



INTERVIEW WITH DONNA MURRAY-BROWN – July 27, 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 Donna Murray-Brown on July 27, 2016. Conducted by Kyle Caldwell, executive director of the Johnson Center and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded at the 2016 Points of Light Conference. 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): All right. Great. You've got a great story. So can you tell me how you came to the nonprofit sector and then how did you come to MNA?

Donna Murray-Brown (DMB): So what's really an interesting story on how I came to MNA, Michigan Nonprofit Association, I had no idea at all what Michigan Nonprofit Association did or who they were, let alone where they resided in Lansing, in the Detroit office. So I was told about the opportunity to be the director of the metro Detroit partnership office. I was told several times and I said, "Well, that sounds interesting. I don't know if that's for me." I happened to be in a meeting in United Way and I was sitting there. We were all trying to figure out how to solve a problem around children who needed food, and these children were individuals who had very low wealth. They were in schools and they were hungry but they weren't getting food because they didn't want to be ostracized by being the ones who needed food.

So we're all sitting on this United Way meeting in Detroit and we figured out *let's give every child food*. Let's not ostracize any child. Let's give every child food, and therefore, a child could feel free about getting the food that they needed. That just gave me such a rush when we came to that idea and it was fabulous and I said, "Wow! This is great. I could do this all day long. I could solve these problems all day long." The person sitting next to me was Penny Bailer who at that time was leading CYD. She said, "You need to work for me." I said, "Did I say what I was thinking out loud?" She said, "You absolutely did." I said, "Wow! I never thought about working in the nonprofit sector." At that time I was working in banking and I was there serving in the capacity of a bank person on a committee. I never thought that I could actually have a career, really, in the nonprofit sector.

So long story short really, I got connected to an executive search firm, DHR International through a friend that also heard me blurt out "I want to solve these problems" and she said, "Donna, I'd like to introduce you to [Sid Kenny] and Sid Kenny actually decided to meet with me. The three of us, myself and another person, we were all going to meet. But that person couldn't make it so I'm in this conversation with this executive search firm not knowing that they're going to be interviewing me for a position. Lo and behold, she was there absolutely doing that. She actually made me think about my whole life in banking for 20 years and giving that up for something, for a career based on the feeling that I had. It was very scary because I worked in the bank for a lot of years and just the proposition of leaving all that and going into a sector with an organization called Michigan Nonprofit Association that I'd never heard of, what would that mean for me? What would that mean for my family? I was also going to be married soon and I had to tell my fiancé then that I'm looking at changing my career. Was that okay before we get married? He said, "Certainly, that's fine. Follow your dreams."

I was lucky enough to meet at that time the president and CEO, Kyle Caldwell, and he interviewed me because there was a process. I was already in process and he interviewed me. They stopped the process to let me come in to the process, which was amazing, but also scary because then it forced me to make a decision. It forced me to make a decision to leave everything I knew behind for something that I didn't know at all. I made that decision. It's been the best decision, I think, of my life. It's been the hardest decision and the best decision of my life, and that's what really brought me to Michigan Nonprofit Association.

(KC): As you think about the organization that you lead now, how do you describe what MNA is and how do you describe what its priorities are?

(DMB): So Michigan Nonprofit Association, I think now, today, and even 25 years ago, still is the voice of the nonprofit sector, still is the place that nonprofit organizations come to for resources, for tools to make their work stronger, more effective. We're still that place, but I think what's happening now, as I see it today, is that the environment has changed quite a bit from 25 years ago. So while the need is still the same in terms of the basic need of helping nonprofits advance their mission, now it seems that the environment is changing. They're looking for maybe additional tools and resources, new things to help them do their jobs more efficiently. So we find ourselves now trying to understand, in a very deep way, what are some of the newer ways now that non-profits can advance their mission that may be different from what we've known for a very long time. So that's the excitement – but that's also the challenge.

(KC): If you had to put it in two or three or four priorities for the organization, what are they now?



