



INTERVIEW WITH LINDA PATTERSON – MARCH 19, 2013

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 Linda Patterson on March 19, 2013. 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.

Preferred citation: Researchers wishing to cite this collection should use the following credit line: Interview with Linda Patterson, 2013. "Our State of Generosity," Johnson Center Philanthropy Archives of the Special Collection & University Archives, Grand Valley State University Libraries.

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.

Kathryn Agard (KA):

What I'd like you to talk about first is to orient whoever is listening to this 20 years from now [00:04:00] of your role in the Michigan philanthropic community. If you could just kind of [talk about] when did you come in and what projects have you been involved with so that we hear your voice and it also warms our brains up.

(LP): My first involvement with the philanthropic community was when I joined the staff at the Council of Michigan Foundations, which was a regional association of grant makers that was begun and headed by Dorothy Johnson. Since it was a state-wide organization, it really didn't

matter where it was located. Dottie's home was in Grant Haven and that's where the Council of Michigan Foundations' home was also after the first couple of years of its being. Dottie hired me to do a special project [00:05:00] looking at increasing and improving philanthropy in Michigan, and her board of directors (spearheaded, I believe, by Russ Mawby who was currently the CEO of the Kellogg Foundation and just a giant in the world of philanthropy in Michigan and even in the United States and the world, really. Just an outstanding gentleman.)

It was Russ's idea that things were happening in the country that were not being pursued as fully in Michigan as it could be. In particular, advocacy for families of wealth to form some sort of formal giving unit and secondly, for there to be more [00:06:00] academic and community support for formal giving. I was asked to staff a committee of philanthropists throughout the state that would play with some of these ideas and perhaps start organizations to deal with some things. And specifically Michigan, after some initial meetings, chose to try to establish an organization that could be sort of an umbrella organization for nonprofit organizations. Foundation... [00:07:00]

(KA): Why didn't the Council become that umbrella itself?

(LP): Because it was, I think, two reasons. We were looking at a broader audience than just foundations – foundations whether they were corporate foundations, private family foundations or community foundations. The Council of Michigan Foundations' strong reputation and purpose was really to serve foundations, but the group's philosophy was broader than that. It was to strengthen the administration and operations of all [00:08:00] types of nonprofits – whether they were cultural organizations or health organizations or direct service organizations – and create a dialogue between both the funders and the doers. Most of the committee that was looking at this question were funders – All of the committee that was looking at the question were funders, but they were very sensitive to their own role. They realized that money was critical, but it was actually the seat on the floor and the doers who are even more critical; and that the two should work more closely as partners, rather than sort of bosses and employees, if you would.

So, that was the [00:09:00] nonprofit support organization. It turned into the Michigan Nonprofit Association and had a couple of other names early on. Then also another issue was this whole concept of strengthening student volunteers, youth volunteers – Campus Compact grew out of that. At the time, the CEO of the Kresge Foundation was very aware of this organization nationally and knew that Michigan did not have that. So we explored starting that with a number of very different college presidents that we drew together to talk about the value of community service and [00:10:00] the value of formalizing how volunteers were trained and recruited and retained and to strengthen how nonprofits dealt with volunteers. The other side of that was to strengthen the volunteer pool that nonprofits [and] community organizations had to choose from. That developed the Campus Compact Organization in Michigan, which is still going and quite active on a number of different campuses for the college and university students.



A third aspect to that was strengthening [00:11:00] the administration of nonprofits. At the time, there was a nonprofit or philanthropy school started one in New York, one in California and one very close by in Indianapolis; but Michigan again did not have anything that academically prepared students to become administrators and active in nonprofit organizations. We were successful in getting some nonprofit administration programs going in a number of different colleges around, but I think most important of those was Don Lubbers steering Grand Valley State University [00:12:00] into really strengthening its social work department and calling that a nonprofit administration, and also establishing the Dorothy Johnson Center on Philanthropy.

Then a fourth one was sort of just to raise the awareness, if you will, of the nonprofit world. To do that, this group thought that there would be some value in focusing or establishing a governor's award that honored nonprofit leaders. We found that the state did have a number of awards that recognized community leadership, but didn't have a formal [00:13:00] governor's award. One was started, it never gained, I think, the visibility that was originally hoped for, but at least it was another step of recognizing.

