking for the money?

(AL): I'm not so sure I'm the right person to talk about how philanthropy works in Michigan. Grand Valley, when I came, was very much of a local institution. As a local West Michigan institution, it remained that way [00:16:00] and in some ways is still characterized and distinguished by its locality. So, my fundraising was mostly in the local region. I don't know too much about foundation philanthropy in Michigan except as I followed Dottie's progress in putting CMF together and then we got very much involved with the Kellogg Foundation. Ted Doan was very helpful so, the Dow Foundation, not like they do for other places but they finally did some things for us. So, we did go into the field a bit in soliciting money from others, but generally it was local and that is what I know about mostly. The philanthropy really stems from the [00:17:00] very beginning of Grand Valley, where Bill Seidman and his colleagues and friends decided to try for a state university in their community. And they succeeded, and they succeeded because they were ready not only to put time and effort, but money into it.

When I came here that community base existed. Joyce Hecht and I were a fundraising team from the very beginning. The community was the base of philanthropy. Working the community and building relationships is very important. [00:18:00] I made a rule for myself that I would never talk to people about supporting Grand Valley at any kind of a social function. If they ask me a question I would answer the question, but they knew that they were not going to get the ask. When I made



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an appointment to ask, they could turn the appointment down or they could accept it. I think that probably made for a better social life for Nancy and me.

(KA): I suspect, so you were invited to more parties.

(AL): Dick Lacks, who [00:19:00] became a good supporter of Grand Valley toward the end of his life, and you know how loud he could be, he would shout whenever I'd come in a room or even at a cocktail party, “Hold onto your wallets!! Here comes Lubbers!!”

(KA): And you weren't like that at all, right then.

(AL): Not right then.

(KA): So you have had what must've been a wonderful opportunity to have personal conversations with people with giving hearts. Can you talk a little bit about, and I don't want you to name any names, but the nature of those conversations?

(AL): Well, this all holds together in a logical stream. We have many people here who are community oriented. [00:20:00] It's a little stronger than in most places, or if it isn't stronger on an individual's base, there are more individuals who are committed to the community. Grand Valley was a newcomer in the community, not such a newcomer anymore, but Grand Valley was part of community building. I love community building. My idea of a college is the excellence of academic work. This is the responsibility and the mission of the institution, but the mission is accomplished in a community. People who help accomplish it, feel they are part of the institution [00:21:00] and that gives them a greater sense of purpose. It is that kind of a motivation that we see in Grand Rapids and Western Michigan, which is a great philanthropic area.

Of course I went to Hope College, I was brought up in high school and college here, so I understood pretty well the community and its philanthropic inclinations. That is what it really was. My whole philosophy of fundraising and the role of a higher educational institution in a region and an area and a town, was one of community and here is a place that had a strong sense of community. So I think that was, that's [00:22:00] why it worked so well as it did.

(KA): You have been in a place where you have seen lots of different kinds of leaders and one of the things that we are going to be writing about is the nature of leadership that has resulted in this philanthropic structure that we have in Michigan with MNA, the Nonprofit Association, the Council on Michigan Foundations, the Johnson Center and the Michigan Community Service Commission, which you may not be as familiar with, it is the government funding stream. I am wondering if you can put your finger on, so that we can share it, what some of the qualities of leadership are that you have seen in senior leaders of Michigan philanthropy that, if you were giving advice to folks in Brazil, who are trying to set up a philanthropic community, what has been



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the nature of the use of power, the use [00:23:00] of knowledge? You talked a little bit about Russ', the reasons why to be able to use that tremendous power that is at Kellogg. Can you talk a little bit of more about the qualities of leadership that work?

(AL): Well, I can only talk about my understanding and there are so many paths to successful leadership. I can just talk about how I feel. I think I, as everyone else, like to be successful. We like to achieve goals and missions, so that you feel that in your job you have done something that is positive and recognized as such. I feel that way, I assume most every normal person [00:24:00] feels that way, so how does that affect leadership? Well, if I want to be successful and I realize other people want to be successful and I happen to have a position that can facilitate their success, that is what I better do. The more successful they are, the more successful I will be. So, that has always motivated me and I always want to help everyone make it.

Unfortunately, some people have a neuroses quotient that is too high, and the leader must deal with that too; you have to try to rid your organization, [00:25:00] as best you can. But I feel that everyone has dignity and everyone has ambition and everyone wants to realize success and therefore, if I am the president of an organization with several hundred or thousand people in it, then it is my responsibility to help them be successful as well as make myself successful. Everyone helping to make others successful is the ideal. It happens frequently in West Michigan. I embraced that way of operating. In addition, you must have your objectives clearly in mind.

