



INTERVIEW WITH Barbara Getz – November 21, 2011

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 Barbara Getz on November 21, 2011. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded via telephone. 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): So just of the background information, were you involved with Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), or the Commission (Michigan Community Service Commission) at all, or was most of your work with the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF)?

Barbara Getz (BG): Almost all of my work was with CMF.

(KA): Okay, good. Then that is where we will focus.

(BG): As a staff member of Kresge and then Gerber. [00:01:00] I was on every committee you can think of; technology, communications, all of the committees. Then of course the Michigan AIDS Fund or originally, the Michigan AIDS Committee, came into being and that then consumed me.

(KA): Let's start with the Michigan AIDS Fund and then we will circle back to your CMF experience. Could you just tell us the story of the development of the Michigan AIDS Fund? In particular we are interested in how leadership made a difference, or didn't make a difference, and the role of CMF.

(BG): There wouldn't have been a Michigan AIDS Fund without CMF, or without Dottie Johnson for that matter. There was a confluence of interests going on at once in late 1988. Bill White had gone to Dottie Johnson, and seeing AIDS as a human rights [00:02:00] issue, because of so many people being stigmatized, he wanted to do something about it. But he didn't want it to be known to be doing anything about it because Mott doesn't fund health projects. So he had gone to Dottie wondering if she couldn't drum up support for something to go on in Flint. At the same time I had gone to Dottie to say, "This awful thing is going on all over the country and it is in Michigan too. Can't Michigan foundations do something about this, address this issue?" Then seven of us got together through the auspices of CMF, we had kind of a grantmakers in health/Michigan; the Detroit Neurological Foundation, Kellogg, Kresge, Metro Health, Blue Cross, Mott, Rotary charities. We all got together and kind of had a meeting of grantmakers in health/Michigan and all of us realized, "wait a minute, none of us has even received a proposal for anything about AIDS", and it was a huge deal at that point. [00:03:00]

So at one of our meetings, Dottie got up and said that she had \$100,000 on the line if we thought we could match it to do something about AIDS in Michigan. She realized right off the bat that statewide was going to be a lot more meaningful than just in a particular city. She wondered if anybody had fire in their belly for that and I leapt to my feet. That is how it started and we plotted, and planned, and met, and met, and convened all over the place and finally decided on a collaborative pooled fund, as opposed to an endowed fund, or something like that. We were very intent on the fact that the fund had to be flexible, agile. There was so much going on in the epidemic at that time that we were all very interested in, working with these new organizations. Most of which really were just projects, they weren't even organizationally [00:04:00] very sound, but they had grown up as a kind of alternative care transport, if you will, for people that the traditional medical system wouldn't touch.

That is how we got launched. We raised some money, we did match Mott's money. Most of the early participants put in money from their own organizations because all of us as staff members were really pretty inflamed with passion for this thing. At that point AIDS was simply a death sentence, and most of the people that were living with AIDS or dying from AIDS were people that were seen as less than. They were homosexuals, so they were less than you and me, or they were injecting drug users, so they were less than you and me, or they were Haitian, so they were less



than you and me. It was a very marginalized population and I think a lot of us thought of it as a human rights issue. For me, my interest was simply, "I don't care how they got it, [00:05:00] these were people that were scared and dying and we need to do something." I think a lot of us felt that way and we were able to translate that passion to our boards. I was not successful, Kresge never did put in a dime, but I did get them to give me release time to staff the start-up of this thing. I had one-third of my time off to staff it and then we hired a consultant staff and took off.

We started as a committee. We had to be approved, if you will, as a committee of CMF, the Michigan AIDS Fund Committee. A service to members to provide an outlet for any foundations interested in funding AIDS. Most of them, again realizing that this was a highly stigmatized thing, most of them didn't want their names on an AIDS project, and so giving to the Michigan AIDS Fund Committee would be a nice anonymous way to participate if they felt so inclined. We were given a five-year lease on life in that mode, but that was in 1990. [00:06:00] By '93, I think Leonard Smith was maybe chairman of CMF at that point, he decided to recreate us as a supporting organization. That was the same time that the Michigan Community Foundations' Youth Project was going on, and so he was making these two supporting organizations under the auspices of CMF because that would really give us more independence. We would indeed have to be approved by the board of CMF as a supporting organization, and there was some question about that because there were some very vocal board members that really didn't like the fact that we were doing this.

(KA): Board members of CMF or board members of the AIDS Fund?

(BG): Board members of CMF. The AIDS Fund was a little scared, we thought that CMF was... pardon me?

