



INTERVIEW WITH CAROLYN BLOODWORTH – OCTOBER 10, 2011

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 Carolyn Bloodworth on October 10, 2011. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded during the Council of Michigan Foundations' Annual Conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan. This interview is part of a series in the project, *Our State of Generosity* (OSoG). OSoG is a partnership of scholars, practitioners, and funders from four institutions – the Johnson Center; CMF; MNA; and MCSC – that collectively form the backbone of the state's philanthropic, voluntary, and nonprofit infrastructure. OSoG's mission is to capture, preserve, analyze, and share the developments, achievements, and experience that, over a period of 40 years, made Michigan a State of Generosity.

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Abridged: The following interview has been edited to assist readability. Extraneous verbal pauses and informal personal conversation not related to the topic of Michigan philanthropy have been deleted. Footnotes to the transcript have been added clarifying any factual errors in the memory of the person interviewed.

Text of the interview questions are as asked. Individuals interviewed have had the opportunity to add or edit their answers in order to provide their most accurate answers to the questions. For these reasons, the edited transcript may not exactly reflect the recorded interview.

Kathy Agard (KA): Of these organizations: MNA, CMF, the Commission (MCSC), and the Johnson Center, which ones have you been involved with over your career?

Carolyn Bloodworth (CB): Actually, all, with the exception of the Johnson Center. I haven't done a lot with the Johnson Center, but I have been on the MNA board. I am doing my second stint on the MNA board right now. I was just elected chair of the Commission. I serve on the League Board as well.

(KA): The first place I would like to go is to talk about CMF. Can you tell me a little bit about [00:01:00] whether you think CMF is effective in what it does? And, assuming that you do, can you tease out some of the leadership pieces, or why you think it is effective as an organization?

(CB): I would say it is a good foundation for me as a corporate grantmaker to get access to the information that I need to do my job, the information in terms of networking and the data that is needed. It

was a critical piece of establishing my company's philanthropy when we decided we wanted to start a foundation back in 1990. I joined the foundation in 1992, so I came in just after everything got started, CMF played such a huge role in helping us put everything together. I don't think we could have been successful without CMF.

(KA): Specifically what were the behaviors that [00:02:00] helped you as a grantmaker?

(CB): I think as a grantmaker it helps give us structure that is so critical, particularly in a corporate environment. That really makes a big difference in terms of its stature and, I think, its acceptance within the corporate environment. It is a stamp of approval; much like the Good Housekeeping stamp of approval. It really helps us to have a road map, also, for where to go. There is a lot of opportunity to do things differently, but you'd like to do them within the guidelines of the rules and the law. That is where CMF provides such a benefit, and is so important for us.

(KA): CMF has taken on major projects and they also do a lot of public policy work. Has it been important to you, or do you think it has been a part of their success, or that it has taken them down some other roads?

(CB): I think it is critical that CMF focuses on the public policy. [00:03:00] It is very helpful for me as a corporate grantmaker that CMF carries that load. My corporation has a number of different policy interests unrelated to philanthropy. I also believe the nonprofit sector needs to have a voice. And the voice needs to represent both the donor perspective, as well as the recipient of the donations.

(KA): Now you sat on both sides of that relationship of the nonprofits and CMF. Let's spend a couple minutes about your experience with MNA. What do you see as MNA's role, and why has or hasn't been effective in what it does?

(CB): MNA has been incredibly effective. What I see is such a strong partnership and a deep connection between MNA and CMF. I don't think the two are able to function as effectively [00:04:00] without one another. Now that I am coming onto the CMF board, I am excited to see that other side as well. But I don't have to be on the boards to see the intersections happen every single day. Going to Washington for many years on the annual Foundations on the Hill trip to talk to the Michigan delegation, I have seen how important it is to share the voice of the foundations, as well as the nonprofit sector. The policy impacts are just so dramatic for both sectors, they have to be connected as we tell the stories.

(KA): What do you think has made MNA successful? What leadership elements? Or as you look at it, if you were sitting in Arkansas, what makes it possible to do the kinds of things that you are talking about?

(CB): I think a large part of the success stems from the strength of the people and the relationships they have. [00:05:00] The leadership, the quality of the individuals, and their vision make an incredible difference. MNA leaders always seem to be a step, or two, or three ahead of everyone. That helps in such an important way for so many different reasons. They are always thinking about what is around the corner. This is so critical, particularly as things change so rapidly in the sector.