I think too many people spend too much time on strategic planning. I have watched people and organizations strategic plan themselves beyond necessity. They plan and they plan. Once they have the plan in place, they are revising the plan, so I have not been a great fan, probably. We did our strategic planning. The leader always has to have a pretty good idea of what he or she wants to accomplish and I think I always did. I would be accused occasionally of not leading in a way that was clear to everyone. Well, I didn't always [00:27:00] know exactly how we were going to reach our objectives, but I always had a clear idea of what I thought we should do and where we should go and how we should make the institution work.

You watch for opportunity. Life moves. You don't create all the life around you, life is created all the time and you have to see what it is and where it's leading and what you should do and then you seize opportunities. Sometimes those opportunities are presented by some people who have the means who want something to happen. That might not have been your top priority, but they want it to happen and you help them make it happen at your institution. You must have your priorities, [00:28:00] but your priorities should not keep you from seizing opportunities. That I think was very important. Those priorities should always include educational leadership.

A leader really needs to live with ambiguity. You have to realize that your responsibility, your first responsibility, what you're getting paid for, is to make the institution run right, not necessarily make your convictions and beliefs prevail. [00:29:00] Once in a while, of course, moral judgments



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must be made, but I think the leader, particularly in higher education, has to be very careful of how he makes them. His moral obligation is to students and faculty and staff, who all are dependent upon that institution and therefore the path for that institution must be the path that leads to the greatest success of all those involved. That is why sometimes the leader has to finesse things, maneuver, just to keep conflict from being destructive. Once in a while you must [00:30:00] make a stand and you have to decide but that is what a good leader does. He knows when to make those decisions to stand firm and when to decide let's try to smooth things over. I am talking about technique, but I have watched many leaders come on harder times when they are projecting their own beliefs at the wrong time. There is the right time to do it, but there is the wrong time to do it. It is an art. Administrative leadership is an art.

(KA): I'm going to shift gears a little bit, but I want to give you the opportunity, since we are putting together the history of and sort of the reasons why Michigan's philanthropic [00:31:00] community has been successful and the Johnson Center is a part of that, when you were coming today, is there anything else that you wanted to say that I haven't asked you about, that you wanted to make sure, and then will move in, because I want to ask you about yourself.

(AL): First of all, why did I get into a job that made me seek resources? Why do people give money to things? Well certainly people see a need, a hungry child, a crippled person, the destruction brought about by ethnic cleansing.[00:32:00] They see the consequences, and their hearts are moved and so they are ready to give. The worst side of it is always people who have a lot of money making sure that they give to a cause that maybe propels someone that they like and know forward. That is not all bad either if the cause is good, but sometimes it is a very calculating reason to give money. There is always the probability of a certain amount of self-interest.

For instance, I was brought up in a college president's family and my father always had to raise money so that [00:33:00] the college could keep going. So how do I get interested in philanthropy? I followed him, I'm a clone. This becomes self-interest, in other words this is a way you make your living, by encouraging philanthropy, getting people to give money to you for your cause. But then you have to have a clear understanding of why you're doing it and you have to believe in your cause. That is good. You never have to have to equivocate about asking someone for support. You go out and ask people for money. You sell them on your cause, so they are not necessarily moved by something they see, as they are convinced because someone convinces them that it is a good thing to do. [00:34:00]

So, there are different reasons for people to give, but the American society has been propelled by it and it needs to continue. I don't know what we are going through. Right now we've had such a concentration on economic power and wealth. One of the historians that I read says sometimes religion is the dominant factor in history, sometimes politics is the dominant factor, now economics is the dominant factor. I am wondering about all this concentration on [00:35:00]



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making money and these huge compensations that are paid by public companies. People are getting golden parachutes that just boggle the mind when they fail. So, something seems out of whack. The creation of wealth through entrepreneurship and good investments helps philanthropy. There are many legitimate ways to become wealthy, and Americans are generous. There are those we should endorse while discouraging what appears unfair.

(KA): One of my concerns has been around the business model becoming the model for every sector and that we all have to become businesses.

