



INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES JOHNSON – 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 Charles Johnson 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.

Charles Johnson (CJ): I always felt that that was a big encouragement to my colleagues.

Kathy Agard (KA): Yes, it was kind of fun to tell the same thing to Kellogg about what the Lilly Endowment was doing.

(CJ): Exactly, I would say it was very helpful to us and it would seem to be helpful to developing the program in Michigan also. Do you remember the period of time when we really had kind of a tri-state approach type of thing? I am not sure whether you were involved then or not, but some effort was made to see how Michigan, Ohio, [00:01:00] and Indiana could help each other in really lifting the level of philanthropy to do be sort of a global way of viewing it. We had one meeting in Indianapolis where we had good representation from all three states. I am thinking Joel was the

featured speaker at that and he did an excellent job. It wasn't specifically about the Youth Project, but it was more about what we could do on a regional basis to be supportive of each other. I don't know where it went with Ohio but I felt that Michigan and Indiana, without any kind of formal relationship, sort of continued that effort [00:02:00] and we were supportive of each other. There was no contract between parties in the two states; it was just a shared concern which was mainly among a few leaders.

(KA): Yes. That was just starting Charles when I left and it has turned into a joint venture now between the three states. I don't know if you knew that, but the MCFYP has in fact morphed into a multistate conglomerate of the community foundations. It was good work.

(CJ): Well it was in the early stages there and I can't put an exact time on it. I don't really have the records to do that.

(KA): [00:03:00] Both MCFYP and the Indiana gift program, and then also the back and forth with Kellogg and Lilly being supportive of one another. I don't know how unusual or usual that is in the major foundation arena, but it certainly made a difference for the field that there were a couple three large foundations interested in the philanthropy infrastructure. Can you talk to me a little bit about what you all were thinking at Lilly at the time?

(CJ): A tremendous focus of the Lilly Endowment is on the Indianapolis area and then throughout the state. I don't mean just in terms of community foundations but that was the real focus.

[00:04:00] We were really exploring. See, my position there was the first time they had had anyone with the responsibilities that I had. I really don't know of another foundation that had exactly the same kind of effort, a person whose primary task was to see in what ways some of the foundation's resources could be used to strengthen the independent sector. Now that is kind of a grand statement, but what I think was meant was what could be done with some of the resources, not all of them by any means, some of them, to support philanthropy in the state.

[00:05:00] But, we were also interested in philanthropy in a larger way. I became very involved with independent sector and the Council on Foundations, the, what was then called, the National Society of Fundraising Executives, and now it is the Association of Fundraising Professionals. I believe that is the correct term.

(KA): I think so, too.

(CJ): We were looking very broadly to see what could be done. We were most interested in Indiana but we were also thinking of what could be done elsewhere that would in a roundabout way also help Indiana. For example, one specific objective was to see if we could increase the number of people in the field of [00:06:00] development or fundraising and to see what could be done to help with their education. So we underwrote the cost of developing the accreditation program that the National Society of Fundraisers instituted, and which is an ongoing thing now; it



doesn't receive continuing support from the endowment. What was needed was to have people who are professionals in testing, develop what would be "how would you know whether you had prepared somebody the basic way to go into fundraising." That had implications for all across the country and including, you know, [00:07:00] the Midwest. So it was that kind of thing. We were eager to learn from anyplace we could, and Michigan was obviously a place where philanthropy was well on its way.

You asked about major foundations participating together. My experience over the years was that, that was really quite limited. There might be foundations in a given community who might work together to help with some project that was communitywide and beneficial, but pretty difficult for foundations to collaborate on issues that aren't well-defined because you have different thoughts and ways [00:08:00] of doing things. It isn't that they are unwilling to work together; it is just pretty hard to go through the process of developing a program and working it up through for support going to the board. But I can tell you, it was really helpful to me when I had to make a proposal that would go to our officer group and then to the board to be able to say, "This is what is happening in Michigan and here is something the Kellogg Foundation is helping with." And, not so much financially, but in terms of staff support from Kresge. In those earlier years, Kresge was very restricted on what their grants went to – you know, it was [00:09:00] bricks and mortar. But Ted Taylor, but then mainly John Marshall, with their own participation (which I assume was okay with their colleagues and boards), their involvement was tremendous. I am sort of rambling all over the place here.

(KA): No. that is exactly what we want you to do. You are giving great background. That is exactly what we are looking for. Talk a little bit about why a big foundation like Lilly would even care whether there were community foundations in Indiana or not.