(KA): Tell me about your board experience at MNA. What happens at the board meeting that is so effective? Or what, again if you were going to be going in to coach an MNA [00:06:00] board in another place, what kinds of things do you think make that board work? It is a huge board.

(CB): It is a very big board and one might think, “how do they get anything done?” One of the key pieces of that board is the consistency in representation from most of the key state organizations. The seats are permanent and the people that are in those positions possess tremendous knowledge. I remember when I was term limited, I was so disappointed to leave the board because I always learned something. The people are of the most incredible quality; the thinking, the visioning, and the work that they do, and I think that is one of the reasons why that board is so effective. People are not hesitant to speak their minds. There is a great openness. There is some very good discussion. Because so many of the people on the board are on multiple boards themselves, they are thinking beyond just MNA. [00:07:00] I think that makes a big difference because they see the bigger picture. And one of the more effective things we’ve done, I think, in recent memory is we’ve always brought in one of the current programs and there has been a program moment where the program would describe what they have been doing. So we actually get to see what MNA is funding, or see the work that we are doing. We see the results, and that makes a big difference. It makes it real.

(KA): They also are maybe more so on the forefront of the public policy issues. How have they handled differences in the membership around public policy issues (because there is a potential for conflict)?

(CB): There certainly is, and that is where the openness of the members has been, I think, very heartwarming. To see that sometimes people say “I can’t vote on this now. I have other interests.” But they are very aware and cognizant of those differences, and very deliberate in shaping the [00:08:00] policy, and making sure that all voices get heard. I think that is where it is so effective, and that is where that deeply rooted understanding, and knowledge comes into play. I am blown away consistently, when we meet and we talk about the public policy, and we talk about the different things that have been done and where we are headed. I am always just very impressed.

(KA): Do you think that that tone was set early on for MNA, or do you think that it is in the water in Michigan? Why do you think that people behave like that here?

(CB): I think it was set early on, because I can’t remember a time when it wasn’t there. Which is, I think, what made it so appealing to me. As soon as I got on the board I realized this is where I really like to be. I remember explaining to my leadership back at my company, that this board is so important for us to have a seat at this table because these people [00:09:00] tend to see the entire landscape and that helps to inform us as a company. There are not a lot of boundaries, the boundaries seem to be very open, and the openness tends to make more things happen. It seems like through the tougher times that Michigan has faced it has become even more important that everyone is working together toward the same goal. I have seen it strengthen, but I have never seen it struggle.

(KA): How long have you been on the League Michigan Board?

(CB): I have been on the League Michigan Board, I am thinking a couple years, three years maybe.



(KA): So long enough that you have had some experience with that. Tell me a little bit about that experience. Is it working, is it not working, and how did MNA get involved with it?

(CB): I might be challenged to answer the question about how MNA got involved with it, but my experience with the League has been very interesting. It has been fun for me. [00:10:00] I work and live in the Jackson area and the Jackson Public Schools are very strong League Schools. We sit with pride because we talk about which schools are doing well and who is really excelling, and Jackson tends to excel quite a bit, and that has been quite fun for me to see. I think I am a little frustrated as a League Board member, however, because there is so much potential with this program and it doesn't seem to be as popular as I think it could be; but a lot of that might be because of the educational challenges that the school districts face, and they might not recognize the value in the League. Being in Jackson I know the superintendent well and I know he gets what the League is about, and he is behind it 150 percent, which is why it works. I see the impact that it makes in the community, and so I get frustrated that we are not able to do more.

(KA): Tell me why you think it is an important project.

(CB): It is an important project for [00:11:00] so many reasons. Getting young people involved in philanthropy in a different way, I don't think they see that is philanthropy. It is just what they do and that is the best way for them to learn because it becomes very natural and not intentional. Including it as part of their educational process, they simply learn by doing. It's not forced. I had a wonderful conversation with Dr. Russ Mawby a couple weeks ago and we were talking about education and how it needs to be more than just reading and writing. We need to build these young people and their character and build them as people and as citizens. That is what the League does. It's very natural for them to be good citizens and give back, and I think their efforts become more successful as a result of that.

(KA): Now let's move onto the Commission. How long have you been on the Commission?

(CB): [00:12:00] I think I am starting my second term on the Commission.