(KA): That's great, Linda. Thank you. It's just perfect. That's exactly what we need. You know, I'm struck by, and you can answer this question – the mystery question for me when I was going through the papers (and of course I was there but for parts of it but I was totally focused elsewhere), what were the distinctions between the improving committee [00:14:00] and the increasing committee and why two committees?

(LP): I don't believe that there were two committees. We really, in the beginning, focused on improving and increasing philanthropy. Now down the way, some sort of administrative changes happened at the Council of Michigan Foundations which then developed committees to actively seek the formation of corporate foundations – or actively seek the formation of more community foundations or to actively seek the formation of more private foundations. But that really was an out spin of the fact that there was, within the Council of Michigan Foundations, a corporate committee that sort of distinguished itself from the other types of foundations and it had [00:15:00] its own programming committee. With that at our conferences would very selectively target those groups. The other groups on the board at CMF began to feel that each kind of philanthropy had enough uniqueness that there should be some special programming that went on. That's where the increasing sort of warped into.

(KA): Yes. Sure. Emerged from it.

(LP): Yes, yes. But in the beginning, it was one concept.

(KA): Okay. Well you – you were, I mean, what a catbird seat, right, to see all of this. Can you describe what the... [00:16:00] Do you think of all the ideas that spun out of that committee in your work? What was it like? If you were teaching a class of one of the grad students, how would you



talk about why that committee was so successful in everything it did? They're diverse people, they have many powerful people with their own power basis. What happened inside the committee that made it work? What did people do?

(LP): Yes. I think first of all, the committee leadership – with the chair of that committee being Russ Mawby – was so incredibly respected. He had such a personable, caring approach, [00:17:00] and he listened and was genuinely interested in everyone's opinion. So, the leadership of the community was huge. The members of the committee were also huge. They were the most experienced and the, I think, most respected in the field of philanthropy that were on that committee. They were just incredible individuals and they were very thoughtful people; not the type of person who was a power broker – not a power broker, but they didn't think of themselves as being powerful or terribly important. They thought of themselves as being ordinary, caring people I think. [00:18:00]

I think also a key is the fact that the council recognized that everybody whose ideas were being tapped had full-time commitments, and therefore they were willing to staff the issue so that daily attention could be given to the ideas that were expressed in implementing them without adding the burden on the people who are already had a full plate of activity. They were influential and powerful people, good, good leaders; but they were being used for their ideas and their networking abilities, not the day-to-day administration of the project. There were a number – especially [00:19:00] in that era – of people who felt the nonprofit world should be run voluntarily and that it wasn't about pay, it wasn't about building up an institution or paying staff people. I think it was very important, and I think that's a lesson that has been learned. I see this whole impact idea that is sort of emerging in the last year and a half. A crucial component of that is to have dedicated staff, and I think the council was ahead of its time in recognizing that need. So, I think that was important.

(KA): Great. Great. Yes and I'm sure they didn't always agree, because [00:20:00] they all came from different places and had strong opinions. I mean, they were an educated group, all that sort of thing. But when they engaged each other in a disagreement, can you walk through how things became resolved? Or how you repaired them? At the kind of a nitty-gritty level, how could a young professional do that work, or be on that kind of a committee, and be constructive and learn from what these folks did?

(LP): Oh, boy. You know, I'm trying to even imagine. I can't even remember an issue where there was a strong division of opinion. Again, however, I think that that could be attributed to the fact that [00:21:00] Russ was a very good leader. He would raise a question and not direct the question, and then allow expression within the room so that issues got talked out and they were really weighted. People considered all sides to it, and then finally a course forward would be suggested that seems to meet everybody's needs. The meetings could be very long that way, but I think that they were also very productive that way. It's that whole having that leadership ability of



knowing that how much conversation to encourage and when to call the question, and Russ [00:22:00] just did that so well.

(KA): You've seen a number of these projects like MNA and the Commission that have been incubated, for a lack of a better word, at CMF and then spun off. What's in the water at CMF that allows it to spin things off and not institution-build?

(LP): [Laughter] Well that's wonderful.

(KA): I mean it's unusual behavior actually. Yes.

(LP): I suppose the original philosophy of being a support organization and being very careful with budget. I think that Dottie was always very careful to have an operating budget [00:23:00] that allowed a wide variety of capacity members to join the organization. Had the organization tried to run everything that it initiated – or incubated, I think that's a good word – the cost would've escalated so much that that mattered. Then I also think that the board members at the council were very aware of mission; they really tried to keep a focus on their primary mission. Again, if they had started operating all of the programmatic ideas [00:24:00] that incubated there, I think the mission of the organization would have been watered down, or at least so broadly focused that their impact would've been less.