(DMB): So I'd say capacity building and that's really providing tools and resources to organizations. It's something that MNA does and still does to provide services to nonprofits. I would also say our civic engagement work is something that we also do around volunteerism and service. Certainly, those things are very integral to a nonprofit getting their work done, and advancing and solving some of the complex challenges that they have. Also, public policy and advocacy – that remains and will probably forever, forever remain a real key need for nonprofits that Michigan Nonprofit Association fulfills for them.

(KC): Moving now to Our State of Generosity, the project that you're a part of. We've captured the history of the organization, the values, the culture of Michigan philanthropy from 1969 on forward, and as a leader of part of that infrastructure, you have, as you mentioned, come to it from a whole other sector. I'm wondering if you could talk about when you came in to MNA, how did you recognize that infrastructure, how did you describe it? Did you see it in a certain way, with fresh eyes, as you came in to your leadership role in MNA?

[side conversation]

(KC): So you came into the sector through MNA and there was an infrastructure there. How did you recognize that infrastructure when you came in to this leadership role?

(DMB): I think I had just a tiny slight advantage because although I worked in the banking sector before, I worked in – I was over the investments that we made, the grant-making that we did from the bank. So I did know some pieces of the infrastructure – actually, just one piece. I didn't know Michigan Nonprofit Association but I knew the Council of Michigan Foundations. I was very limited in my thinking in terms of what they actually did and how far-reaching Council of Michigan Foundations was as it related to its partnership with Michigan Nonprofit Association and I had no idea about the Michigan Community Service Commission. So right away, when I became the Director of Metro Detroit Partnership, my then boss Kyle Caldwell actually connected me to those particular organizations right at the very beginning. So there was a lot of history that I received and I could receive history from the executive assistant, to the president at that time, to anybody who wanted to talk to me. I talked to them about this. So I was aware of it but I didn't recognize how deep it was. I didn't recognize how strong it was, and I certainly didn't recognize how we're admired by many across the country (which I thought was very refreshing) and then something that I could be really proud of.

(KC): When you think about the way you describe that infrastructure to some of those other national organizations, what do you say?

(DMB): So when I see other organizations across the state and I have a great opportunity to see that. They ask me, "So tell me about all this that's happening and Michigan's infrastructure in Michigan." So I tell them that it is the sense of understanding that it takes grantmakers and grantseekers working together to really affect the change that we all want to see. That very partnership has to exist and we figured that out many years ago, well before I came into the sector. That was figured out for us, really, to be able to do great work in Michigan. So for me, it was interesting going across the country and recognizing that this didn't exist in other states where the grantmakers and grantseekers were so far apart and they were so challenged in terms of advancing the work that they wanted to do, whether it was in the public policy space or in strengthening the sector in order for nonprofits to get what they needed. It was very



challenging for that to occur, but in Michigan it's a conversation. It'd be a conversation right at our board table at the Michigan Nonprofit Association because we've got the Council of Michigan Foundations right on our board. The president and CEO there, Rob Collier, and then we have Ginna Holmes at the Michigan Community Service Commission right there at our board table. So when we're talking about things that need to occur in Michigan, or things we want to see happen, or if we just want to talk about our imagination on how we can make the state better, we can do that right at our board table. So that's very different and it's such a huge advantage, I think, compared to any state that I've been to when I talk about it.

(KC): Has your awareness of the infrastructure changed from when you first came on as the leader of MNA and then later on? Has it evolved? Have you learned anything new?

(DMB): The infrastructure knowledge that I had when I first came in was very, very limited. Certainly, over time it's evolved and it's evolved into understanding the strength of our partnerships, the very basic notion of "together we're stronger," than when we're doing our work independently. That just rings so true in terms of the work that we've been able to accomplish together. So I never feel like I'm alone in this work. I feel like I can call someone at any one of the organizations. Certainly, the Johnson Center with Kyle Caldwell being there, also Ginna Holmes, we work very closely together probably on a more regular basis. Of course when we look at public policy, we can always tap Rob Collier at the Council of Michigan Foundations and we get the answers we need and we can move and act very quickly. So I think now it's more of an asset than I thought of it from the very beginning. Before it was like, "So we've got these partners here and we're supposed to work together and we do great things and we've done great things in the past," but now it's about the future and what we can do together and recognizing that we understand each other's assets and our personal attributes that we bring to it. It's not as elusive as it was in the beginning when I was trying to figure it all out. Now I can't say that I've figured out everything but I can tell you that together I know that we're stronger. Together, I feel very hopeful about the work of Michigan Nonprofit Association, in particular, for its future because of the infrastructure.