Susan Harrison Wolffis (SHW): I am sorry, I just was going to ask, can you tell us why? Is this important to the story, why they were against it? [00:07:00]

(BG): I think a lot of people were afraid and because so much of the population in Michigan was homosexual, and there was quite an awful lot of the foundations in Michigan that are very traditional, and somewhat rigid. Fundraising was always a challenge for the AIDS Fund. We wanted it to stay a philanthropic organization, to be within philanthropy. We thought that was where our best opportunities lay to try to educate the philanthropic community and raise money from them, and then distribute it to the AIDS projects around the state. We became a supporting organization in '93, a little bit early, and some of us were a little suspect about why? Why do they want to do this to us? But it worked out to be just fine. And the fund changed and evolved [00:08:00] and grew and changed just as the epidemic changed and evolved and grew and changed and I think that was the beauty of the collaborative effort that we put together. The only thing that had happened like that I think before was distributing Exxon money and that was a community foundation project but we had all kinds of participants. We had Rotary Charities which



was a public charitable entity. We had private foundations. We had corporate foundations. Whirlpool was an early supporter and eventually the State of Michigan was a huge supporter because we got them out of several jams. They weren't spending their federal money fast enough and so we helped them do it.

You asked in one of these questions, how was CMF instrumental, or Dottie. It was absolutely vital. CMF, and I will maybe get to this in the infrastructure question, but CMF is a unique organization among the regional associations or at least it was at that time, I think it still is. [00:09:00] It's not just a gathering place for foundation folks to meet and chat. It is actually an organization that does things and I think that's largely because of Dottie Johnson and Rob has followed up nicely with all of that. I think with her working behind the scenes, supporting, pushing, urging, cajoling, CMF really is a tight and workable organization and therefore bred a tight and workable organization in the Michigan AIDS Fund. The thing that we did differently, the thing that I felt was one of our maybe largest contributions to the whole thing was that the board members of the Michigan AIDS Fund actually got down and dirty with our grantees. Again these are fragile, brand new organizations, most of whom boards were dying, they were marginalized in their communities and we went out to them to learn from them and to [00:10:00] work with them to show them how to be an organization. I think that helped grow a lot of these organizations into, some of them kind of granddaddy organizations that they are today because we were willing to shake the "do no harm" grantmaking idea, or the "arm's length" grantmaking idea, or even the "quid pro quo" grantmaking idea which existed in a variety of environments. We decided that we were partners with our grantees as opposed to just funders.

(KA): Barbara was this one of the first times you had worked with... that you saw these foundations. Most of them are pretty good scale at working together and how did it work inside... how did you all work with each other?

(BG): We were very bonded, actually, we became best friends to a large degree. [00:11:00] I had worked with Rob Collier when he was at Mott, not worked with, but I knew him. We were at one of the new grantmaker, Michigan grantmaker get-togethers at one of the national conferences, one of the Council on Foundation conferences and we kind of became fast friends and so we traded information and project ideas and those kinds of things from the get-go back in 1978 and 1979 and I knew a couple of people at Kellogg. It is interesting. At that time it was kind of considered that Kresge doesn't talk to Kellogg, and Kellogg doesn't talk to Kresge, and so as staff members we kind of worked around that, but we were never really able to collaborate. There was this cloak of mystery around everybody at that point, which I think is really stupid. [00:12:00]

(KA): Well you helped to change that.

(BG): With the AIDS Fund we were busy trying to gather information every place we could because most of us were heterosexual, suburban dwellers that didn't know the issues and so we



worked with grantees. We worked with the state, we traveled all over the place trying to find out what our priorities should be, trying to deal with them, what were workable things and what weren't. So we did a lot of traveling and real role-up-your-sleeves struggling together as board members of the Michigan AIDS Fund and so you don't have relationships like that ordinarily in organized philanthropy. It just doesn't happen.

(KA): There was this trust relationship. I remember you saying this. When Dottie had schedule conflicts, [00:13:00] I went to meetings representing CMF and I remember clearly you saying this would never happen if we didn't trust CMF and Dottie Johnson so much. Can you identify what the behaviors were? So if we were going to talk to somebody else about how to do this, is traveling together one specific behavior? What can they do to build this kind of trust relationship?

(BG): You know one of the things that we did at CMF, and this doesn't involve Dottie necessarily or CMF, one of the things we did with the AIDS fund is we never had a 900-pound gorilla at the table. I wouldn't have let there be a 900-pound gorilla. It would have been Kellogg if there had been one because they provided the most money. But we were all equal. Even I, who brought no money to the table, except what I raised from other foundations, I couldn't raise any at my own foundation, [00:14:00] we all had equal say. We all had equal interests and equal participation, and so there was never a heavyweight coming in and lashing in and saying "I put the most money in, and I get to say yes or no on this".

(KA): That is a really great insight.