(KA): So tell me the difference between the role CMF plays, the role MNA plays, and the role the Commission plays.

(CB): It is quite an interesting picture because they are all interwoven in some way. I see the Commission as the doing, trying to make sure we mobilize the people to serve the nonprofits and make good use of the money that the foundations have invested in those nonprofits.

(KA): Carolyn, were you involved in the raising of the 20 million dollar endowment?

(CB): I was.

(KA): Tell me a little of that story because it is such a unique thing. I was always amazed that 20 million dollars was raised for endowment before something even existed.



[00:13:00]

(CB): The CMA (ConnectMichigan Alliance) endowment (a supporting organization of MNA), very fascinating to say the least. And I have to say my corporate foundation does not contribute to endowments, and so I was doing cartwheels down the hallway when we actually contributed. The CMA (ConnectMichigan Alliance) endowment was such a powerful statement. I think the reason that worked was the state's commitment and the governor's commitment right up front; it never would have happened without that, there is absolutely no question. From a business perspective, as coming from a corporate foundation, the math worked for us. It just seemed to make such great sense, leveraging other foundations, putting all of that together, seeing the power of collaboration like this state has not seen before. [00:14:00] This is that future vision again and it is not just from the foundation leaders or the nonprofit sector, then you have state government coming in and they are seeing that vision. I think that is something that even my company executive said, "It makes great sense for us to invest in this. We need to be part of this as well."

(KA): How did it actually happen? Was it a big committee and little committee, how long did it take?

(CB): I don't know that I can honestly answer that. I just remember being invited into a meeting with Kyle Caldwell and Sam Singh, which you knew was going to be fun because those two young men are always thinking ahead. I remember them saying "we would like to do this and we would like you to be a part of it." It is really tough to say no to them. Really, really tough. [00:15:00] And then seeing the rest of the cabinet that was put together – it was a blue ribbon cabinet – it was an honor to be part of that. It really was.

(KA): So partly it was the people that were brought together.

(CB): Oh the people, just phenomenal people, and I think that is the one thing that is consistent among all the lines of all of these organizations. The people are some of the very best people this state has and it is a real privilege to work and serve with each of them.

(KA): Let me press a little on that, about what makes them good people.

(CB): The quality of their character, their deep passion for Michigan and seeing Michigan grow and prosper is so appealing. Positive energy, a real can-do attitude, can-do spirit, and I think a love for their field. It tends to [00:16:00] really make you want to be as in love with what you are doing as they are.

(KA): Were you part of the Michigan tax credit?

(CB): No.

(KA): That predates your history. The Commission has been under fire, right? Tell me how what that has been like to suddenly be, instead of being on the wave going up, to be trying to hang on as the wave is going against



(CB): It has been a challenge for the Commission. Federal funding cuts have been just brutal, absolutely brutal, so a lot of the programs the Commission supports have been cut dramatically because of the federal budget cuts. Now the state budget cuts impacted us as well because we are part of the Department of Human Services. It is not a real large budget - \$600,000 – which leverages several million dollars in federal funds but it is under question often and consistently, and we need to continually prove our value and our worth. [00:17:00] It has been a bit of a challenge. I think we need to continue to try to show measurable results for what we are doing, and that is not necessarily a bad thing, everyone has to do that, and I know that is something we can do.

But it makes it very tough when it is such a difficult time for everybody on top of all of this. It is a tough time for our volunteers, it is a tough time for the agencies when they are strapped to be able to deliver what they need to do. But there is no question, we are committed to continue to fight for that. We have a new director in the Department of Human Services, Maura Corrigan, she attended our board meeting last month and she is very committed to us, which is exactly what the Commission needed to hear. We have a number of new commissioners coming on that I think are going to bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm. We just need to continue to educate people in the state for the value of volunteerism and [00:18:00] what it brings, and what it can do particularly when other areas are down. People can pick things up and make a difference.

(KA): We are in this terrible time where society is really divided. One of the places of division is around the role of capitalism and business. So from a business perspective, how do businesses look at the philanthropy world? Is it totally alien? Do business people see themselves as both business people and part of the community? You are the one person we are talking to who has that business rootedness. So tell me, when you are looking at Michigan's philanthropic community, what you see or how does that look from a business perspective?