(KC): How do you explain to your board and maybe new staff, those who come in to the field from other sectors or who have not been involved with MNA as long, what this infrastructure is?

(DMB): It's very interesting. When we have new colleagues that come on board and we talk about "So what is this Michigan infrastructure?" Actually, we don't talk about it in the sense of infrastructure. Understanding exactly what it is, that it is a strength that actually supports the philanthropic sector in Michigan. We understand that. We talk about it in the sense of partnerships. These are our partners. It's how we describe that and I think colleagues understand that language. Sometimes it becomes a little bit difficult to say, "So who does what?" Sometimes the lines are blurred in terms of who owns it and that's where the personalities come in because if you have that relationship, that personal relationship, and there might be some dissonance that exists, but you can call the person and say, "I think this is where I should be leading, maybe you should be following here."

So sometimes when the lines get blurred, when there's a complicated issue, let's say, and we all have some stake in it, sometimes it makes it very challenging to call a new colleague and say, "Hey I should be doing this work," and you say, "Well, we actually collaborate on this and we came to a conclusion from a collaborative perspective." Sometimes that can be challenging to explain that to a new colleague because



they want to know “Why can’t I just do that?” But other times they step back and I provide as much detail and information about things that have happened in the past and then really explain to them that in order for us to move past or to solve challenging problems out there, that it requires us to step back, all of us, all partners, and then to really think through how do we work together to address that. Then the resolution might be that it’s not Michigan Nonprofit Association, and that’s okay. So sometimes it’s harder.

A lot of times, too, if we’ve got a new colleague that’s coming in and they want to be the best at their work and they don’t necessarily know what the landscape is, it becomes a learning opportunity to share with them how we can accomplish things and how we can really be better at our work when we’re working together. So really, when you’re on-boarding a new colleague into Michigan Nonprofit Association with this infrastructure, it’s not a one-day orientation around “Here’s the infrastructure you work in”. This is a constant, ongoing, and even for myself sometimes, an ongoing exploration of the infrastructure, which I think is pretty exciting.

(KC): So I want to take the conversation maybe half a level in terms of structure and answer the question. If you’re talking to a funder and they haven’t invested in nonprofit infrastructures, what’s the compelling case? What do you tell them? Why is infrastructure important?

(DMB): Right now and especially in Michigan, there are a lot of things that can tell you about the physical infrastructure and why it’s important and, at this point in time, if a funder were to ask me why is it important to fund the infrastructure of a nonprofit organization, I would talk about what’s happening in Flint and say, “Look at what a failed infrastructure has done to a community.” That’s exactly the same philosophy as it relates to the infrastructure for the nonprofit sector. So if you’re not investing in a nonprofit being strong [enough] to handle some of these issues, these big complex issues that we see, that we all want to see solved.... We know that the private sector can’t do it on its own. We know that the public sector desires to do that – but cannot do it. Then it’s that middle part there, that independent or that social sector that picks it up.... but they only can pick it up if they’re strong. So they have to have a strong foundation, a strong support system to allow them to do that so they can do their work. They shouldn’t have to think about all the HR issues that happened, what’s the management of a nonprofit or the financial issues or even to think about all these pervasive laws and legislation that impacts their work. They should be able to focus on their work. In order to do that, there has to be a strong infrastructure organization that supports that for them. The Michigan Nonprofit Association does that. So when you’re looking for a return on your investment, funder, and you’re looking for investing in a grant to allow a nonprofit to solve these challenges and you want to take off as much barrier of that investment, then you would invest in Michigan Nonprofit Association to do that. It gives you a much higher return on your investment and it keeps that likelihood of solving the problems that you want to see solved completed because of that.

