



INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SIEGER – JUNE 27, 2012

Our State of Generosity, a project of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (JCP) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), in partnership with the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF), Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC), and GVSU Libraries' Special Collections & University Archives present:

An interview with Diana Sieger on June 27, 2012. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded at the Johnson Center for Philanthropy in Grand Rapids, 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): Just to start and warm our brains up, can you tell me about the roles you have played in the Michigan philanthropic community with the four organizations we are talking about, the Michigan Community Service Commission, the Johnson Center, CMF and the Michigan Nonprofit Association. So in any order, Diana how have you been involved?

Diana Sieger (DS): First of all, I am – every day I walk into our building, I am still as honored as when I was selected to be the president. I know that sounds corny, however, it is truly what I believe and I think that I came into the particular organization of the foundation at a very good time. We were just on the cusp, all the whole field of, “Boy this could really go places.” [00:01:00] To go places, we really needed to band together with (what I would say) very influential organizations. The Council of Michigan Foundations was the first stop for me, outside of figuring out who is to whom and what is going on in the office and everything. The community foundation has been a member of the Council of Michigan Foundations since its inception. At that time, prior to the community foundation services specifically being organized, there was a strong core of community foundation leaders that would meet periodically with the wonderful guidance of Dottie Johnson. That was a good place of sharing knowledge and sharing concerns, but also [00:02:00] building the capital, if you will, for being able to do things together.

Along the way the Johnson Center being created – wow. That was started actually sitting on the board of an organization that is no longer in existence called Direction Center. By design there were two representatives from the community foundation, two representatives from the United Way here in the area, Grand Valley State University and I’m forgetting the fourth – that’s it I think. Joel and Russ were the instigators, if you will, around the necessity of having a more focused look at philanthropy as a whole in the state but through [00:03:00] a university; this gave birth to what we now know as the Dorothy A. Johnson Center on Philanthropy.

The Michigan Community Service Commission... My involvement with that in the beginning had a lot to do with CMF in regard to a youth program as well. That is when I first met Kyle Caldwell and working in that regard. I have never been on the board nor really deeply involved with the Michigan Community Service Commission, but I certainly do admire their work and am very happy that they are in existence and that they continue to be a strong voice in securing funding, so that we can leverage it throughout all the communities with regard to volunteer services and other programs that have emerged over the course of the last 20+ years.

Again, the Michigan Nonprofit Association, [00:04:00] I can remember when that was created – again, by Russ and others – and the purposes behind that. Dottie Johnson and Russ and others really played a role and it is bringing the voice of the Michigan nonprofits together. It started with the grant maker/grant seeker conference – and I believe the year was 1988 when that was birthed – and then emerged out of that were the leaders saying, “We need to more structure this and codify this.” It is certainly, under Kyle’s leadership today, a very strong voice in our state.

(KA): Since you brought it up here, one of the things I have been interested in is the quality of leadership in Michigan. It may be a good time to talk about, as you have observed, and yourself



included, the sort of qualities [00:05:00] and characteristics of the Michigan philanthropic leaders in the network. How would you say they operate or what would you think it's important for others to know. What do you tell people when you're traveling out of Michigan and they say how did this happen?

(DS): It was not magical, but close to it. I would say because many of us, certainly Dottie, to me, was, is and continues to be, I would say the real primary philanthropic force, not only in Michigan but worldwide. I don't say that in a contrived way, I say that in a deep meaning kind of way. I think her leadership really inspired many because she is an aspirational thinker and a force to be reckoned with and that is a good thing. She would plant seeds, [00:06:00] sometimes broad hints, sometimes really bluntly saying, "You ought to be doing this..." and you know what, she was right every time.

Around the conceptual table, if you will, people from Kellogg, people from other types of foundations... And a real appreciation that in my world of community foundations, it wasn't just about community foundations. It was understanding the whole of, what I would say, organized philanthropy with all types of foundations and how it was so critical (regardless of where you make your decisions with either a family foundation, a corporate foundation, a corporate giving program, a community foundation, whatever) that we honor and respect those decisions because they come from maybe different places.

That is when [00:07:00] we started having conversations many years ago, ideas about, "Well, you know, we could do a lot better if we banded together." So when you think of the four primary statewide organizations that we are discussing, the growth of community foundations, the growth of corporate philanthropy, it was around, I would say issues and projects that coalesced us. I feel like we have all been traveling down the same path for a long time, so I think longevity plays a key role; maybe not 25 years ago because we were all still figuring out, but now it really does... and a deep respect that while we can still argue the great debate, we certainly walk of the [00:08:00] meeting rooms arm in arm, saying, "But we've got to do this for a good reason." I think it is because we understood that we had greater power together and power in a positive way that gave rise to the strength of Michigan philanthropy.

