



INTERVIEW WITH GOVERNOR and MICHELLE ENGLER – April 22, 2016

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 Governor John and Michelle Engler on April 22, 2016. Conducted by Kyle Caldwell, executive director of the Johnson Center and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded at the Business Roundtable, Washington DC. 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.

Kyle Caldwell (KC): Just for the record, we also need to just record the fact that this is the Johnson Center, Our State of Generosity project, with Governor and Michelle Engler. We'd just like to get an acknowledgement from you that you all are willing to be recorded and interviewed for the archive, and I just need you to say yes.

Michelle Engler (ME): Yes.

Governor John Engler (JE): I'm willing to be recorded and I'm willing to allow some of it to be used. [Laughter]

(KC): You do get editorial rights over all the material. We'll show it back to you. As we think about this, I'm going to ask you questions. I'm going to give it a pause and let you answer...

(JE): Okay.

(KC): ...because my voice shouldn't be on it. If you can just kind of give us a sense from your perspective: you were a major part of Michigan philanthropy. You helped create a number of organizations. How do you think about Michigan philanthropy and your role in it?

[Side conversation]

(JE): I think the way to look at this in Michigan is that Michigan's always been a state that's been very generous. We've been, I think, noted for major foundations that were established early on: Ford Foundation, Mott Foundation, Kresge Foundation – some of the leading citizens. The Kellogg Foundation was perhaps the one that I had the earliest awareness of and contact with because they were always doing things that focused on some of the rural areas, and I grew up in rural Michigan. I even saw my father benefitting from a Kellogg farmers program, way back when. Kellogg, throughout much of its history, was very focused on developing leadership. They had a lot of leadership programs for rural leaders, later on for urban leaders, for youth. And as I got active in the political world, a great friend, Russ Mawby, became the head of the Kellogg Foundation. Here is this man who at one time was the leader of all the 4-H programs in Michigan, now running this critically important foundation. He was inspirational.

Then George Romney, literally *after* he completed a successful three terms elected as governor and then served in the cabinet here in Washington as secretary of HUD, came back and devoted his entire life to giving back. He was always an advocate for the power of what people could do when they were empowered, and how communities had to come together to help. Certainly that had, I think, something to do with his Mormon faith, the way he was raised and the way he lived his life. I think it also had to do with just who he was and the ethic that he had inside himself. He never stopped giving back. He was highly inspirational. I think the realization that he, as a business leader and then as a governor – no matter how effective the programs were or how hard he worked – he knew there were still some things that couldn't be solved by governmental institutions. He'd seen it not only in his church, but in the communities where people acting to solve their own problems actually could be, and were oftentimes, more effective. He wanted to build that kind of a network everywhere. That was sort of the George Romney function, sort of this "Johnny Appleseed" spreading the seed of volunteerism and community engagement all



over, not just in Michigan but all over the country. But primarily, Michigan is where he really had an impact because he lived there and he knew so many of us.

(KC): Michelle, you and the Governor sort of took this on, as well as both of you as First Lady and Governor thinking about service and volunteerism through the Commission, and working through philanthropy. What was that like and how did you get involved in this?

(ME): Well, one of the first meetings I had officially as First Lady was with Governor Romney because he was so passionate about volunteerism. We had talked about setting up a commission to help volunteers. He introduced me to the volunteer centers of Michigan and to the whole concept of volunteerism and how it goes hand in hand with philanthropy. And he really gave us the idea of supporting the volunteer centers – rather than taking on a specific issue like breast cancer – to take on the responsibility of helping these volunteer centers to develop the leadership and the volunteers there and their programs because they were already doing so many great things in their communities. Each community could decide what they needed in that community. We could provide the sort of support – whether it was [from] the public sector, or leadership development, or some other kind of support – for these volunteer networks that were already out there in Michigan and very strong and vibrant in Michigan.

(KC): You both had roles in working with philanthropy with Dottie Johnson and with Rob Collier and the Council of Michigan Foundations and other foundations. How did that relationship through your administration and in both your leadership roles work? How did you even think about engaging philanthropy in that way?

(JE): Well, I think when Michelle really decided this is something she wanted to take on, we thought about some of the best people in the state that could be around the table. Who do you need to bring forth the best ideas and inspire, and motivate, and challenge people? You quickly get to a Dottie Johnson or Russ Mawby and so on. That list was extensive in Michigan and this was something that had nothing to do with politics. It wasn't a Republican or Democrat or Independent kind of activity, didn't have a label on it. It was just how do you do good; how do you leverage doing good to benefit the most people to impact the significant number of problems and challenges? I thought there was a huge benefit from just seeing groups and [their] attempts to solve problems, literally being down on a shoe string. You look, and sometimes the government budget can be a program targeted at the same challenge – and they're spending a lot of money. And year after year, the problem seems to not get better, or sometimes it gets worse. And here's a group of volunteers over there and, gosh, they're starting to turn things around in their area. They're finding creative and innovative ways to do things and they're also doing things in a way that actually could be replicated. There was a whole lot of both, I think, bringing some of the right people together. As Michelle said (touching on these locally-based



solutions that were out there), a lot of other things start to come together – but that’s how it gets started. From there we ended up with, I think, a pretty substantial program. And we’ll talk about it but, I mean, eventually even a foundation that had an endowment.