(KC): We’re going to move off to infrastructure questions now and talk about Our State of Generosity generally – not the program but generally. When we talk about a number of key elements that have been successful in developing Michigan’s philanthropic infrastructure and field – what I want to do is just sort of walk through each one of those and then have you reflect on what they mean to you in terms of the role you play in MNA and in terms of the larger sector leadership role you play. So these are more value statements. You can answer what you feel most comfortable with. So when you think about your role in



MNA and you think about being part of what we call Our State of Generosity, what does servant leadership mean to you?

(DMB): So servant leadership for me, as a lead person at Michigan Nonprofit Association, really means there is an opportunity for us to support the leadership of others to move things forward and it's not necessarily Michigan Nonprofit Association that's leading that or certainly not Donna Murray-Brown that's behind or leading something out in front. It really is the ability to be able to provide the support system for someone else or something else to advance itself, and it's not necessarily looking to make a statement for itself for the notion of that. It's really around how do I create the opportunity for others to thrive, whether it be other organizations, other people. That's something that Michigan Nonprofit Association is proud to do. There are certainly lots of things that we can say that we had our hand in but it's not necessary to do that. Really, our gratification comes from knowing that we still have the ability to support even more and more organizations, more and more communities from the work that we do and we're satisfied in that.

(KC): Is there an example of servant leadership that you could share, either an institutional servant leadership role or an individual?

(DMB): Sure. I would say one of the examples of servant leadership that Michigan Nonprofit Association had, really the privilege and honor right here in Michigan, has been in the city of Detroit with the Belle Isle Park Conservancy. Now we are all enjoying which was an opportunity to support four organizations coming together to really create a strong park for everyone to enjoy. Michigan Nonprofit Association was that organization that supported those conversations to come to fruition to create this entity. So while we were the ones that created the meeting space for them, organized their thoughts for them, helped them to organize their thoughts I might add, and to help create a vision for what we're able to see and enjoy today as the Belle Isle Park Conservancy, it is something that we got complete joy out of to support. The four other organizations creating their dream of what would be a park now that we know today that everyone can enjoy. So there was a lot of support that was given there but it was not something that we said, "We want to create the Belle Isle Park Conservancy." Certainly, we could have done that. We have the skills to do that but it was necessary for us to be the support in providing the four organizations who had been working with the Belle Isle Park for many years (and some over 40 years have been working with the park) and now creating this opportunity for the park to thrive, and we had something to do with that.

(KC): The notion of engaging and knowledge, and expertise, and the skill-building as part of the infrastructure – does MNA play a particular role in that and do you see that as a core viable component of the infrastructure?

(DMB): I do. I think that one of the pieces of infrastructure that we often don't talk about is the infrastructure into people. People make institutions and make organizations run and do the great work that they do. So one of the things that we are doing currently at Michigan Nonprofit Association is leadership with purpose. It was really designed to look at that individual to really assess and to imagine and to understand their leadership. That is really, really important because oftentimes we don't have enough time, or even the expertise or guidance, to really explore what our leadership can mean in a community. So for us it's really important to invest and provide that professional development and that space for



professional development, and really in some cases, like leadership with purpose, that guidance, that process. It's really important now because as we look at the exodus of many leaders in the nonprofit sector, it becomes incredibly important to have a very strong pipeline of leaders like me that came from a totally different sector, and those that are in the sector that are emerging and moving through their career, and having that opportunity to have inputs into their development, their professional development. That's something that we really value and consider really a function of our leadership for the sector.

(KC): Is it to you a human capital investment strategy or...?