(BG): Unfortunately, I know there have been collaborations for housing projects in Detroit, and other things, but there have been those big gorillas at the table and those collaborations tend to fall apart. We noticed this early on with the National Community AIDS Partnership which we wanted to become a part of, but they weren't interested in the State of Michigan, they were interested in Detroit. But we convinced them anyway and we are still being funded by them. One of the things we watched were Northern Californian grantmakers, Minneapolis grantmakers, various grantmaker collaborations that had responded to early [00:15:00] National Community AIDS Partnership money. They began to fall apart and in fact, Minnesota just dissolved over questions of whether they should be funding policy or whether they should be funding projects and they couldn't get it straight because there were too many large voices at that table that each wanted their own way. We never had that, we really had consensus all the time because there was not personal pride in it. There was nothing at stake, if you will, except trying to do the right thing.

(KA): Was it because the big players weren't at the table, or because they buffeted their influence?



(BG): The big players were all at the table. Kellogg was at the table, Kresge was at the table. Mott was at the table. Those were the big three. Skillman was at the table. There were always [00:16:00] very large players and very large grants. Even the State of Michigan, while they were not at the table, they were a very large grantor.

(KA): But then they modified their behavior when they were together.

(BG): I think particularly the people that we had involved, except for Glenn Kossick and Ira Strumwasser, we didn't have the executive director at the table, we had the program staff. We were all ready to chew this up and spit it out. We didn't have anything to prove to one another. I think that worked, the trust in Dottie and CMF. I think without Dottie and CMF, none of this could have happened, because she was able because of the organization she had built, foundations were used to going to CMF to do any kind of partnership, or collaborative work, or even any specifically focused work. [00:17:00] If you wanted to find out, I'm sure that when Kellogg decided they wanted to go into the Northern High School of Detroit for twenty years and fund everything they could find to improve that area, I am sure there was CMF research behind that. I am sure that a lot of digging was done by CMF and then when you wanted to partner with somebody, you went to Dottie. That is where it happened. She knew who was interested in what; she was out there all the time, knowing who was interested in what. She saw her job as being of service to these foundations in Michigan, which I think were uniquely organized under CMF, and probably still are.

(KA): Can you talk a little bit about the spinoff and CMF's willingness to give up an organization?

(BG): Not having been there at the time, but I have talked to Rob about it quite extensively, it became more and more difficult [00:18:00] for us to raise private philanthropic dollars. We didn't want to compete with our grantees in raising money, that was always both a cramp and a pledge. We didn't hold fundraisers *per se*, so we kept going to the organized philanthropy in Michigan. Frankly, we did it remarkably well given the fact that most foundations have a three to five year interest span. We were alive for twenty years and that is, I think, a real testament of the willingness of Michigan foundations to participate in something like this. It got down to the point that the state became one of the largest funders, and one of our biggest projects was to try to help the state in both prevention, education and what we call "harm reduction", which is code for syringe exchange. That became very controversial. The state couldn't touch it. The state was not allowed to touch it, so they funded us to do it, which we did, [00:19:00] and it had been very successful. It got down to the point where that was about it, and we couldn't see ourselves being within philanthropy anymore. We had become a project manager, and so that looks a lot more like a nonprofit organization, and I think the fund at that point needed to evolve into a different style of organization. A different class of organization really, and the natural place to put it, given a lot of negotiation and there were many demands made on both sides to make sure that one organization didn't really subsume the other, so the merger with the Michigan AIDS Prevention



Project was the most likely step. They too were statewide, we were statewide. They had the same interest in prevention and harm reduction. They were willing to raise money to fund grantmaking efforts, [00:20:00] and so it was a kind of a natural thing. CMF actually I think initiated it. They kept a supporting organization structure in place as just a holding shell because it is too much work to try and set one of these up again, but they transferred the assets to what is now the Michigan AIDS Coalition.

(KA): Actually gave it away?

(BG): Yes, with it they insisted on a certain number of board positions and those kinds of things.

(KA): And then as I remember, the Michigan AIDS Fund won a lot of national awards. Can you talk a little bit about that?

(BG): I don't know about winning national awards. We certainly were a national model. We became the new paradigm if you will for these kinds of efforts. I think the National AIDS Fund could have made more use of us, but I know that... we were always a virtual organization – not always – up until toward the end we were a virtual organization staffed by the Greystone Group [00:21:00] and Jim Heynen did a lot of travelling around the country to promote the style of collaborative that we were and I think he did a good job at that but I think the National AIDS Fund, undergoing personnel change and those things wasn't really able to take enough advantage of it to see those kind of statewide activity growing around the country. They kept insisting on focusing on communities, big urban communities, which has its own value because that is where the epidemic has been, but I think the statewide effort has an awful lot more draw for people that are otherwise kind of left out. Rob Collier was surprised to learn in 1988 that there was a rather significant HIV AIDS problem in the Grand Traverse area. That's not hardly Detroit. He had board members on Rotary Charities board that thought this is a Detroit problem, this is a Saugatuck problem. No it is right here and so I think the [00:22:00] insistence on focusing on urban communities is a little shortsighted if you want to include as many people as possible for education as well as care and prevention.