(ME): I think it was kind of a perfect storm of leadership in the state at that time with the Russ Mawbys and the Dottie Johnsons, and Joel Orosz, and Rob Collier, Sam Singhⁱ young people as well – but they all were leaders in volunteerism and philanthropy in the state so it was kind of a wonderful time to be in that area. They provided so much leadership there and were so willing to be selfless about creating a structure, if you will, that would bring together all these folks and not have to take credit for one foundation, or one group or another. They all wanted to work together to promote volunteerism and philanthropy in the state of Michigan. It was a wonderful time to work with some icons in the field of volunteerism and philanthropy in Michigan.

(JE): I think that’s a really good point. One thing that’s important is that it wasn’t about a particular foundation or a specific program. We’ve seen a lot of foundations waste a lot of money. I mean, they’ve done things and funded things that aren’t replicable. You couldn’t in a million years hope to duplicate some scheme that a foundation cooked up or somebody talked them into. But here, with the community service foundation, you’re really leveraging people. You’ve got the actual citizens on the ground who know what’s happening in their community... and so they’re looking at it from a completely different way than somebody who might have some wonderful degrees from a fine school, who are perfectly prepared to tell you how you should solve your problem. George Romney always felt that ought to come from the bottom up.

The other thing that happened during this period of time – and I think it had a lot to do with the kind of person Russ Mawby was, the kind of leader he was (but also, I suspect somewhat his participation, which he was generous with his time on this Commission) – because the Kellogg Foundation came forward with this grant strategy where they said, “Well, why don’t we have a community foundation in every community in Michigan?” You had long-standing community foundations in places like Detroit, but that wasn’t the case in the eastern part of the Lower Peninsula or parts of the Upper Peninsula. All of a sudden, Kellogg is saying, “If you’ll raise so much at a local level, we’ll match that.” And, by the way, there’s even this unique thing about getting young people involved on the grantmaking, if you will, or getting sort of that next generation of philanthropy imbued in a few of these young rising leaders in these communities at the high school-age, of all places. They started to do all that. Next thing you know, here in the state of Michigan, you have 83 counties, and every inch of the state is covered by a community foundation today. It always is amazing and impressive to me to this day, you’ll see somebody – and this could be somebody of prominence or somebody who’s just an active person in the local community – and you’ll see that maybe there’s an obituary notice, and what do they want? They want the grant support: in lieu of flowers, give the money to the community foundation. It shows



you how these have taken hold all over the state and they're continuing to do some really impressive things and the money stays local.

(KC): Let's talk about some of the community foundations and their, sort of, network across Michigan. Let's talk about some of the institutions that you two were a part of. We touched on the Michigan Community Service Commission. This was something you created, right...

(JE): Right.

(KC): ...and with a certain vision. Tell me a little bit. You mentioned George Romney was the inspiration, but what was your vision for creating a commission?

(JE): Well, I think it was the idea that – and Michelle's talked about this because this was really her vision, as well – we wanted something that was not part of the political process. It's just something that could be a way, a vehicle, to get people involved. If you go back to '91 when this was happening, of course, the state was coming out of a budget crisis. We didn't have a lot of... we had *no* extra money (we had a lot of red ink, as a matter of fact, in those early days). But still, even with that, in places like Michigan there's still a lot of wealth there. There's still a lot of capacity, but you've got to be careful and you've got to manage that well. So you've got to create a mechanism. I always said that the greatest strength of Michigan was the people. The citizens who lived there had a certain toughness and resilience that if you gave them a chance – if you gave them the opportunity – they'd show you what they could do. I think that's true whether that's in terms of getting the economy moving, or in terms of solving community problems. This was that vehicle, and it began to knit together a lot of disparate efforts that were going on and, as Michelle said, the volunteer centers. I mean, they were out there but they didn't...they were doing the best they could with what they had, but suddenly there is now a way to hear that *this group is doing this; this was a good idea; maybe that will work in our area*. Replicating success, sharing success stories. Those are the kinds of things that you get kind of excited about. You see that people are learning from each other and, more importantly, maybe they're inspiring others to get involved and it grows over time. I think that the leadership you have on the commission – you mentioned some of the names – they're pretty spectacular.