(DMB): I would certainly say that it's a human capital strategy that we employ but I would say that it doesn't start necessarily at the adult level. For us, it starts way in kindergarten through our philanthropy education that we do. So for Michigan Nonprofit Association, we're thinking about leadership. We're thinking about children, all the way to young adults in college, and then we're thinking about those in the community that can really think about their leadership in the space of community. However it plays out, we would certainly hope that it is in the nonprofit sector that they matriculate but it also could be in the private sector or it could be in the public sector. But what we're really looking at is investing in the human capital from kindergarten on up to really create thriving communities. So that's something that we really feel is very important at Michigan Nonprofit Association.

(KC): I'm going to move to another value and that is public-private partnerships. I'm wondering what's your view on the value of public-private partnership and the role they play in looking at public policy.

(DMB): So I think that public-private partnerships are extremely important. Actually for me, I was a bit surprised coming in because I saw a lot of the public and nonprofit partnerships. But the private partnership didn't seem to be as strong as I hoped it would be. I think it's moving in the right direction now because much of the work, as we look at solving challenges, the entities that are now emerging are very blurred. So I'm starting to see that that changed a little bit but I think in the public policy space, as we think about public-private partnerships, we have the nonprofit caucus as one of those vehicles that was actually co-created. The Michigan Nonprofit Association and the Council of Michigan Foundations having that entity there to really be able to understand the needs of the nonprofit sector and not just understanding but advocating also for the needs of the nonprofit sector has been, I think, one of the greatest examples of a public and private partnership with the nonprofit sector. So some of those partnerships we can see some advancement as it relates to public policies that we've been able to either advance, or in some cases stop, which has been extremely rewarding. So I think as we can see those continue, I would like to see a little bit more as it relates to the actual private sector. So still staying tuned with what we can do as it relates to that, and I think there are going to be a lot of opportunities in the future for that.

(KC): When you think about (and again, I'm switching gears to another principle) the work of MNA, the work of CMF, the work of the Commission, the work of the Johnson Center, as it relates to things that are going on in the national space, do you see some of the work that you're doing in MNA informing national and, does any of the work national inform your work?

(DMB): Can you repeat that in a different way?



(KC): Yes. So MNA plays a role that's important in terms of leadership in Michigan.

(DMB): Right.

(KC): But I know that you, Rob and others are also involved in the same type of work at the national level. I'm just wondering, does that national work inform what you do as a leader in MNA or the Michigan infrastructure, and does part of that Michigan infrastructure work inform national?

(DMB): So I think the Michigan infrastructure, I certainly see ways that we influence the national on the national basis. One of the key things that probably typically doesn't come up, and I think it's remarkable, that it really is very strong in the Michigan infrastructure, is around diversity inclusion and equity. It's something that we have really created as a value here in Michigan. The infrastructure in Michigan where we are moving forward with My Brother's Keeper through the Commission, the Michigan Community Service Commission, where we're looking at creating toolkits for nonprofits to use. We have the Council of Michigan Foundations that created Transforming Philanthropy through Diversity and Inclusion. So we're early pioneers here in Michigan and that worked because it's been many years that we've been really investing in it and ourselves in advancing that. Now we're informing the national organizations, like the National Council of Nonprofits, to take a look at what is the importance of diversity inclusion and equity from a national perspective. I think that's been extremely, extremely rewarding. If I'm looking at – conversely, from the national informing the Michigan infrastructure, I think, I see that play out a lot in federal legislation that's occurring there because they are located in D.C. - many of the national organizations are located in D.C. by virtue of geography. They have the ability to find out things maybe sometimes a little earlier than we do. Also, to be able to advance some of the ideas and perspectives and opinions that we have in Michigan. They're in D.C., and that's been very, extremely helpful. While they're national partners that we have through our Michigan-based infrastructure, the relationships are so advanced and so strong because we constantly keep in contact with one another, whether it's - it's certainly mostly virtually but we also organize ourselves both at the state level and at the national level. It seems like it's very seamless. That's been, I think, exceptional – something to brag about, actually.

(KC): When you think about the work you've been doing at state level and at the national level, what are the things that are difficult about infrastructure and what are the things that are propelling or easier to work?

