



INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HOSKING – OCTOBER 5, 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 John Hosking on October 5, 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): Feel free to stop me.

John Hosking (JH): Oh I will, don't worry.

(KA): Answer what you are comfortable with. What we are trying to do is, as you know, is to capture some of the flavor of Michigan, and why we're different from other places in the country, or not, and what we might have learned as a model of our experience. I'm going to try really hard not to give you a lot of verbal feedback. My nature would be to giggle, and I'm going to try really hard not to do that. It may seem a little strange to you, but I will try to give you as much physical feedback. I don't want my voice on the tape. To start with, would you tell us just a little bit about, I'm going to ask you at the end about your own story of philanthropy, but for right now can you just talk about...

(JH): My own story?

(KA): Personally. How you came into this work... [00:01:00]

(JH): I had no other background prior to my...

(KA): You know, most people coming into this field don't. It is an interesting field for that reason. To start, I'd like you talk a little bit about your current role at the Binda Foundation to kind of set a tone for how you got with me today.

(JH): In August of 2009, Elizabeth passed away and at that time – She passed away in August, and we had a June board meeting and she had elected to step down then as president. There was a vote taken for a new president and I was elected to that position, and she retained [00:02:00] the chair position. Of course, with her death in August, I also became the board chair, and it has been a three-year term and I was just reelected to those positions this past June.

(KA): So you are chairing the board?

(JH): Yes, that is correct.

(KA): And what is involved with that? You also have an executive director at the foundation...

(JH): Our executive director is basically the face of the foundation. She pretty much handles everything with regard to grant requests, site visits. I do do some site visits with her if she requests me to join her, or if I am interested in the area that she might be visiting, but the foundation has grown [00:03:00] financially. After my aunts passing it has doubled in size, but our executive director has been with the foundation and had the privilege of being tutored, if you will, by Elizabeth for a number of years. She goes back to '96, is when she first started part-time with the foundation. Actually, she still is not what you would call a full-time employee. She works about three days a week plus. She works a lot actually.

(KA): Would you tell us about Elizabeth and Guido? Their story?

(JH): Okay, from the foundation standpoint or?

(KA): Just about how they met, a little bit about them. We will have it [00:04:00] in writing. I can tell you this as well: the tape itself, that we're doing today, will end up going into the archives at Grand Valley for serious study. But what we're going to take – and you will have a chance to approve of these or not – are actual clips. So part of what I'm getting from you are just clips that we are going to take.

(JH): And I'm purposely not referring, where normally I always refer to my aunt as Aunt Elizabeth or Guido as my uncle, but I am purposely not doing it here because she always made it very clear, as I told you, it is not a family foundation.

(KA): Yeah, so we can refer to them maybe as Elizabeth and Guido, and that will work.



(JH): Both Elizabeth and Guido were born in the Upper Peninsula; Guido in Bessemer, and my aunt in Hancock. [00:05:00] My aunt and family – which would be my father and grandmother and my aunt's father – moved to California when my aunt was seven and my dad was three. Shortly after their moving to California, my grandfather passed away at a very young age, so they moved back to the area in Calumet and resided in Calumet until my aunt's graduation from high school. She went on to Northern Michigan University where she received a bachelor's degree in education, and then received a scholarship. At that time there was only one scholarship offered at each of the state universities, and she [00:06:00] received that scholarship and went to the University of Michigan and received her master's degree.

(KA): Now as I think about that period of time, it would've been the early 1900s. That would've been unusual for a woman not only to get a bachelor's degree, but to go on to school.

(JH): And Guido, being raised in Bessemer and being from a good Italian family, attended the University of Michigan, the School of Architecture, and received his bachelor's degree there. Then went on to work at various firms in the Battle Creek area, and started his own firm. Then, of course, he served in World War II in Burma, in building the Burma Road. [00:07:00] When he returned from the service after World War II, continued on with his own firm and it grew from there. He specialized in schools, both elementary schools and high schools. That is how they met. My aunt was at that time a consultant for the Battle Creek school system in elementary education, and Guido was designing a school in Battle Creek, and they met. They were actually a match that no one else, I don't think, would have put together. They complemented each other.

(KA): Would it be fair to say that they were from modest backgrounds?

(JH): Very modest. I would just like to say that there was never, in our home [00:08:00] growing up with my grandmother, and I know with Guido's family, there was never any discussion of poverty. It was always what they had, not what they didn't have. And you would never hear them mention anything about going without, it was what they actually had going forward and good hard work.

(KA): Do you remember when they founded the foundation? Were you around?

(JH): Yes. Actually, I moved from Calumet in the Upper Peninsula to Battle Creek in 1971 and it was in 1977 that they formed the foundation.

(KA): Why did they do it?