(KA): Thank you. That's a really great answer and right on target I think. You're doing great. One of the things that I'm interested in is CMF created all these institutions, and when you have really a good leader, which we've had, of these institutions – why haven't they ended up after being spun off going to war with one another? I mean what holds the – My feeling is that there is something unusual about the relationships between the institutions in [00:25:00] Michigan. I'd like you to comment a little bit of whether that's true or not true, and then what might be some of the factors involved in the relationships?

(LP): I think (and you know I have not been active in a number of the organizations in recent years) in the early years, they at least had such definitive work to do that they needed to cooperate with each other. They needed to learn from each other. These were new endeavors that were happening. The organizations, in order to be effective, needed to understand what other organizations were trying to achieve and how what they [00:26:00] were trying to achieve worked cooperatively and worked differently. I think the leaders of those groups had a lot of mutual respect and learned from each other; and because of the cooperation and learning from each, there wasn't the same kind of turfism that you often see develop – especially when you have common membership often at least to some degree. I'm not sure that that's the case today, but it seems to be from working the issue from this side of the formula (as opposed to the administration of some of those organizations, but instead being now a supporter of those



organizations) I see they're still [00:27:00] continuing to be cooperative, non-competitive climate there.

(KA): Great. Thanks. I'm going to ask you to then – you were ahead of that direction, you're anticipating where we're headed – would you talk a little bit about the private foundations in Michigan; and what Michigan, and particularly CMF, but also the other organizations to the extent that they've been involved in the support of and building of family philanthropy? Was it important? Did they have anything to do with it? If so, what did they do or how could they have been more supportive? What is that interaction between some of these or all of these organizations and the private foundation world?

(LP): I think the Council of [00:28:00] Michigan Foundations was instrumental in supporting the development of a number of private foundations. If an individual had an inkling that they wanted to start some sort of a formal giving program, they usually don't really know how to do it. They don't know the law that's involved. They don't know the detail that's involved. CMF developed materials that were sort of Grant Making 101, and it educated families who wanted to start a foundation as to both the legal and the familial aspects of what that meant (and that could not always mean starting your own foundation). [00:29:00] Depending on size and depending on the founders sort of dream of what he or she wanted to accomplish, maybe developing a donor advised fund in a community foundation was going to be better for that family.

It had the opportunity to still give them the pleasure of reviewing a number of different types of requests that might come in for their support, and of making a joint decision of between family members as to where that support would go and not have the administrative burden. On the other hand, there were some families that even though their foundation asset level was [00:30:00] going to be small, wanted and welcomed the administrative coordination and function for the foundation. I think it was critical that some lessons they learned that could be taught, if you will, to those families who were exploring whether or not they wanted to form a formal giving program and what kind of structure they wanted that giving program to take.

It (the Council of Michigan Foundations) also allowed the development of networks within local communities that supported [00:31:00] administering and functioning within the formal giving program. The conference, for instance. The annual conference allowed donors to meet other donors so that they could pick up the telephone and give them a call if they have a question about some sort of a food pantry in their city or any other interest – an educational program. Any number (or variety of the focuses) of various family groups developed other friends, if you will, who were doing the same kind of work they were doing and could support and educate each other and cooperate with each other and expand the impact, therefore, of their own giving. I think a lot of the council's [00:32:00] role has been both to help people in establishing a giving program but also to help people establish a giving program that was going to have impact and some sort of sophistication in a separation.



(KA): Great. I'd like to take a few minutes to walk through these themes, and just ask you whether you think what we're saying is true or not. If it is, if you have any examples; but if it's not true, also why you think it's not true. So, the first thing we're going to put out there is that Michigan seems to have been blessed with a number of people who adopt the philosophy of servant leadership. In your experience, is that true or not? Also, [00:33:00] do they know the concept of servant leadership, and do you have any example you can think of from your working with everybody about where they might have expressed that?

(LP): I think that's interesting then. In thinking about when I early on became involved with my work with the Council of Michigan Foundations, I think that at that time there was a lack of focus on community service. You certainly heard of the grey ladies that helped in the hospitals or tutors or [00:34:00] parents who would go into the schools and help kids (listen to them while they read or compose something), but you didn't have the emphasis on young people especially actually participating in their communities. I have seen that field grow enormously. Even you see now applications for college – for high school kids who want to go to college – there is sort of a whole section of what have you done for other people, what have you done in the community now, and that never used to be the case. I think in the last 25, 30 years that emphasis has changed hugely.