(CJ): [00:10:00] The Lilly Endowment from its beginning in 1937, the three founders (the father and two sons) indicated that they wanted the funds to be concentrated – Well, I will need to be careful how I say it. They weren't specifying the amount, but they wanted support to go for local matters because, and this is a quote that comes down through the years, "the community had been so beneficial to the company that they felt a desire to try to be supportive of the community." [00:11:00] And then over the years as the officers and board members of the foundation tried to carry out the wishes of the donors, it was just sort of a natural progression of things. And with the '69 tax law changes, which instituted the mandatory payout level – You are familiar with that?

(KA): Yes.

(CJ): To Lilly Endowment and a few other of the foundations, that meant going to a whole new level of gift support because prior to that, there was no requirement. Now, Lilly Endowment from the very beginning was making contributions, but there was not a mandatory payout requirement



[00:12:00]. But you also had, over in the '50s and '60s and '70s, tremendous appreciation in the assets of the foundations. So it just, I'll just speak for Lilly at this point, it meant going to a much higher level of grant making. Well, to do that responsibly requires some thought and staff and effort and that's what led to my invitation to join the foundation. There was the thought of "I wonder what the endowment could do to help agencies and charities expand their programs and efforts?" Because it was realized that there was tremendous needs in all the communities and all across the country [00:13:00], but again, focus on Indiana.

So when I came, I brought a background of fundraising. I had worked nine years with a couple of different single charities, organizations, and then I had, I guess it was 17 years with a professional fundraising firm. So I have worked with so many kinds of organizations across the country and with fundraisers, and I felt this would be something that Lilly Endowment could use some of its resources and help further develop the field. I can just tell you [00:14:00] that it was the idea of working with Indiana community foundations with sort of an outgrowth of some interviews I made around the country. Dottie may well have... That may well have been my first time to get acquainted with her, to see what some other experienced people thought might be possible, what would be a feasible thing for Lilly Endowment to do. It came down to, among other things, this concept of seeing what we could do to stimulate the development and the growth of community foundations in Indiana.

(KA): Great. A part of your work, I think, was also the development of the IU Center [00:15:00] as really, the first big formal centers on philanthropy. And we are going to be talking as we do this history on some about who I think of as the little sister, the development of the Johnson Center at Grand Valley. Could you talk a little bit about what your thinking was relative to higher education, getting into the business of education about philanthropy?

(CJ): Well I can respond to that pretty directly. The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University was a direct outgrowth of this attempt to respond to the question, "How might some of the resources of the endowment be used to strengthen the independent sector?" And it became very clear as I studied [00:16:00] that (because I was fortunately given several months to try to put together a reasonable program for the endowment) through interviews, it became clear to me that most nonprofits were under budgeted, understaffed in terms of their development of fundraising efforts. One approach to solving that problem would be to have more qualified people available to be in their development programs. Well if you got more people, how would they be educated, trained, prepared?

And that led me on the search of what were the resources currently in place and I found two. Well, [00:17:00] that is not quite right. Some of the associations, the hospital group, the college-university group, became the case, council for example, in support of education. They were conducting seminars at their conferences and regional seminars, but I couldn't find but two places that were doing this as a full-time effort. One was a west coast group, the name escapes



me. They were conducting seminars around the country, and I am sure they did some in Michigan too, where they would partner with the nonprofit [00:18:00] to host an event, but what they were concentrating on was, "How do you get government grants?" Now they were aware that there were other ways of getting support, but they took as their thing "How do you get government grants?" and that was in a time when organizations needed that, many of them, and that was a success. Grantmakers, I think it is called Grantmakers.

Anyway, I went to Los Angeles and interviewed the founder and leader of that and he explained to me exactly what they were trying to do and I said, in effect, "Well that is one part of development, but then there are these other things." And he said, "Well we are concentrating on that." So I knew that [00:19:00] wasn't really going to be a source for us. But then I heard about The Fundraising School, which had been developed and was being run by Henry Rosso (who had an interesting career and was, at that point, well up in his years), who was just doing this remarkable job of going around the country and holding these seminars that people would pay a registration fee. I attended one of those sessions and I interviewed some participants and I got this kind of response from someone who is brand new to this. They would say something like this, "Well, The Fundraising School is really good for people who are new to development. I doubt if people who are experienced would find much to help them." [00:20:00] Then I talked with someone who was well-experienced and they would say just the reverse, "This may be a little advanced for newer people, but it is really a good thing for those of us who have been at it a while."