(JH): Well, not having any children of their own, Guido and Elizabeth both were very interested in [00:09:00] education, and had done a lot privately with scholarships. Every high school that Guido built, he left a scholarship to a graduating senior. They were always interested in giving back. They did so much privately, with no fanfare, did not look for recognition, and I think the idea of forming a foundation and being able to expand, and learn more about how they could contribute was very important to them. [00:10:00]



(KA): You mentioned that they never really explicitly talked that much about their type of leadership roles, so I'm going to ask you to extrapolate a little bit, knowing them. They were both very important and of course, after Guido was gone, Elizabeth even more so became engaged on the CMF board and in communities. Can you chat a little bit about, knowing them, again, the same kind of quiet leadership? About why if they are a Battle Creek foundation, why they might have been interested in giving some of their time and their energy to a statewide association?

(JH): I think it was the association they had with the leadership of CMF, and also the foundation members. I think at that time when they got involved, a lot of the original founders of the foundations were still around [00:11:00] and they had a very close knit group that they could sit and talk with. The CMF gave and provided a lot of direction where they needed direction.

(KA): Now Elizabeth and Guido, would have been peers with Russ Mawby in Battle Creek. Were they friends? Did they know each other?

(JH): Yes. They were very close. Yes.

(KA): And would that have played into some of their thinking on the development of the foundation?

(JH): I am sure Russ Mawby, Norm Brown, and a lot of people within the community had some influence on them.

(KA): And they had their own interests when it comes to education. They had always been really focused on education.

(JH): Yes, but the foundation, it's not strictly just education. They were always very interested in the arts, [00:12:00] they traveled the world over and over. Elizabeth was an avid reader, and Guido supported her in everything that she expressed an interest in pursuing. Fortunately, he had the means to do that. In the arts, they were followers of the opera and both served on numerous committees throughout the state and in the city.

(KA): I bet she was a heck of a fundraiser. I would love to have her on my board...

(JH): She was actually an original member of the Battle Creek Community Foundation, and she served on the [00:13:00] Kellogg Community College Board of Trustees for 27 years, having also served as its president for a time.

(KA): Lots of wonderful service. So you are personally somewhat familiar with the infrastructure in Michigan – the Council of Michigan Foundations in particular and probably a passing knowledge of the Michigan Nonprofit Association, that it exists anyway. When you think about what you would like in terms of support in your role and support of the foundation, can you talk a little bit about the behavior or the things that support organizations can do for foundations like yours.



(JH): Correct me if I'm wrong, but I [00:14:00] think CMF, one of the important roles that CMF plays with their member foundations is they are the arm. They are the extension of the foundation in dealing with government – both State and Federal government – and other larger foundations that can provide some new ideas and collaboration, if you will. Collaboration is one of the biggest things that I have seen the CMF organization do, providing training where training is needed.

(KA): Are you going to go to the conference?

(JH): No, I don't think so.

(KA): No, me neither. I can make it for a couple of days. Good response.

(JH): Not that I [00:15:00] don't – I mean it just happens that I can't go. I have been to a number of them.

(KA): So when you are bringing on a new board member or introducing the foundation, what do you encourage them to think about when they think about doing formal philanthropy and this kind of work that you're doing on the foundation? Let's say that you had a new trustee come to the foundation, how do you coach them?

(JH): Interesting that you should ask that. Now this, I'm going to get off here a little. We have been looking at our trustees and we have openly discussed having to start looking for new members because of age. We have a number of those that have been – we have one trustee [00:16:00] who was an original board member, Vern Boss. So we have been talking about it, and really haven't. ... Pretty much it has been discussion. We haven't formulated a plan yet as to the approach we are going to take. In the past, of course, it was always Elizabeth that would, based on recommendations and her observations and the people she knew, would decide who she wanted to serve on their board.

(KA): And it really is a maturing, if you will, of this organization, isn't it? Now that she is gone and you start to lose some of your original board members. What is the nature of your discussions about how to keep the spirit...

(JH): Well, [00:17:00] one of the things that both Guido and Elizabeth felt was the secret to the foundation was continuity that the trustees had. It has always been a small board and the atmosphere amongst board members is just wonderful. Everyone feels free to express themselves, and being a small foundation, and with such a close knit board, we do things much quicker than some larger foundations. Elizabeth always said that the secret to the foundation was the board – not any one individual, but the board. She always instilled in board members that [00:18:00] we needed to keep that continuity, she didn't want to see people added just to add a member.

(KA): While you are still wearing your foundation hat, do you feel like the foundation is isolated or do you feel like you're part of a greater community of foundations in Michigan?



(JH): Oh no, no, no. We feel like we're part of a greater community, with the number of foundations in just our area. No, we don't feel isolated at all. We try to, in every way possible, try to partner with other foundations and organizations on grants. We are not a standalone organization at all.

(KA): Why the collaboration?

(JH): We feel it is important that [00:19:00] people that have received grants from the Binda Foundation feel that they can come back to the foundation, but not as the sole grantor, if you will, for another project. We like to see them approach other foundations within the community and/or area, and that there be collaboration in the grantmaking process.

(KA): Would your executive director call up other foundation people and say things like “Hey we’ve got a grant request, what are you going to do?” How does the informal conversation go between foundations?