(KA): Okay. I'm going to move on to the next [00:35:00] one, just time-wise. That is that we've been blessed to have resources here; but if you were talking to someone, say in another country, and talking about trying to replicate what happened in Michigan, could some of it be replicated without money? What is the role of human talent, the role of financial resources and the kind of networking that has been built here in building the network? More so, it's like people and money – making the distinction there.

(LP): When I think of the European countries, I think more the distinction is not necessarily the money or the people, but it is a philosophy of whose responsibility the needy may be. [00:36:00] When I experienced a lot of the really different kind of thinking about nongovernmental organizations, I saw – and I think that this is also changing – but when I first started working in the field, I saw a resistance from people overseas thinking that they had a role to play in supporting those in their own society who may have greater needs. They thought that was the role of the government, and that they paid their taxes so that the government could do that. They didn't really take it upon themselves so much to have the impact that could be reached if more of the citizens participated that way.

(KA): [00:37:00] And then that more to the idea of what have you seen relative, or if you could reflect it – let's put it that way. If you could reflect on CMF and MNA and again the Commission and the Johnson Center – their role in public policy development and the relationship with government, how has that developed and what has that been?



(LP): Well I think in all of the organizations that you've mentioned, the role of public policy has been very important to them. I know with the Council of Michigan Foundations it was, I would guess, probably the number one reason that the umbrella organization for foundations was established. There were things that were happening in tax law that [00:38:00] those foundations that had been in existence a number of years were opposed to and felt were going to really make their work less effective. I think as far as impact goes that it's been real, but limited. I think social change just is very, very slow and hard work. When you see policy change, it usually takes a long time to get a law changed; and then even when the law is changed, it takes a long time to see any impact from that change. That's one of the most frustrating, I think, aspects of working in this area – [00:39:00] how few people have patience to really do policy work.

I can understand it, but it really is this single area that makes the greatest impact in addressing especially social justice issues, issues of poverty, issues of racism. The really, really tough issues to crack take a lot of public policy, cooperation and focus – and we don't get that understanding. The work itself is slow and hard. Especially the political system today I think is broken. I really have problems with what's going on with certainly our national politics, but also [00:40:00] even state politics. I think it's encouraging that our government in the state of Michigan has at least made some efforts to have a liaison with the giving community, but with the financial resources being so scarce now I'm not sure of how great an impact that's going to have.

(KA): Next thing I was going to ask you is what you worry about and you again started there. Are there other things that you worry about in looking forward for the field?

(LP): Well yes, I guess. Again, it's this whole government funding and the government's unwillingness to address tax [00:41:00] issues. What I think is happening is fewer risks are being taken on the part of philanthropy because greater need is there just for operating funds. The thing that always attracted me to philanthropy was the innovation that happened in those fields. Now, the money really is needed so severely by many organizations to just keep their doors open, that some of the innovation is being lost and that's too bad. I think that's going to be a social loss.

(KA): What are you seeing in terms of the next generation [00:42:00] of leadership? We've both been at this long enough that you can begin to see the emergence coming.

(LP): Yes. [Laughter]

(KA): Are you liking what you're seeing, or are you worried about the leadership? What do you think is...

(LP): Yes, I am optimistic about that. A lot of people are worried because – I'm based now in the City of Grand Rapids – we are really seeing a huge turnover because of age with most of our traditional philanthropist in the city; but what I'm also seeing is a whole new generation of very



successful young people happening. Now, they're not doing formal giving programs yet. They may be still too young for that [00:43:00] and they may not have – The younger children have so much on their plate with establishing their careers and their families and everything else, so they may not be looking to ways to give back yet. But I feel that we are going to have new wealth in our communities, and I feel that our communities have already established an ethic of giving back. So, I'm not nearly as pessimistic about that as some. There certainly is a change going on. The change at established foundations sometimes does dilute the local impact, because when future generations take over control they're [00:44:00] in many different locales and so their interests are different. But I think we will have a number of successful and new and ethic-driven young people that will be coming up to take the places.

(KA): If you were to summarize what you have taken out of your work over the last 30, 40 years, what were the lessons that can be shared with people in other places from the experience here?