(AL): What do they talk about now, the Section B Corporations, or whatever they're called. In other words corporations adopt policies that they not only are making money for their shareholders, but some of their profits are to be applied to social good. Now that is a kind of countervailing movement to what we have been seeing in some of corporate America. So that is [00:37:00] encouraging, that is hopeful and I think that is something that could be promoted through the Johnson Center.

(KA): I want to change, how are you doing? Do you need a little drink of water anything? That's okay. So tell me your philanthropic biography, you started to get into a little bit. So mom and dad were philanthropic, did they model, how did you become who you are?

(AL): My dad was always raising money. He became a college president when I was three years old at Central College in Iowa, where I became president 15 years after he left, to become president of Hope College. It was just in the family and my mother was very much a partner in all [00:38:00] of this. She did not pursue her own career, but it was obvious to me that the two of them were in a career and she fulfilled many, many functions of that career. So I just liked all that. It is interesting to me that when I went on to graduate school in history and in higher ed., I thought wouldn't it be nice to be a college president sometime? But then knowing that that doesn't just happen. You want to be an x-ray technician you get trained for it. You don't do that to be a college president. There are avenues to it. I started teaching history at Wittenberg in Ohio.

(KA): World history or US?

(AL): I was teaching history, American history [00:39:00] and everyone taught the world history. I did some political theory, too. The vice president for development left Central College in Pella, Iowa, where my father had been president. The board felt that they needed someone to come in there and pick up where he had left off. The school needed a more emphasis on development, so they thought “maybe the kid can do like the father did,” so they offered me the Vice Presidency for Development. I went there and did that for a year and then the president took a job as a theological professor in a seminary in a New Brunswick, New Jersey and so there the presidency was open. The committee brought some people in, some that I knew and that I thought very highly of, but they couldn't convince them to take the presidency. [00:40:00] Then the faculty



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signed a petition asking the committee to make me president. So when I was 28 years old in June, they offered me the president. I assumed the position in July of 1960 when I was 29.

(KA): I suspect you were always old, Don, that you were always a grown-up.

(AL): That is what my son-in-law says to my daughter. He says your father has always been an adult.

(KA): So how long were you in Iowa then?

(AL): I was president there for eight and a half years and when I was 37 years of age, I came to Grand Valley in January of 1969 and stayed until July 1, 2001.

(KA): What advice might you give? One of the reasons, Kellogg has given us some funding for this project and one of the reasons [00:41:00] they have given us funding is that Jim McHale was particularly interested in what lessons might be learned in Michigan that people coming in from Brazil or other places in the world that have very fledgling nonprofit and foundation and regional associations and nothing near certainly what we have as a mature system in Michigan. Do you have any advice that you might share with them that we can put on our little clips on our videotapes?

(AL): Share with people who are coming into Michigan?

(KA): No, people who would be looking at it on the Internet from another country for example, about the role of the center or...

(AL): I think people from other parts of the world are becoming more philanthropic. Let me digress a bit. When I was president, the vice chancellor (which is synonymous to president [00:42:00] at British universities) from Kingston University came over to Grand Valley and one of the things he wanted to find out was how we raised private money. In Britain, that was not a tradition and he thought it was a good idea to begin raising money. Over the years, he and I spent some time together and he launched for Kingston University a real development operation which continues to this day.

I would say to anybody who is looking at Michigan or Michigan institutions, they are viewing institutions that have been the beneficiaries of philanthropy for a century and a half or more. Michigan has had a highly developed philanthropic community and that has come. [00:43:00] Look at Mr. Kellogg, what he thought, how he thought. Then, look at what the Fords did. When they went public and they set up the Ford Foundation, now it's been captured by the Eastern establishment, but it still was a Michigan company and it still has effects in Michigan. Those are



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two prime examples. There are more people like Kresge. Look at what Kresge did, an Albion College graduate – he set up a great foundation.

Companies and people in Michigan – more than most states – committed to philanthropy in the late 19th and first part of the 20th century. Michigan had people who committed to philanthropy [00:44:00] in a major way, sooner than many others did. So I think as soon as a society understands and commits to philanthropy, they will find themselves enriched and changed by it. And Michigan has had an auto industry that has its ups and downs, but the philanthropy of Michigan has helped some of its nonprofit institutions be sustained through difficult times, as well as thrive in good times.

(KA): Anything else that you want make sure to say?

(AL): I will probably think about it tonight.

(KA): Well the cameras will be rolling for another year.

(AL): Not everybody gets a chance to just sit in a chair and talk.

(KA): Thank you so much.