When I go out of state, I will tell you that people look to Michigan as really, not only one of the leaders in philanthropy in this country, but *the* leader in philanthropy. It is not just because we have a lot of the larger independent foundations here; it is because we have such a deep history of the growth of community foundations. Again when I think of my colleagues in Western Michigan, we have never had problems that has emerged in other areas of the country in terms of saying, "Well this is my territory, no, that's your territory." [00:09:00] It is not always... It's



collegial, but that doesn't always mean we don't have differences of opinion. That helps make sure the conversation is much more enriched.

(KA): One more question on that path. What, from observing Russ and Dottie and Joel and Ranny, what have you tried to incorporate into your own practice?

(DS): Those four people — Ranny, Joel, Dottie and Russ — I don't know how you explain it, they are magical. I love watching them, the rare moments these days when they are together to talk. First of all, they don't talk over each other; you can tell they really want to hear what the other one has to say. I love it when they [say], "Well you know I'm going to take a page of that and I'm going to add another page [00:10:00] to it." It is graciousness without being deluded. It is humor; how can you think of Joel without thinking that wonderful sense of humor and you had better darn well be well read and intelligent sometimes to get the drift. I would say, when I started out of the community foundation I had a lot of rough edges; I was pretty young. That hasn't stopped my spark or my ability to speak out. What I learned from the four of them is better listening and not give in to spontaneous blurting, but more of a careful thought and review. And truly the word respect comes [00:11:00] out of that, to watch those four. And graciousness, Russ always wrote the most beautiful — and probably still does — thank you notes over things that I think, "Wow, how did you know that, how did you see that?" The lesson is learned from all four...

(KA): I used to stand in the bathroom and practice trying to raise my eyebrow like Dottie can do. It was very effective to me.

(DS): Oh, Dottie.

(KA): So, you have been chairman of the board for CMF and if you believe CMF has been an effective organization, which I think you do, why do you think it has? What did it do or how has it behaved that might be replicated that makes CMF work?

(DS): You know, when Rob and the leadership of the board asked me to chair, I think there was some trepidation. What emerged out of that was there is no need to fear. I am all about philanthropy and I am all about really trying to shoulder in and make sure that CMF continues to be the spectacular regional association that it is — not just regional association, but leader in the country and globally. My reason for wanting to take on that wonderful role, that opportunity — I didn't think it was a challenge, I thought it was an opportunity. It kind of came right on the cusp as it was ending, my term there, was when the world imploded with regard to the recession, so stormy waters were certainly ahead.



But the reason why it's worked – Dottie Johnson was certainly one reason [00:13:00] why it worked, Kathy Agard was a reason why it worked, Rob Collier is a reason why it works, and certainly Donnell Mersereau. They are the real strength of that. You know, Dottie never gives up and so when she sees great opportunity, even with a person with rough edges, *there's something there and we are going to make sure that that something comes out when we're sitting around the table trying to figure out knotty issues that are coming up through the ranks*. The Council of Michigan Foundations, having now tremendous experience at the national level through serving on the board of the Council on Foundations currently, I have experienced other regional associations and they are all over the map. They are all good, there is no bad [00:14:00] there, but they all look to the Council of Michigan Foundations as the model and we need to take that seriously, not from an arrogant way but from a real modeling kind of way. The role of the Council of Michigan Foundations has become very critical in the area of public policy as well as, not only in Michigan, but certainly at the national level as well. Never give up. Show up, be smart and don't be afraid to dive into issues; and that is why CMF has really worked.

(KA): I'm going to give you a multiple-choice, you can pick one. The Tax Credit, the Brand-New Project – maybe the Brand-New Project because I know less about that – or the Standards Project. Can you walk through the process that happens [00:15:00] from the moment that the group realizes that there is a problem that needs to be solved and I can give you an example of the computer project where people really sacrificed their own self-interests so can you talk about who brings up the idea and then what happens, walk me through it. Any one of those are good examples.

(DS): Would it be better... The tax credit was really when Jack predated me being there, but it was the year it was enacted – but I could talk briefly about the Brand-New Project. I also want to talk a moment about the standards. The group of foundations known as community foundations will be celebrating, as a field, its hundredth anniversary in a year. The Cleveland Foundation was the first community foundation in this country, [00:16:00] founded by Frederick Goff, a lawyer and a banker. What a visionary, 100 years ago, to create these unassigned trusts to benefit the community. What a gift.