So I became acquainted with Henry, and he was operating out of San Francisco. When I met him, I think he must have been in his 70s. Now, to me now, that looks like a very young person, but at that time I felt this was really an ancient guy and I said, "What can we do to help you?" Of course he told me he was limited in the number of people he could do and he was doing almost all of the teaching, and he and his wife [00:21:00] would move around from city to city. I could see that here was a program that seemed to be of great value and I didn't see how this was going to be sustaining. So I said, "How could we get you to move to Indiana and operate out of there and do more for our Indiana organizations?" And he said, "Well, I am not moving from California, but I have really been interested in whether I could make connections with an educational institution. I have tried in a couple of places and they just don't understand what it is we do and they just think it is some kind of adult education, vocational..." And I said, "Well, let me think about that." So we helped [00:22:00] him expand the number of people who were working with him by making a grant to him where he was training the trainers. But now, this is over a period of a good many months.

In the process, I became acquainted with a group of one of the chief development officers at Indiana University. It turned out he had tremendous interest right along the same way that we were looking and... it has already been a long story but I will shorten it. He and I came up with the same idea of seeing if we could get Indiana University to take on this program if Lilly Endowment would fund it, but it had to be with the concept that increasingly Indiana would take responsibility for it. [00:23:00] We wouldn't have been interested in doing it just to plant it there and continue to



support it without the University's involvement. A faculty committee was appointed to discuss that and they were enthusiastic. And so he actually, in effect, gave his nonprofit organization to Indiana University and then Lilly continued to provide funding for that over a long period of time. But, and here is where Michigan comes in. The Kellogg participation in that, I should say, Russ Mawby and Joel Lawrence and money from Kellogg. It was all these things; it is financial but it took mainly leadership. Kellogg's interest in that, [00:24:00] and continuing interest, was just of incalculable importance. So, I tell you the efforts in Indiana and Michigan just had so many ways in which they touch.

(KA): That is one of the reasons we wanted to chat with you. You have been in on a lot of those relationships. I always told my friends in Indiana, I felt like the state border was never there. I am as comfortable in Indiana as I am at home.

(CJ): Russ Mawby, his role in all of this is not possible to overstate and Dottie Johnson. Those were two tremendous leaders and what great influence, not only in their state, but elsewhere. [00:25:00] I include Joel right along with them but you Kathy, you worked with them for many years. I am sure you probably would agree with my assessment of their importance.

(KA): Absolutely. In fact you are going where I was going to go with the next question. One of the things I have been wanting to get at was the nature of their leadership because frankly I don't see it much anymore and I am saddened to have it not be around. So I am wondering if you could put into words... you have watched them work and you have also had the opportunity of watching other wonderful leaders in the field. If you could put your finger on what some of the characteristics are that a young leader might want to think about developing [00:26:00] that Dottie and Russ and Joel exemplify, what did they do that made them really good leaders?

(CJ): Well they had vision and they had a broad outlook. They weren't parochial. Russ wasn't just trying to promote Kellogg and an appreciation of Kellogg. He truly had a concern for the nonprofit sector and its importance in our society. And Dottie was the same way. What a leadership role that Michigan Council of Foundations played, not just in Michigan, but elsewhere. You can't [00:27:00] overstate it. Their understanding of what needed to be done and why it was important and then they had that elusive leadership capacity of drawing people with them. If they suggested something that they thought was good, there was, I think on the part of most people, an immediate response to say, "Yeah, that is good and how can I be part of that?" I don't think you manufacture that, I don't know that you grow it, it is just a leadership trait that is... I don't know how you develop it [00:28:00]. We had programs in leadership development that we funded at the endowment working with cities and towns and all kinds of things, and it is just that the role of leaders who could grasp the vision and understand the importance and then devote themselves to it and bring people along, that is tremendous.



(KA): It is really magic when you see it work. You had some of that in Bob Payton who is another person that I just admire greatly.

(CJ): Right. Bob Payton, well he was our first full-time director at the Center on Philanthropy.

(KA): Yes and a great thinker. I sometimes wonder if we have people of that same [00:29:00] intellectual scope in the field anymore that are really thinking about it. He is a big loss to the field. That is for sure.

(CJ): Well, I am encouraged by the growth of the academic centers on philanthropy. Now, the Dorothy Johnson Center in Grand Valley is certainly an outstanding example of that and that has the Kellogg touch and the Dottie Johnson touch. I forget now... Maybe you know, there is quite a number of these academic programs... And they weigh from a professor in some field, some discipline, who has an interest in this and who does something [00:30:00] and not so that that person is identified with this association of academic centers. So you go from that all the way to the Grand Valleys and the Indiana University which are really grounded and rooted in the academic world. I don't know what degrees Grand Valley is doing now with philanthropy, but at IU there is a Master's Degree and a Ph. D. (the doctoral). And now work is being done more at the undergraduate level, and that reminds me of your MCFYP program where you are getting people who never have even heard of philanthropy, maybe, and trying to have them make it part of their life, not necessarily their [00:31:00] career. Still Kathy, what I guess I am trying to say is this is a many-faceted thing that we are dealing with and I think it is... I just am so excited about this project you have. Now I am assuming that the expectation is there will be a book come from this.