(DMB): The things that are maybe sometimes difficult about infrastructure are that it's infrastructure. It's so strong. It just sometimes seems permanent and it's not as easy to evolve. It's not as easy to see the need to evolve because it's sometimes invisible until it breaks or until something tragic happens and then you say, "Oh, gosh! Where was Michigan Nonprofit Association when we had all these nonprofits not being able to advance the work that they're trying to accomplish?" That's when it becomes very easy to understand. The need for it seems very, very evident. But if it's not changing with the times or evolving, and it doesn't have to be a tremendous change but just evolving itself. As time changes and the needs change – just like [how] we watch television. We had the big televisions and now we have the flat screens. It evolved. It's still a television.

So the infrastructure is still there but it's evolving and changing through the needs for what the community needs. So I think sometimes it's a little hard to make those adjustments. Sometimes they're



painful but I think they're necessary and I think that's what makes it challenging. What propels it though, I think, is this notion that those – especially those that lead these organizations – are committed to the strength of the philanthropic community in Michigan. So it's almost a commitment. No one ever raised their hand and said, "I commit to this," but you know in their heart, and you know by their actions, that they've committed to that. I think that's what propels it. Because while there might be some challenges with understanding, some might be evolving a little bit faster than others. The idea is that we have all made a commitment to the betterment of the state of Michigan. This infrastructure is included in that – that we will acquiesce when we need to and we will move forward together when we need to.

(KC): What do you think your board, your staff really need to know about infrastructure? Based on what you just talked about, what are the core elements that they need to understand about Michigan's infrastructure?

(DMB): So I think staff need to know the Michigan Nonprofit Association. Actually, at every one of the organizations that represent the infrastructure in Michigan, [they] really need to know its history. I think history is incredibly important because it informs, really, the future. It helps pave the way. I think also it's important for organizations (rather, for colleagues) to be able to articulate what the roles are of each one of the infrastructure organizations and how they provide and give to the philanthropic sector in Michigan. I think the importance is really evident in terms of how you can see how we're advancing in Michigan, and really because it seems so elusive that you really don't know how good it is until you go out of state. So I encourage all of my employees and team members – talk to others. All you have to do is go to one conference or go to meet any of your colleagues and you can see how advanced we really are, based on infrastructure. So it really makes it much clearer in terms of why it's strong and why it's important. So that's typically how I share that with my team members.

(KC): Part of the work that we've observed with Our State of Generosity is that the terms for infrastructure or partnership, whatever, seem to be pretty interpersonally-based. So can you talk to me a little bit about the interpersonal side of this infrastructure and what have you observed and how do you maintain it? Are the relationships between the organizations transferrable regardless of leader or does [Crosstalk]?

(DMB): [Laughter] Just give me a moment. Sorry. I mean that's a great question. I just want to be very thoughtful. Not that I wasn't thoughtful about the rest of them. So I think it's interesting because I came into the role and I followed behind a person who led the organization that's still part of the infrastructure. So I think that was extremely helpful for me. But I do often wonder *if all the leadership changed at one time, how vulnerable would the infrastructure be?* So I think what makes our infrastructure here are the interpersonal relationships because they exist and they're so strong, but it also is very vulnerable if things were to change at once. So I think about that and - or if someone were to retire, or whatever the case may be, but if there were adjustments at the leadership, how would that work out? So when I think about the past, in terms of the organizations, everyone knew each other. So there was this interpersonal connectedness. It still exists but it is always threatened and it's always vulnerable, depending on who's in the leadership. It's part of the reason why I think it's so very, very important for those at work at every one of the infrastructure organizations to connect their colleagues and team members to each other, to the leadership of all of the organizations because I like to think that we're always considering who we're



grooming to take our role. I always hope that that's what we're thinking because that's the highest vulnerability to this infrastructure we have in Michigan is the leadership.

[side conversation]

(KC): You described really well the vulnerability, but I also want to hear what are the advantages to the interpersonal nature of this infrastructure and these leaders knowing and working together.