(CB): It is interesting; we [00:19:00] look at a lot of the nonprofits that we support and want to make sure their bottom line is strong; we need to make a good investment in them. But what I also think about is the fact that many of our business leaders in Michigan – particularly many at my company – are actively involved in the nonprofit sector; they are actively involved on foundations, they serve on many, many boards. Many of them are nonprofit leaders themselves, so there is a real important intersect there. We are all trying to make Michigan a better place to live, raise a family, work, and do business. But I think we expect the nonprofit community to be able to hold themselves up just like a business. Obviously their mission is different, their passion is going to be a little bit different, but the bottom line is there is money involved and they need to run it wisely. For a business to be able to make an investment in them, we need to have them be as strong as they possibly can be.

(KA): [00:20:00] You've had time to think about this is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would like to make sure gets into this mix as a lesson learned, or an insight you have had, or a quality of some of these members that you have observed that we should get into this.

(CB): I saw one of the questions and I was trying to imagine what it would be like, when I think about the leaders in this state. I think of Dottie Johnson and Rob Collier and how different they are as



individuals, yet the transition in leadership at CMF was seamless. I am overwhelmed and awed by what they have been able to achieve. I think about Rob and working with Kyle Caldwell, Sam Singh, and Paula Kaiser Van Dam, and I think about the ability of all of those leaders. They take their stripes off when they get into a room. You [00:21:00] can't tell who belongs to which organization, and I think that is probably one of the reasons why Michigan's sector is so strong. And they are all looking out for one another. That is the one thing that I consistently hear, and now being on all of these boards, I see it. In each board meeting I see it. They deeply care and they are rooting for each other. When they go to Washington they are not just wearing the MNA or CMF hat, they are wearing the hat of Michigan. And that I think is what makes this such a great success, and I am just real pleased to be part of it.

Susan Harrison Wolffis (SHW): I really would like to hear about your path into the world of philanthropy; both [00:22:00] personal and corporate. Then some of the ways it has changed you as a person, changed the way you have done business. I will let you talk, and if you don't mind, I will interject questions. What is your first memory of being a part of philanthropy? What brought you to this place?

(CB): It is an interesting path. My first memory of philanthropy is walking up and down my street in Jonesville, Michigan with my mom as she raised money for the March of Dimes. It is a very small, tiny glimmer of memory. I had to be about five or six, going door to door. I remember that, I don't know why I remember that, but I do remember. I grew up in a small town and had just a wonderful life. My parents were very actively involved in the community. They owned a newspaper. [00:23:00] They were actively involved in the community, so philanthropy and service was just a natural part of my life. It was part of that League type of experience where I didn't realize what I was doing, just got involved in a lot of things, supporting whatever was going on. I went to work at the utility as a college student here in Kalamazoo, bounced around in different departments as I grew and as I finished school, I landed in a job to work for the foundation. They had to actually talk me into it. They had already set it (the foundation) up, and I had already been with the company for a long time.

They had to convince me to take the job because I loved the job I was doing within the company. At that time I had a brand new position administering an employee suggestion program. I was driving around the state, meeting with employees, and I was having a ball. I had been in a number of different [00:24:00] other roles within Consumers Energy, so they had to convince me to change roles and work for the foundation. That was probably about 1992, so fast forward here we are about 20 years later. I can't believe they had to convince me! My job has grown, and I have grown and developed into the position. I have been running the foundation since about 1997, I would say. We are a small corporate foundation, but our company used to have international interests, so at one point in time we were supporting not only Michigan, but 17 other states and 21 other countries. So I have had an opportunity to do a little bit of international giving, and that was an experience. So what [00:25:00] did I do to handle that experience? I called CMF and asked CMF "I need some help, what do I do? I have to do international grants, we have never done this before. What do I do?"

I also reached out to my corporate colleagues that I had met through CMF. I went over to Dearborn, sat down with our friends at Ford and said "please help us figure this out." CMF was really key in helping as we grew because we grew as a foundation pretty dramatically over the years, and it has really ebbed and



flowed since that time. We had some down years, and a lot of times I would call Rob (Collier) and say, “what do I do?” and he would help me, talk me through it. The resource has really been pretty incredible.

(SHW): Is there one project or series of projects that has really affected you? Some of the different things you have been able to fund, to make changes in the community or the state?