(LP): Oh, boy that's interesting. Gosh. I think probably in sort of [00:45:00] having your feet on the ground in the local communities. I was raised in the tradition of top-down leadership and I have really come to believe that the changes that are going to be most acceptable and have the greatest impact are going to be more bottom-up type of leadership, where you have a lot of a collaboration between different groups that perhaps used to be this turfism. I think collective impact (the concept of collective impact) is interesting and has some promise to it. I'm not sure that we on a local level are implementing those concepts [00:46:00] in a strong, and as strong as they could be implemented, way – but the collaboration part of it and the data building part of it and having a very broad based input part of it, I think, are going to be the most productive in making some change.

(KA): Okay. Great. And then when you were thinking about our conversation today, was there anything else you wanted to be able to say that I haven't asked you and that I want to flip to a more personal side. So, but then on our formal side, is there anything else that needs to be sort of be said for the record about the last 40 years of the development of the infrastructure in Michigan?

(LP): No. [00:47:00] I think your questions were insightful, and I think you've pretty much covered the important aspects already.

(KA): Okay. Then let's talk a little bit about Linda, because I think it's useful to know that people didn't necessarily grow up to become CEOs of private foundations.

(LP): [Laughter] That's true.

(KA): Could you tell us a little bit about your philanthropic history? Where did you grow up? Was it a part of your family life in terms of volunteering? Or tell us a little bit about your past.



(LP): I was not exposed to any kind of formal giving structures in growing up. In fact, I grew up in the [00:48:00] Detroit area, and we really didn't have a whole lot of emphasis on community service. But then I moved over to the west side, and in the Grand Rapids area I found that there was a huge emphasis on community service in this community and giving back. I always felt, and my family always felt, that we were very fortunate and our lives had no – how do I put it? So many things happened in our lives that we really weren't responsible for on a personal level. I was born in an area of financial success in the community of [00:49:00] relative peace time and affordable education and good private and public education. I was blessed in those ways and therefore I always felt I had an obligation to give back, but it was also just a huge personal interest – I love people. I've also always been in situations where I've been able to give of my energies in helping [a] program get initiated and continued to see [it] through. It was just a very fortunate opportunity when I was asked to work at the Council of Michigan Foundations. It's great.

(KA): What were you doing before that, Linda? What were you – yes.

(LP): Completely [00:50:00] volunteer. Raising my kids and volunteering.

(KA): What did you learn from those volunteer experiences you as you moved into your career?

(LP): It was useful in that I really had an opportunity to meet a variety of people with a variety of interests and that has always – That networking function I think is something that is very important when you are working in a community. Here at the Dyer-Ives Foundation, I have a colleague working with me who really her whole life was spent in the community, her whole adult life was spent in a community and working from the grassroots up. I think most of the programs that I have seen [00:51:00] the foundation participate in that would be innovative at all and that would have a long-lasting impact, have been because of those relationships and knowing the right people to tap, the right people to ask their opinions of and getting that variety of culture, of education, of economic level, all those involvements have been very important.

(KA): So when Dottie called you, why did you say yes?

(LP): [Laughter] My youngest child had just started college and I had decided that I did want to go back to work in the working world. I had only been in it my first year out of college, and I just was fascinated with the [00:52:00] idea of growing the community interaction with money and program. So, it just sounded fascinating to me.

(KA): It was the idea. The idea captured you. Yes.

(LP): It did.



(KA): Interesting. And you commuted over to Grand Haven. Can you talk a little bit about working with Dottie?

(LP): Oh, that was incredible. [Laughter] She had an energy that was just astounding, and could have more activity going on at the same time than anyone I've ever known. She worked hard at understanding [00:53:00] what was happening in our society, and in needing and developing professional (and many times personal) relationships with people who made those things happen. She just knew a huge variety of people that could really move our state forward and socially in so many ways and she had the energy to put off and the smarts to pull it off and the excitement. She was really an intellectual person who had new and different ideas going all the time and she could have something that was unheard [Laughter] of that she was trying to accomplish at any given time. I think she must have been very happy. [Laughter] She just was [00:54:00] an amazing worker, an amazing visionary and just a real go-getter and a real doer and I think an enormous influence.

(KA): Good. Thanks.

(LP): Yes. [Laughter]

(KA): Okay. Well I'm going to turn off the recorder then and anything - unless there's anything you want to make sure that we have?

(LP): No. No there isn't but I would love to know what you...