(KA): Yes, in fact we started it thinking we would just write a book and if nothing else, capture the voices from the people who were involved early and keep them here at the Johnson Center and at least somewhere document what really happened and try to pull out the lessons learned. When we talked with Kellogg, Jim McHale wanted us (Jim is vice president now at Kellogg)... [00:32:00] What he has encouraged us to do is to both write the book and then also to develop an electronic platform. His interest was that they have a lot of funding internationally, and he was saying to us – in particular, in South America, in Brazil – there are people there who would like to learn about what has happened and how you get something like a CMF going; and the best way to reach them on course would be to have something available on the Internet. One of the reasons we are taping is that we then will make the resources available online and what we learn. Joel and I will write a section called Lessons Learned, but in the meantime we will have this history and then the profiles of each of the individuals to sort of give the sense of 'it can be done' and what the people [00:33:00] were like who have done this work. With that I am going to ask you one last question. Anything else you want on the record that we may not have talked about?

(CJ): Well, there is one thing that came to my mind immediately when I... You may not know, but I was reached through the local community foundation. Your Robin Leonard [00:34:00] was in



contact with somebody here who then called me and said, "Could they give out my telephone number and e-mail."

(KA): She tracked you down.

(CJ): As soon as I heard about this project dealing with the state of philanthropy, Michigan's state of generosity, whatever title you have used on that, my immediate response was tremendously positive and I thought there was a great story to be told and that the role of the key people that I have mentioned to you...and Kathy I put your name in that list too. I have got it right here in front of me. I thought that was so terrific.

Susan Harrison Wolffis (SHW): This is Susan and I can tell you that I have had a rather lengthy interview with Ranny Riecker (from Dow), and she talked a great deal about the necessity to stay in the community where you (private foundations) made your money, and that [00:39:00] somebody from the family should live in that community or at least in that state and be part of it. So I think there is a way for us to work with this without having somebody pointing fingers at one foundation. So don't worry about that.

(KA): I don't know if you know Ranny from Dow, their family now is spread out almost worldwide and Ranny is the one who is left in Midland and they have just gone through lots of conversations... I am not speaking out of school at all, because she has chatted to lots of folks about her sort of dismay with the fact that the second and third generation are all over and what does that mean for a big private foundation whose company [00:40:00] is still very active in the community.

(CJ): I have to say I understand, say in the case of Ford, that it is more than a local company and entity with the worldwide plants, like Lilly Endowment has worldwide plants too and certainly some around the country but... Well, again, I don't know whether it fits in with what you are wanting to do in reviewing the state of generosity, but I am excited about your project.

(KA): Good. With that, if you don't mind spending a few more minutes, Susan will talk to you about how you got here.

(CJ): I [00:41:00] think we have already talked enough about me, but I will take her questions.

(SHW): You have such an interesting path. Theological seminary, fundraising... Could you talk with me a little bit about why you got into the field of philanthropy and how?

(CJ): Well, like most people who wind up in it, it wasn't intentional. While I was a student at Earlham College – I don't know if you are familiar with that school, the Quaker college on the east side of Indiana. I was there on a scholarship and a work study and, [00:43:00] for some reason, I



was selected to drive the president on some of his speaking engagements around in the state (because he liked to work when he was in the car as opposed to driving). So I got a glimpse, I met some of the trustees of the college. Now you know I only spent a few hours a month doing that kind of thing, but it was a brand new experience for me. Then the vice president for, I guess he was called public relations – he was sort of a general vice president – used some of my work study time to do some things for him; not much, but it gave me an exposure [00:44:00] to a world that I had never been around or known. After I graduated I actually spent a year coaching athletics at a high school in Iowa, had a great time and just loved it but decided I should go on with my plan which was to get a theological degree. I never planned to be a parish – we didn't call them parishes in the Quaker group – but a parish minister. I wanted to work for a church-related educational institution and it had to do, I think, primarily with my experiences as a student at Earlham. And the president of the college [00:45:00] came to my graduation at Hartford Seminary and offered me a job and I went immediately to begin work for the college and learned something about fundraising, not very much, but that really just lead from one thing to another. To me, I can't think of anything that I would rather have done. It was really a rewarding experience; really capped by my 18 years at Lilly Endowment which was an unusual opportunity I was given. It happened because of circumstances, not really my doing; but [00:46:00] there I was given this opportunity, literally to write a job description of what I had proposed to do and then that developed.