(DMB): So I would say one of the things that – from the interpersonal connectedness, from each one of the organizations, and its leadership in particular – is that really you yourself can be vulnerable and that has been exceptionally good for me. As a newer leader, especially in the nonprofit sector, it's been helpful to be able to go to any one of the leaders and really share “I'm having a challenge with this” or “What do you think about this” or someone calling me conversely and say, “You did a great job on that. That's fantastic.” Just knowing that they're there has been extremely – I mean even if you don't need to call them, you know that they're there and that's been extremely helpful for me as a newer leader. I will probably say [this has been true] also for my colleague, Ginna Holmes, too, at the Michigan Community Service Commission, who also started around the same time that I started, as well, has been able to do that. I also think that if there's outside of the infrastructure, outside of the organizations, when you still need to bring someone else in or you need to be introduced to someone, nine times out of ten, one of the four organization leaders knows someone or something to connect you to something that you need. That's been extremely rewarding and important for me as a leader, too. It's a notion of understanding each other and being able to be vulnerable when you can be vulnerable because leadership is a lonely spot. Leadership is a place that it's really challenging to say, “I need help.” Knowing that you do have a group that you can go to to be vulnerable, I think, makes us stronger actually, which has been especially rewarding for me.

(KC): Have you seen the same sort of interplay at the board level where you have board members who interact across organizations?

(DMB): Absolutely, there's lot of opportunities with our board, Michigan Nonprofit Association, because of, kind of, the crossover of the organizations being represented also on my board and vice versa, whether you're not on the board but you're a partner. There's lots of opportunities to create stronger alliances at the board level. So many of the board members of each of the organizations represent the public-private sector – public and private sector representation. So it really advances your network from the leadership of four to hundreds, really, of people that you have access to. With that type of alliance, it really creates a strength in leadership that, to me, is second to none and it's right here in Michigan.

(KC): When you think about the board and you think about the network, are there particular historic (and you can define historic any way you want) leaders in the field, people who have moved this infrastructure, who have built this infrastructure – that you admire, that you think about when you think about your leadership?

(DMB): So when I think about my leadership, the first person that really comes to my mind (and while I don't know this person extremely well, every interaction I've had has been one that has been inspirational for me and I think inspirational for the sector) and that's Dottie Johnson. She is an extraordinary leader



because she's a woman leader in the field. It's somebody that I naturally gravitate toward. But I think she's a smart businesswoman with a philanthropic heart, I think, so that it lets me know that all of that is possible and it's wrapped up and it's – this brilliant woman called Dottie Johnson. So she's one that I see that advances the network – the first person that comes to mind for me. I had the pleasure and the absolute delight to meet Russ Mawby who is just a phenomenal person in so many ways. The foresight that he had to create Michigan Nonprofit Association and [his] understanding that there was going to be perpetual needs for the sector, and there needed to be an organization to fulfill those was just incredible. The philanthropic education for children – I mean, looking at children and having them at the center of community is just exceptional. I think today other organizations still follow suit with that. Certainly, Rob Collier, Kyle Caldwell, more recent legends [who are] still alive, still doing well, still doing great work – but [they] also taught me a lot and [have been] very patient with me, very patient with me coming from another sector and asking maybe some dumb questions and answering those with respect for me. That's been incredible, I think, as well.

(KC): I'm going to ask you two separate questions and you can answer in whichever order, but I'll repeat them for you.

(DMB): Okay.

(KC): So the one question I wanted an answer to is what do you see as the vision for Michigan's nonprofit infrastructure in the future? So that's one to think about. The other one sort of could be related to that. What's your interest in your legacy as part of that? I didn't want to separate the questions so you could think about your answers and think about how you want to sequence it – and whether it's you talking about the broader vision and then your role or your role in the broader vision – either way.

(DMB): So I'll take a stab at the broader and then the narrow.

(KC): Great. So let me just roll the questions out to you. So what do you see as your vision for the nonprofit infrastructure in Michigan?