(KA): Exactly. Well I want to change your hats now and have you talk a little bit about your experience with CMF in general from both your Kresge and Gerber perspective and the work that you did. Do you think Michigan's philanthropic infrastructure is unique and if so, why you think it developed that way or if not, why not?

(BG): I think it is unique and I think it developed that way interestingly. It was put together in response [00:23:00] to the congressional hearings that were going on back in 1969. They were looking at private foundations, not with a very pretty eye and so Bill Baldwin at Kresge and Bill White at Mott and Russ Mawby at Kellogg and the good old boys got together and decided they needed to do something. And they needed to have a structure, a mouthpiece through which to do



it because they didn't want any one of them to set themselves apart and take a rifle shot. So CMF was born with that in mind and CMF grew very quickly. Then Dottie came on board to promote philanthropy as a value in the State of Michigan. A lot of work [was] done to get the tax credit for community foundation gifts. A lot of work [was] done to organize the state and... [00:24:00] there is a lot of work with the state, an awful lot of work because the State of Michigan has known for some time that it doesn't have the wherewithal to do what the private sector can do. I think Dottie parlayed that into a wonderful partnership. A great deal of trust between, well I don't know that we trust the state so much, but a great deal of trust from the state. CMF is the go-to organization to try to get something going when the state can't seem to get it going. I think that is unique.

If I think of other regional grantmaking associations, it seems to me that, as I said early on, they are more of a gathering place, a place to have a cup of coffee and chat about commonalities. CMF is more of a get-in-there-and-do-something organization and I think that is a powerful recognition of the impact you can have when you harness a variety of philanthropic interests and head them [00:25:00] in a single direction, whether that is public policy, whether that is congressional oversight, whatever it may be, the whole ongoing question of what a payout requirement should be for private foundations. CMF is in that fray and is awfully good at it and Rob continues to be awfully good at it. He has got a lot of irons in the fire with the State of Michigan. I think that collaboration between public and private is really, that is what maybe makes us unique.

(KA): If you were to capture the lessons learned that you would share, what advice would you give an emerging regional association about how to do it right.

(BG): As a membership organization, it needs to keep the needs and wants of its membership [00:26:00] foremost. It needs to really be able to be trusted as not having an agenda of its own, but seeking the agenda of its members.

(KA): Great, those are good. Is there anything else about the sort of tone or the quality of leadership or anything about the nature of leadership in Michigan that you would want us to make sure to capture?

(BG): You know Dottie [laughter]. I tried to give her an awful lot more credit for the AIDS Fund and she wouldn't let me put it in there. She kept striking it out. I think the quality of leadership that most impressed me and we are speaking about the individual frankly, is that her enthusiasm knows no bounds and she is [00:27:00] absolutely contagious in that. By the same token, she is not looking for any spotlight for herself. She is not looking for any praise for herself. She captures the interest of members foremost and knew how to link member to member in order to get those interests fulfilled just working in the background.



(KA): One of the things that's of interest to me would be people... You saw John coming into Michigan and there have been other people coming in from the outside and they become acculturated to this way of being. How does this happen?

(BG): I think it happens by working... but I think that idea [00:28:00] of working together in that open-faced Midwest kind of way is a lot – it's very refreshing. I think it's relaxing in fact. You don't have to be uptight about stuff, you don't have to prove stuff. You can actually work with your colleagues and enjoy it. And I think that's part of what I saw happening in that case.

(KA): Anything else you want to add?

(BG): I think that one of the things that I would like to stress about the AIDS Fund is the compassion that the board members had. The passion and compassion. It just happens that we were [00:29:00] individuals involved in philanthropy but Glen Cossick said it so well when I interviewed him. He said it is remarkable what can happen when you put heart and head together and the heart part is the part that always struck me even when I was a philanthropist myself. I never appreciated and I still don't, the imbalance of power between grantseeker and grantmaker. I have always thought that to be unfair and imposing and probably the dark side of philanthropy. I think most of the people on the AIDS Fund board, if you ask them would feel the same way. I think we were all interested in working with this issue as opposed to against it.

(KA): What about any last thoughts about CMF and the sort of [00:30:00] nature of philanthropy in the State of Michigan? Anything else you want to say?

(BG): I don't think so.

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