(ME): They really are. It was a means of creating a public/private partnership. To bring some of the resources of government, to apply to help some of these volunteer centers that were struggling on their own out there, to connect them maybe with some department of social services resources that they might not be aware of, to connect them with other government agencies that may or may not be doing some of the same sorts of programs and that may or may not be effective. It was a way of creating some public/private partnerships at a time when government was struggling with the budget but also, even had it not been, government is not



always the best and most effective answer. It often is people on the ground, just pitching in to help.

(JE): I think we also had a philosophy, too, that we weren't afraid to have faith-based organizations involved. We weren't afraid to have different kinds of communities –who maybe hadn't been in the mainstream – involved or hadn't been central to solving problems. It became a bit of a melting pot of different kinds of interests and communities and geographies, so it was really interesting that way. The other element that I thought over time was we had a tax credit at Michigan that would allow anybody to make a contribution. And this functioned better than a tax credit because it was a deduction so you got it right off of your taxes if you gave. It was an encouragement for everybody to give to their community foundation and it was almost a free gift. I mean, it really was a reduction to the state's tax revenues in order to have that money go to those community foundations. At the same time, then they got to spend that money and, I guess if we look back on it, we'd probably conclude they spent it a lot better sometimes than the legislature appropriated it.

(ME): I think it was very important, too, and I credit John with this, that it was not a political organization – the Commission. I remember asking a couple of people (begging, even) to be a part of it and them being quite concerned that this not be a sort of arm of the Republican governor. He felt very strongly as I did that this would be a very bi-partisan – nonpartisan – commission. I think we managed to make it so. In fact, succeeding governors kept the commission on. That, I think, was a very important part of it – that it was not seen as a partisan arm of the Republican governor.

(KC): You talk about that, and I want to talk about the Commission – one more layer, if I could – and then move to ConnectMichigan. When we talk about the way the Commission was created in '91, you created a model that other states followed when federal legislation came on. Here, you were considered a pretty conservative governor at the time in the Republican Party who was then implementing a not exactly conservative Democrat president's program in the form of AmeriCorps, and you embraced it. How did you feel about that balance, and leveraging human capital that way?

(JE): Well, we were trying to explain to people that conservatism really meant the preservation and the husbanding of resources. It meant stop spending money wastefully, and so we were always happy to have programs working where they could be more effective than the program they were replacing or, frankly, where there was a gap in service and nobody was taking care of the need. I think there's a fundamental philosophical difference. I think, certainly, people who come at government from a more conservative perspective ought to be looking at the idea, and the distinction is this: *Do you think government is going to be more compassionate and more creative*



in solving your problem than you could be if you had the tools to do so? I think that's been answered, unfortunately, pretty [Laughter] clearly over a long period of time, a sweep of history.

I think that what we tried to do was to create just a robust mechanism that was out there, and I'm happy that it's continued to this day. I'm very proud of the leadership that Michigan has provided to the nation and ultimately, I mean, other things happened. The leadership of Dottie, and Ranny Riecker, and others – and the Council of Michigan Foundations was a national model also – where suddenly you started bringing together lots of different people. I think today in America, we have a lot of people who are looking at setting up family foundations, have already done that. There's a lot of giving back – and I spent a lot of years on the Annie E. Casey Foundation board, so I've had some experience with that foundation role as well. It just seems to me that if we could get everybody kind of thinking about *How do we get some of these problems that have been with us for so long finally turned around?* Boy, we can make some strides. I mean, it's exciting to me. I think too often that people want to stand back and let somebody else (meaning the government) do it. We're just going to wait a long time for answers and, frankly, I don't think we've got that much time.

(KC): Let's talk a little bit about another innovative program that you're a part of. We talked a little bit about public/private partnership, the commission. You were champions for creating the nation's only endowment for volunteerism and you put a pretty interesting mechanism in place. You didn't just say it will be a state-funded, fully-funded mechanism. Could you talk a little bit about that?

(JE): Well, Michelle really ought to start that conversation because that actually was not my idea. That came from the Commission. I mean, you guys at the Commission brought that to me. We did it at a time when we could literally afford to do it, and recognize that this might be the perfect time to do it, because putting it in place would allow it to endure.

(ME): Yes. I think we approached John and the legislature with the idea that if we set this endowment, that this will be funded in perpetuity – volunteerism, and the volunteerism efforts that have abounded throughout Michigan. We approached and asked for \$10 million but said we will match it and – I'm sorry, was it \$5 million?

(JE): \$10 million.

(KC): No, \$10 million, \$10 million.

(JE): \$10 million.

(ME): Sorry about that. We approached and asked for \$10 million with the idea that we will raise the matching funds so that it would be a total of \$20 million and John was amenable to that. He



said, “You’d better get it matched.” [Laughter] We worked quite a bit on visiting with corporations and foundations and individuals to match that. We’re very proud of that accomplishment.