(DMB): So my vision for the nonprofit infrastructure in Michigan is that it continues to stay connected but it also continues to look at other partners that could possibly be in that infrastructure. So I think there are other organizations that can be certainly partners to broaden that. I would like to see that it's so interconnected, that it is so strong, that it can't be broken. The vulnerability of leadership will not be an issue; it will permeate the entire state and the nonprofit sector itself will be a force to be reckoned with. I think right now we're vulnerable because sometimes we're misunderstood. But the more that we broaden our tenet and people understand what our work is and the value of that, I think that it would systematically be what it needs to be for Michigan. So that's the vision for that. So I think that Michigan Nonprofit Association itself will have a huge part. The other four members of the infrastructure organizations that currently support Michigan will have a huge part in that because we are clearly the ones that are informing lots of other people about what the sector is. We are still, still today, talking about *what does charitable mean?* Still today we're talking about that. So that notion of really being able to inform and professionalize (and I say that with all due respect because we are professionals, but I think some other sectors don't see us that way). So as much as we can really create and demonstrate and broaden the organizations that are part of the infrastructure (and this could be, again, partners) we would



really be able to raise the level and the profile of our work, not for the sake of raising our profile but really being able to advance and solve a lot of these challenges that we have that can be done. So we broaden our notion of what infrastructure means, I think, in Michigan.

(KC): So as you think about that, what role, what legacy role would you like for Donna Murray-Brown in that?

(DMB): I think for me personally, as a leader at Michigan Nonprofit Association, in terms of creating this strong Michigan, this strong infrastructure, it's really a legacy of being inclusive. I think that in order to broaden the infrastructure, it really looks at the entire state of Michigan and what makes up that. Who makes of that? Who should be included? I think I feel incredibly blessed and quite lucky to be in the role that I'm in. I did not grow up nonprofit. I came from Detroit, from an area in a community that was impoverished really and I find myself in a position of leadership, in a position to be able to impact a huge system of what we call the nonprofit sector, but from Detroit, went to public school and the first person in my family to graduate from college. These are the odds that you don't typically see in the role that I – so I don't take my role lightly at all. When I think about this notion of infrastructure is who else gets the opportunity, not just to set up the table for the opportunity but what skills and values do they bring and being able to orchestrate that. So it's inclusive enough to really be able to make the change that we need to. I think inclusion, equity, you can possibly say you could see diversity, but I think inclusion is where it would really land from my legacy because I think it takes much more than we have right now that are going to be able to solve the challenges that we're faced with now and in the future.

(KC): Is there any advice that you would give to new staff members or new board members coming in to any one of the four infrastructure organizations to help them think about all this you shared about legacy in the future?

(DMB): I would say one of the things that I would share with my colleagues and new colleague is really easy. I could say, "Go to the website for Our State of Generosity," but actually I would have to say that to some of my current staff members. Actually, I just said it today to one of my – "You need to look at that website, Our State of Generosity." For me I look at it often. I actually go there and what's wonderful about it is that you can just almost like Google. Just put a concept in the search field for what you're looking for and something will come up. Lots of things will come up. So I think it's important that there is a resource that individuals can go to to learn about that. Certainly, the casts or characters might be different by the time that they get to that but that's okay. It's really the understanding. It's really the knowledge and the history piece of it but then also the future is also embedded in that. I think that's what makes it such a great resource. I would say, "When I came on board in 2009, if I would have had that, oh my gosh! I'll be the most fantastic leader ever. [Laughter] I'm aspiring to be that but that would have been – that's exactly what I needed." So when I tell people about the philanthropic sector now, I have a place for them to land on that but then the next thing I think is really making certain that team members, especially new and those that are existing get a chance to fully understand by sharing stories with them, but then also putting them in a room with other organizations and so they're not just in Michigan Nonprofit Association. It's important for them to know all the organizations. I think that actually builds strength in our current infrastructure.

[side conversation]



(KC): That's all my formal questions. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you feel we should? Or anything that you [Crosstalk]?

(DMB): No. The legacy question was one I didn't – I mean I knew but I didn't – I feel good. I feel complete.

(KC): Sure?

(DMB): Yes.

(KC): You did a great job.

End of Recording