(CB): Sure. It is [00:26:00] funny, there are a lot of projects that hit me, but what I think I am most proud of is we have made a commitment at Consumers Energy to support youth. When America’s Promise was being formed and developed, and Colin Powell, and all of that, we had made a commitment to double all of our volunteer grants. So any of our employees that are involved with children in any capacity (coaching, tutoring, mentoring), we would double those grant awards. Originally it sounded like something we might do. Well, here we are 20 years later and we are still doubling those grants. Our commitment to youth is still very, very strong.

When I look back and I think about what I have been able to accomplish and what I have been able to do, that is one of those issues and impacts that have been the most meaningful. It’s not one grant, it’s not one community, it’s [00:27:00] everywhere. We have 8,000 employees at my company, so 8,000 employees have an ability to impact youth that way, and so that to me is very meaningful. It didn’t hurt meeting Colin Powell, I brought him into town. But there are a number of other projects. Every grant is special in its own way.

Whenever we are able to dramatically make a difference in a particular community, and each community has such different needs. It is one of the benefits of my job. I am not just supporting one community. It is not just Jackson. I’ve got Muskegon, I’ve got Tawas, Flint, Traverse City, Kalamazoo. Every community is different, and seeing what we can do in each of these communities is powerful. A lot of time it is not a large grant, but it is enough to make a difference. That has been very, very rewarding, to go out and meet the people we are able to impact, maybe see a building that we helped to construct [00:28:00], maybe meet the youth that are being served. Or going out and seeing our employees who utilize a facility, or maybe somebody serves on a board. Our employees, their pride and happiness because their company supported something they care about, that has been pretty terrific.

(SHW): Have these 20 years changed you as a person, your view of life, lessons learned?

(CB): I would say very much so. When I started working with the foundation I hadn’t really thought about my childhood and what I had done growing up and being involved with the community and things like that. Then as I kind of grew into the job and got to make it more of my own, and got to put a little bit more of my stamp of what is important and what I think is important for the company to be doing, I think it really helped me and helped remind me where my roots were [00:29:00]. My mom passed away a year ago and we were thinking about her life and what did she do, and I got thinking about what I have done. I don’t think I meant to be emotional here, but when you talk about changing you, that is the impact.

(SHW): What is important to you?



(CB): Helping people. People talk about foundation work, “oh you have a great job.” Everybody at Consumers thinks I have the best job, “your job is great, you’re giving away money.” Yes it is great, but I also have to tell people no, and that is tough, that is real tough. I have learned, and I try real hard to make the people understand that it is not a personal no, and we want to help them but we don’t have a great deal of money, and I want their journey to be just as good all throughout, at the end as at the beginning. But I think it is [00:30:00] important to help people, and help them understand what they have been able to accomplish. We have built a lot of buildings, a lot of capital campaigns, that is kind of cold, but trying to demonstrate what the building is able to do. Are they able to serve food because they weren’t able to before because their kitchen wasn’t big enough? Or maybe we helped build a ramp because people in a wheelchair weren’t able to get inside to be served. Just trying to make that personal, and it becomes very personal. We work a lot with some youth groups. Michigan FFA [Future Farmers of America] is one of my favorites. We have been supporting those kids for a long time now. The organization develops leaders. They are my kids now, they send me Christmas cards, and they keep in touch with me on Facebook and tell me how they are doing. [00:31:00] And they are doing great things in their communities and the state. That is important. It is all about the people. It gets real personal, real quickly.

(SHW): It is not just a board, not just a meeting, not just a grant.

(CB): Not at all. Sometimes that makes it tough. We get about 1,200 requests a year, and I have to separate myself. I am real strategic, I probably learned this through MNA or CMF. I don’t meet with everybody personally because as soon as I meet them it is over for me, I can’t disconnect. I am real careful about who I meet with now.

(SHW): Any lessons you would like to pass on to the next generation of leaders?

(CB): I think the biggest lesson for me is you have to be real deliberate in your thinking. You also have to be very open. [00:32:00] The one thing I have learned – my eyes have been opened quite a bit in this job and this role – listen ten times more than you speak. That is such an important lesson to learn, and the more you listen the more you see. Your ears are a much better window into what is happening. Be flexible, always embrace what is going to come because everything seems to change on a daily basis. If you are not going to embrace those opportunities to meet that change, it is going to be a very challenging job ahead.

(SHW): Anything else you want to say on a personal nature? [00:33:00]

(CB): I think what you are doing to record this history is pretty terrific and the story needs to be told. I am honored to be part of it.