(SHW): I am one of those people who likes more information more than less so that is perfect. I see that after your career in philanthropy officially ended, you continued as a volunteer in Arizona and of course, at the Center on Philanthropy at IU. What made you continue on a personal level to be as a volunteer?

(CJ): I am just so committed to the [00:47:00] independent sector (and I have used different terms because there are different ways of referring to that), but I am such a believer in the power of volunteers and of the charitable sector and that covers lots of things. It is funny you would mention that about my continuing because, now this has not been a typical day, but I am on the board of a fairly new community foundation here in this community where the retirement home is located (which is a new location for me, a [00:48:00] new move to this community). I dealt with an issue on that this morning and then I have also dealt with a scholarship fund that we have established for the children of employees and the families of the people who work here at the retirement community, and we're handling the funds for the community foundation for southern Arizona. So I have gone off the board of the Center on Philanthropy and I have dropped other connections because for one thing, I think that other people need to come along and I need to empty a spot for them and then somehow or other time catches up with us and I really, I don't want to travel anymore and frankly [00:49:00] don't want to do as much as I used to do, but I enjoyed it. My wife volunteered in schools, too, after she retired so I guess it is something we do.

(SHW): Where did that come from? Is that something that was important in your upbringing? Something that stems from your faith or your college?



(CJ): I have thought about that. I would say it really is the way I was brought up and the faith aspect. We lived in a little tiny town in Indiana that was really a rural community and the little town was made up of retired farmers [00:50:00] and shopkeepers and the like, but we lived there and my mother, to supplement the family income, made cottage cheese. We kept a cow outside the town and my older brothers milked it and she made this cottage cheese, which I would peddle around town when I was in grade school and I remember it absolutely. I got 10 cents a pint and 5 cents went to my mother and 5 cents to me but before anything was done with that money, 1/10 was taken out and put aside to give to the church. I have heard this kind of story from many people, where they learned the importance of sharing. [00:51:00] We didn't call it philanthropy, but that is what it was.

(SHW): Here you are continuing, passing it on to the younger generation through so much of your work.

(CJ): It is, as I say, I have really been so fortunate to be in the spots where I have been. I wouldn't change any of it.

(SHW): Is there anything that you would like to say about your life, about your contributions that might not show up on this resume or might not show up on the Internet? I see a lot of articles about you, some of your speeches and some of your reports, [00:52:00] but something about which you are the most proud or something that maybe not very many people know but that you would like people to know about you.

(CJ): Well, no I don't think so. I really spent all of my working career being supportive of leaders, whether they were staff people in the organizations I served or leaders of volunteer organizations, and it wasn't about me [00:53:00]. I don't really think of anything that I would come up with in response to your question.

(SHW): Here is what I would like to do, ask your indulgence to be able to contact you again and what I had hoped to do is, as we go through this project and I will be putting together my pieces of it, I know that there are going to be questions that I forgot to ask or I didn't know what to ask at the time and would it be okay with you, either with or without Kathy and the recorder I would be able to give you a call back just to double check things and....

(CJ): I would be happy to do that. I really think it is a wonderful thing you are doing and it is a story that [00:54:00] needs to be told and will be, I think, helpful to other communities. I would be happy to hear from you Susan, with or without Kathy.

(KA): Wait a minute here (laugh).



(CJ): [00:55:00] Kathy, did you know Gene Tempel?

(KA): Yes. I was director of the Johnson Center for six years. That was my most recent job before retiring and so Gene and I worked very closely together before Patrick took over. And then of course I have known Dwight forever and just adore him and think of him as family practically, so we have been very close to the IU folks.

(CJ): Gene had tremendous interaction with Michigan folks. He is quite well-acquainted with Russ Mawby and Joel and he played an important role in what we [00:56:00] did there at Lilly Endowment. He and I became sort of a partnership team and he was working with University folks and I was working with the Lilly Endowment folks and it developed over a period of time. I guess what I am saying is if you don't have him down as a resource person for your project, you might think about that. I guess you know about his new position?

(KA): Yeah. That is a really good idea. I hadn't thought about Gene, but he certainly knows us well. The two of you together must have been a formidable force. I feel sorry for anybody... They must have sat on their wallets whenever you walked in the door.

(CJ): Well I tell you, teamed with Dottie and Russ. That is something. [00:57:00]

(KA): We will stay in touch with you as this all progresses and you will have a chance to look at whatever we use. But you did a wonderful job. Thank you for all of the good background.

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