



## INTERVIEW WITH LUCY BERNHOLZ – October 8, 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 Lucy Bernholz on October 8, 2012. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded at the joint conference of the Council of Michigan Foundations and the Michigan Nonprofit Association in Dearborn, 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.

**Lucy Bernholz (LB):** I did read through the questions and there are a lot of these that I feel like I have no informed opinion about, so I'll just let you know them up front.

**Kathy Agard (KA):** All right. Well, when we get to that, you'll let me know that. Let's start with this one, because I have known of you because Diana Sieger was one of your gals (or advocates or

cheerleaders, I guess is the right word). I'm not aware of how much you are aware of Michigan's infrastructure organization, so the partners in the project are the Council of Michigan Foundations, Michigan Nonprofit Association, Michigan Community Service Commission, and the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley. So can you just give me a little bit of a background about what you know about any of these organizations?

(LB): Sure. Of those four, the one I know best is CMF. I think I first connected with Michigan when I was doing community foundation writing back in the early 2000s as part of "On the Brink of New Promise," and that is probably when I first [00:01:00] connected. I might have met Rob before that at some conference, but when we started looking at community foundations, everybody pointed to Michigan. So we came to Michigan, and I have been here ever since it feels like. I didn't know the Nonprofit Association until today. I don't know the Services Commission, and I know Grand Valley and the Johnson Center. I served in some capacity when Joel first moved there thinking about the curriculum and I have been aware of it and its holdings ever since.

(KA): Okay. Let's talk mainly about CMF, so we will talk about the one you are most familiar with. As you look around the country, as I said, we are making assertions that Michigan has a different way of being than the rest of, then other places in the country. Would you say that that's legitimate and if so, in what ways and if not, why might we think that?

(LB): Sure. I think in the two ways that I know [00:02:00] Michigan best, that is actually true. So it is the role of the regional association [CMF] and the ways the community foundations are connected to each other, which are distinct realities. I think Michigan has a well-deserved and accurate reputation as being an association and a community of funders that pays a lot of attention to local, to state policy, much more so than I am aware of in any of the other regional associations. Why that is true... I don't know if it's because it's a very densely populated association within a single state, so it may just be something like that. I have a feeling it's more than that.

The other way I know Michigan that has sort of lived up to its billing, in my experience, is the way the community foundations connect to each other. They're [00:03:00] very well networked. The leaders talk to each other. The Youth Advisory Committees, I think that whole process connected community foundations. I know over the years there has been talk and work and reality in building out shared back offices, particularly in the U.P. And so my experience as an outsider is if there is some idea or trend about community foundations working together, the place to look to see if it is real has been Michigan.



(KA): Great. Perfect answer. I like it too. So thank you very much. Would you talk a little bit more about Michigan's influence, or whether you have seen projects grow from – I don't think our intent ever was to become national or international, yet we have had programs that have become, so you can you chat a little bit about what you have observed from the outside?

(LB): Right. I mean, I don't know [00:04:00] the history of this exactly, but I think, and again it is mostly limited to community foundations, the whole Youth Advisory Committees, that is an idea that I don't know if it was really, fully born here, but it certainly came to full fruition here and attracted the attention of community foundations around the country and around the world. No doubt about it. Even if they may have tried it beforehand, there was a sense of connectedness, and doing it together, and reach that was different from individualized foundations with youth committees. So that is one example.

In terms of direct liaisons between an association of grantmakers and the state government, and not just sort of soft ways, but official ways, I mean really hard ways, like tax credits and – I don't know if [00:05:00] the governor still has a liaison to the philanthropic community, but I think you were the first state to create that. Those are hard evidence of a set of relationships, and I would say an area of focus that I know regional associations and some sort of subgroups of foundations are trying to make happen in other places, but they are following your lead and may not be catching up to you.

(KA): What about, you know I left the community foundation field at the start of the national standards. Can you chat a little bit about how that has come from and where it is headed?

(LB): Yeah, that would be a great chronology to unravel. I will say that I think the standards movement, and certainly the national marketing (NMAT), that work, which I think has roots here in Michigan, was transformative for community foundations around the country. I think there has been a good solid decade where [00:06:00] that set of activities, both in its specific, concrete outcomes, like having standards or sharing marketing materials, they met those goals and moved on. But as important is the network of community foundations around the country and the way they sort of – they certainly don't act in lockstep – but they are still today, a much more identifiable subset of the field of philanthropy, I think, than family foundations or corporate foundations. There's sort of a body of work there that ties them together, that defines them and that they connect around that is identifiable. It is beginning to change a little bit, but it held strong for a good decade.