(JH): The way that the Binda Foundation handles grants, of course, they are submitted to the foundation through our executive director [00:20:00] and we have two grant review meetings during the year. There is a grant review committee that reviews all of the grant requests. That committee then makes recommendations to the entire board, and then the board decides on... And the grant review committee is a very diversified group, and there's much discussion as to the type of funding that the Binda Foundation might provide in collaboration with other foundations who might have an interest, and then we pass that on. We feel partnering is very important, [00:21:00] that they're not coming back to the same well every time.

(KA): From your point of view, and the kinds of things that come to you, if you were talking to one of our graduate students who wanted to go into the field of either nonprofit leadership or would like to get into the foundation world, what is some practical advice you might give to a young person about becoming involved in this kind of work? What do they need to know, what do their attitudes need to be, how do they need to act? What skills do they need?

(JH): I think probably the most important thing is that you have to be willing to share your time [00:22:00] and your services and be a good listener, an extremely good listener. And it is amazing that if a person is interested, that there are opportunities, both through the Council of Michigan Foundations and other foundations. That they first get involved in the community and get to know people, but it has to be in your heart. I think that you have to feel it, it has to be a passion, I think.

(KA): To go into this work?

(JH): Mm-hmm.

(KA): Would you mind sharing with us, now thinking about you personally [00:23:00], not Guido or Elizabeth's story, but your story. Was your family philanthropic, in the sense of being engaged in the community?



(JH): No.

(KA): Tell us about you. You grew up in the UP too?

(JH): Yes, I grew up in Calumet, Michigan in the Upper Peninsula. My mother came from a very large family and my father of course, was Elizabeth's brother. They always were very positive, both families were, and extended families. As my aunt always said of the extended family growing up in that day, the church was very important in their lives. The relationship that they had with their family was [00:24:00] extremely important, and I could see that growing up. We didn't have everything, but we had what we needed.

(KA): Was your family itself a large family?

(JH): No, I have one brother. I think my father was very involved in everything my brother and I did, whether it be in sports, in school. My father served over 20 years on the Board of Education at the Calumet Public Schools.

(KA): You didn't get away with anything. [Laughter]

(JH): No. I think it was just through action, you could see that it was important to them. I think my brother and I both felt that you have [00:25:00] to, again, give back, do something. My wife comes from a very similar family background and she has done a lot of volunteerism, and I think my aunt had a big impression on her, I know she did.

(KA): What do you remember as your first volunteer or philanthropic activity? Did you get involved in high school or middle school, in college, or your first job? Where is your passion in this work that's your own, not the foundation's?

(JH): Actually my passion was always working with the young kids and coaching, whether it be hockey teams or just being around younger children and seeing them develop.

(KA): Have you been able to continue with some of that now?

(JH): No I haven't. [00:26:00] We've raised two daughters....

(KA): When you think about your daughters, what kinds of things have you tried to instill in them or how have you tried to instill your beliefs, and your wife's?

(JH): Actually, I think through action. My wife was a professional until she had our first daughter and elected to be a stay-at-home mother; and so we didn't have everything that all the other families had on the block. We eventually got a computer and so forth, but again my wife was extremely involved in everything they did in school, and I was working a lot, but never complained.



(KA): Are you seeing them develop philanthropic interests now?

(JH): Yes, actually, [00:27:00] our oldest daughter is a schoolteacher, and my aunt was very proud of her. Our youngest daughter is a graduate of Michigan State and is married and lives in the Chicago area now, and does a lot of volunteerism through the animal rescue shelters in the area that they're in. She has done a lot of volunteer work in other organizations where they have lived.

(KA): So how are you enjoying your foundation role? Was it what you thought it was going to be?

(JH): It was actually [00:28:00] in a lot of ways not something I was looking forward to at that time, having been – this might be off record – my aunt's health was declining and I was also the executor of the estate. And so originally, when I was asked to serve on the foundation board, I questioned my aunt, because I was not a college graduate. I had attended college, but I had just felt that I could do other things that I would be more happy doing. She explained to me that there were other gifts that I could bring and that a college degree yes, it's very important, but it's not [00:29:00] the only thing that one needs in life. It was the transition with her health, and it was a struggle. The transition within the foundation I think was very smooth, because of the board, and our executive director. It was a very smooth transition.

(KA): Are you having fun now?

(JH): Yes. We have a wonderful board.

(KA): Those are the main things I wanted to cover. I wanted to get you on record about the foundation and about your background. But when you were thinking driving over, was there anything that you wanted to make sure that we had in what we present online and to other people, that we should get on the record that I haven't asked you? [00:30:00]

(JH): In the articles that Robin is going to copy, I think what you'll find in there – and as was on the tape that Guido and Elizabeth did with Dr. Norm Brown, when he was the president of the Kellogg Foundation – they talked about them forming the foundation, and she was asked “What do you really need to start a foundation?” I think she said “A big heart, caring, and a small purse.” I think we live by that. The caring is the important thing.

(KA): Great. Thank you very much.

-End of Recording-