(JE): I don’t know if that remains today the only endowed effort of its kind, but I think it is and that’s pretty impressive. It did reflect, I think, a commitment in legislature. There were some key people in legislature who get a lot of credit for it, too many to name all at once here. But we didn’t do it alone and then, as Michelle said, there were foundations and companies that really stepped up and secured that match. So that then protected that fund, no matter what happens, because I know after I was gone from Michigan, after Michelle was no longer chair of the Commission, they went through some pretty tough budget times out there, but that was not touchable.

(KC): Before we go into the last questions, which is we’re curious about how you’re telling your daughters about philanthropy and volunteerism, and service, is there anything related to any of these initiatives that we didn’t cover that you wanted to make sure we talked about?

(JE): I would say maybe just one thing.... the Kellogg Foundation under the kind of leadership that Russ Mawby provided, and of course, Dottie Johnson was the board. Dottie herself was very active with her own foundation. You’ve got the West Michigan philanthropy example for a whole community that literally has been vaulted to the top among mid-sized cities in the country because of private philanthropy. Michigan’s got a lot of good lessons for people to take a look at. The other thing that’s happened is that the Michigan leaders are very proud of the people who played a role in Michigan who’ve gone on to play national roles. There’s a national prominence to folks in Michigan who come up with this kind of background and so, in some ways, there is a bit of a philanthropy industry, if you will. But it’s been something that, if we look ahead at our country and where we’re headed, there’s going to be a lot of opportunities for people in this space. I think that it would behoove them to take a look at how Michigan handled some of these things and say, “Boy, that’s a good model,” because I think we’ve seen a number of these efforts keep the overhead down. The maximum of the benefit then gets out to the solution, or to work on the solution you’re trying to bring to reality. That’s a contrast to those who end up with, let’s just say, maybe, overbuilt headquarters and overstaffed organizations. And by the time you’re done, the program offered is representing a bigger bureaucracy than the very government that might have seen them come into existence. That, to me, is not the desirable path and it’s a good caution to always remember what your objective is.

(ME): I think, too, as a newcomer to Michigan, I was very struck by the long history of volunteerism and philanthropy in Michigan. I think that’s almost unique to, certainly to the United States, but even in Michigan. It’s at a so much greater level, I think, than in other states. I think George Romney was sort of the personification of volunteerism and spreading those seeds, as



John said. We started with a very strong base of volunteerism and philanthropy in Michigan and just tried to build on that history and make better organizations.

(KC): What are you telling your daughters about philanthropy and service and how they think about civic life?

(JE): Well, I think that they've had a good example in their mom, for sure. They've also been a part of lots of things. We had our daughter Madeline who was very involved in trying to raise money when she was in elementary school for victims of 9/11, and actually came up with and executed a little fundraiser at a very early age. They continue to be involved. We were just recently at an event. Now the girls are in college. Our daughter Hannah was involved with the Take Back the Night event at Ann Arbor where they're working against sexual violence. They're doing things that matter. Our other daughter Maggie who was home on spring break recently was working on a curriculum for girls who come to her campus and learn how to code and to get active in technology. The part she was working on specifically was cyber security for kids – this particularly was young women still in high school.

(ME): Tutoring.

(JE): I think it's just part of who they are, probably because they've had some examples, I think, along the way. I hope that's what that's come from. I do think that most people, when given an opportunity, are happy to help. I do think, also, part of the religious heritage of this country is good. And that would be a shame, but a lot of studies today say there's some decline there. There needs to be, I think, some values and some belief systems that are greater than just you [Laughter] yourself and what you can get for you. So I don't think we'll have the kind of country, the kind of communities, we'd like unless we have people who care. I think that when you look at people, it's always interesting how often I've seen that the most effective employees are themselves not only effective here but they're effective as moms or dads, or people back in their...

(ME): Volunteers.

(JE): Yeah, they're volunteers. They're doing things back home, and not just for their kids but for their larger community and that's pretty cool. They could be doing fundraisers at school, working with the scouts, working with whatever the organization is, and that kind of giving back makes a big difference.

(KC): Did you talk to the girls about how you thought about service?

(ME): We have talked often about to whom much is given much is expected. As John talked about, they've – one has tutored. One was in high school as the head of the diversity group. And there was service-learning in their school. Two of our daughter's schools had service-learning



programs so they were both very involved in those projects, and then in leading up the projects as seniors among freshmen. They understand their requirements. They understand what it takes to be a good citizen of this country and of this world– and that is giving back in whatever way you can.

(KC): Well that's all the questions I had. Is there anything that either of you wanted to share with us that we haven't covered yet?

(JE): No. I don't think so. I think you got plenty there, more than you can use.

End of Recording

¹ Kyle Caldwell's name was unintentionally omitted from paragraph fourteen, and is included in Michele Engler's list of leaders for volunteerism, upon her editorial request.