(KA): Were you aware of the growth of FIMS and the Foundation Management Information System?



(LB): Yeah, but I don't know a lot about it. You guys created FIMS didn't you?

(KA): [00:07:00] We did.

(LB): I don't actually know, yeah.

(KA): The reason I brought it up is that it is actually the first step of trying to standardize, was to try to standardize the bookkeeping.

(LB): The technology. That would be the place to start.

(KA): And if we could get them that way, then maybe we could get them to do other things. So the Michigan sector, you came in 2000-ish, was Dottie still at CMF or did you come in after she had left?

(LB): She was gone. I think she had gone to Grand Valley by the time I got here. I think.

(KA): Was Russ still?

(LB): No.

(KA): So you missed that generation of leadership?

(LB): I did.

(KA): So in thinking about the leaders that would all probably be currently in place in Michigan, is there a way to typify the kind of leadership that they bring to the – is it fair to say that they bring servant leadership? What kinds of things do they bring to the field that make it work?

(LB): Specifically of the foundations themselves?

(KA): [00:08:00] The foundations, or in the broader field, but the foundations you are familiar with and CMF.

(LB): That is a great question. It is hard to, and this is not meant to any individual, but being the president or CEO of a multi-billion-dollar foundation, it's a hard thing to reconcile in my head that that is a servant leader. There is something about leadership of the big foundations in Michigan



– specifically I'm thinking of Mott, Kellogg, and Kresge, and I would add Skillman to that (although I don't even know where they fit in the asset management size. I would add them in terms of a model that others are paying attention to that is different in this way, in my opinion) – that they are, they may be big, they are big, [00:09:00] and they may be international funders, there is a very clear commitment to the State of Michigan that is different from when I think of other large national and international funders who are located in a place. They may also have a commitment to a place, but it is not as distinct, in a way, as the Michigan funders are here. What is also different about it – and here I'm thinking about several big foundations in the Bay Area, certainly in Seattle – they have a very clear commitment to place, but there is not a group of them. There is one or two of them, and here there is actually “The Michigan Funders.” So from the outside looking in, there is an ethos, there is a place-based awareness, and there is a pride and commitment – [00:10:00] and certainly dollars that follow it—that really shapes the view of the foundation from those of us outside the state.

(KA): Can you speculate about what caused that?

(LB): Here are some hypotheses that I would be tracking down if I were looking at this historically. There were some very significant fortunes made in the state earlier in the last century that were remarkable for their time, in terms of their scope. I think the founders of those institutions were very committed to place and I think Michigan as a place was unique among your immediate state neighbors in having that much wealth created with a Michigan focus and [00:11:00] there was probably a very early (I'm guessing), I would be curious about the networks and connections of the founders and the early leadership of those foundations. This is very much a coastal point of view, born and raised in New York, now live in California. I would imagine there is a possible sort of seeding and well, *we are here and we can do this together and for ourselves* kind of attitude. In a very positive way, pride of place and pride of self-capacity, I don't think that's a word, but you know what I mean. Then I'm going to guess that there were actually behaviors and traits and characteristics of leaders of those organizations who were in positions for a long time to set an ethos. I mean, Bill White is part of that and is still part of that. I don't know the length of terms of other CEOs, but I think you're talking about a period of time, several [00:12:00] decades when it is highly possible that you have had a small number of people in those positions for a long time, and their own way of being is going to be very influential.

(KA): I think you're accurate about their being in their place for long, long periods.

(LB): It sets a tone and a culture that can become synonymous with the institution, and it can serve the institution and that may well be what is happening here.



(KA): And those sets of relationships continue over time. Thanks.

(LB): I think it is also, to add to that, it is also a set of expectations that it is not a *go-it-aloneness*. If the culture and ethos is set as *we are in this together* and *we are pillars of these communities in this place*, that sets a culture and tone of doing it together, which has not been the case in places like New York, where similar fortunes and philanthropies may be based, but there is much more of an ethos of *we'll do our own thing*, [00:13:00] not *we'll do things together*. The other thing that I think is a binding agent here has been then the network of community foundations and the statewide association. There are sort of reinforcing tendencies for Michigan to do for Michigan, and to do well for Michigan.

(KA): Thanks. So, what have you, and this is getting on the more global way, but what have you learned about leadership in this work? If you were talking to our grad students at Grand Valley, what would you want them to know on the more, not the “be inspirational,” but the “know how to run a meeting?” What are the behaviors that would be useful to leaders in the field?

(LB): [00:14:00] I have found, I think the people here in Michigan who I know and who I respect as leaders, are consummately committed to whatever their particular mission is. So if it's the Mott Foundation, it is one thing; if it is CMF, it is another thing; if it is any of the community foundations, it is another thing. They are of that place, they are for, particularly in the community, they are for that place, but they are hungry for ideas from outside. Now, I'm an outsider, and I get invited here a lot, so I would see the world that way, but I think there is a constant kind of curiosity and then bringing it back home.

I have also learned a great deal, particularly earlier on when I was in the state more working with community foundations, working with folks from the UP, [00:15:00] there is a kind of leadership that I think translates into day to day—the ways you interact with other leaders, others who you are trying to help, others from other industries—that is shaped by your expectation that you are going to see these people tomorrow. That you are here for the long term, that everybody deserves respect, but that you may not sort of, what is a phrase I'm looking for? Michigan leaders are not about winning the battles and losing the war. They are about winning the war. So they are very focused on maintaining relationships over time and that comes down to respect, it comes down to listening to the people, it involves curiosity, but I think that is really that sort of sense of, *yeah, we are not going to cut off our nose to spite our face*. I don't know how many [00:16:00] more idioms I can throw in this sentence but...

(KA): I thought it was really great.



(LB): I think there is a long-term perspective that shapes the way you interact with everybody on a daily basis.

(KA): Do you have a favorite Michigan philanthropy story?

(LB): I don't know if this is true or not, but it's lore and I love it. I don't even know where philanthropy fits into it, but it has really shaped my image of Michiganders. I'm a speed freak. I like to go fast. I told that to Rob Collier, and Rob told me that there was a luge track in Muskegon. I said, "I'm only ever coming to Michigan again when it is cold, and there's snow, and I can go lugging in Muskegon." Sure enough, he made that happen. I don't know why there's no [00:17:00] snow now, and there wasn't any snow when I was here last, but I won't hold you guys accountable for that. So Rob took me lugging in Muskegon. It was one of the best days of my life. The story Rob has told me about why there is a luge track in Muskegon is that it is a completely community effort, built around, inspired by a young kid who went on to the Olympics, and that the people of Muskegon got together and built a luge track. That's philanthropy, that's community, that's philanthropy – and I also got my speed freak dose.

(KA): I am from Muskegon and that story is true. In fact, Mark Grimmette ended up graduating with my kids.

(LB): So I love that story. I use that story all the time.

(KA): [00:18:00] Would you mind telling us a little bit, and I'm sorry we are not going to have much more time with it, but can you give us the overview about your own philanthropic, as Bob Payton used to call it, your own philanthropic biography? How did you walk into this work?

(LB): Sure. You know, people talk about their hearts and their minds and all that. I have kind of a really wonky side of myself, a very academic side of myself, and very impulsive side of myself. So the impulsive, *do unto others* side of myself was absolutely taught to me by my parents and by my early schooling. I went to a Quaker school in New York, Friends Academy, and it was absolutely just part of what you did, as part of who you are. I think particularly what was valuable in the school setting was that they unpack that for you as a kid. It wasn't just a set of activities; we were able to try to make sense of it. The head side of me, [00:19:00] I'm very interested for a lot of reasons in the question that I always phrase as "What is public, what is private, and who decides?" For me, that is sort of the question of the American government, it is the question of this election, it's a big question. But when I sat down as a doctoral student and said, "I want to study this question at the history department in Stanford," we went looking for a place to do it and that led me to look at institutional foundations, a great place to look at that question. I've sort



of been in there ever since. What I have done since then, I think with my wonky head side, is made sense of my own volunteering activities, my own charitable donations, my own contributions as a neighbor, and sort of brought this analysis to it that comes from that wonky side of me.

(KA): And then I want to honor your time, and so let me just ask you this question. When you thought about coming here, when Joel [00:20:00] sent you the e-mail? Was there anything else that you wanted to say that we should have on the record? Now we can talk by phone later on, but while I have you on screen, is there something else you want make sure that is captured that could be shared?

(LB): Yeah, sure. I don't live in Michigan. I do get the chance to come here very often, and I just sort of made an over-the-cuff comment leaving the last meeting was that, but there is more truth to it than I realized, which is that an awful lot that I've learned about philanthropy I've learned from Michigan. I think there is a very legitimate, important story here. Now I did my doctoral dissertation on philanthropy in San Francisco and I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time in the archives where there is a resource similar to this. There is a long oral history of California foundations and their leadership at that time. I think it is exciting to recognize this transition moment, this field that the state is in, and I'm just really [00:21:00] honored to be a part of it.

(KA): Thank you for scooting in here and to share with us.