Along the way, many changes occurred. We became known as community foundations generally. For many years the Grand Rapids Community Foundation was known as the Grand Rapids Foundation and we realized that in the year 1991...

I was again also serving in a capacity at the national level on the forerunner to the now known Community Foundations Leadership Team. I chaired a committee called the Committee on Community Foundations. Community foundations were up in arms [00:17:00] because Fidelity



Investments had filed for an IRS letter ruling in Brooklyn, New York to create a charitable gift fund. The charitable gift fund was, and still is, a huge — either one or number two nationally in terms of assets — became a competitor of a product known as a donor advised fund at a community foundation. At that time the field was, what I would say, community foundations were the sleeping giants in their communities. Fundraising was a kind of concept that they did not want to adopt. The reality was that community foundations do need to raise resources and give the community opportunity to do that, as well as to work on community leadership. At that time, [00:18:00] it shocked the field so much, particularly the larger community foundations, and for about seven or eight years it was a cranky, disruptive time and lots of well, “Why didn't somebody see this coming down the street? Why, why, why, why?”

In the meantime, the wisdom of some of the community foundation leaders here in Michigan, in particular Mariam Noland from the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, she promptly raised her head in the late 1990s and said, “You know, this isn't going to be resolved at the national level.” We needed to as a state, because we knew we really respected and trusted one another; we really need to understand how we can bring ourselves together. We went through, “Well maybe [00:19:00] there's an ad agency that can do this.” Oh, we had years of that. Nobody quite got us.

Then through a relationship that we have with a firm in Grand Rapids, a strategic marketing firm, the Williams Group it is now known as. One of its principals is a gentleman by the name of Bob Talbott and because we had been working with him for a long time, he's the voice of reason, a selfless individual, and great staff... smart, smart, smart. I introduced him to the group of community foundation leaders and he went through a real good exercise of Branding 101 before it became kind of known in the last 10 to 12 years as, “Oh, branding.” The branding was, “Okay, who are we?” He convinced us through a really [00:20:00] smart exercise to — for the eight community foundations at that time who did not have the word “community” in their names, to really seriously consider doing that. If we were going to do a statewide effort that said, “look for your community foundation in your community,” and somebody in the Kent County area here in Grand Rapids was to say, “I don't think we have a community foundation, we have something called the Grand Rapids Foundation but we don't know what that...” So that is what started that.

It was really through Bob's vision. He got us, he understood us and created an identity that many community foundations (some did not adopt it)... using the line — and then created websites for community foundations for people to find community foundations — created the phrase “For [00:21:00] Good. For Ever.” And it was “for ever” as two words. Well the grammarians went nuts but anyway, that was the beginning of that and it spread to some degree nationally.



There was some resistance to it because at that time people were still responding to the charitable gift funds and they wanted to be 24/7 fund statements online; they wanted to do pass through and just focus on this one thing and I'm thinking, "We can be all those things." We are here for good, for ever. That was the basis for that. Kellogg was very generous with us. The Mott foundation... I have to tell you that through the wisdom of Elan Garonzik in the year 2005 [00:22:00] (or in that era), he commissioned a study written by Katherine Fulton and Lucy Bernholz about what is going to be the next surprise for community foundations. It is on the brink of new promise that has really been a great resource for everyone to realize, you just can't sleep, you have to be awake.

The standards became kind of an outgrowth, in a way, of that branding project. At the national level when I chaired the Committee on Community Foundations, with all the brouhaha about the charitable gift funds, they emerged out of the committee was, "Can we just identify what makes us, what do we all value, what are some of the commonalities that we have. Let's not get into anything else and let's put the swords down, [00:23:00] and let's just talk about that." So one night, in a meeting room at a hotel in Denver, Colorado, we hammered out three hours worth of what do we value and realized the fighting has got to stop.

That birthed national standards and a woman by the name of Deborah Whitehurst from The Arizona Community Foundation, really was the, she was one that executed this. So the first draft along with some very bright minds from around the country, created the national standards. Prior to that, Donnell Mersereau really also wanted to create a set of standards for the State of Michigan and did so; that came into being so that we could start thinking about molding into national standards. We are the first field of organized philanthropy to identify [00:24:00] standards, because we are fiercely independent and did not want to be regulated by anybody else other than ourselves. We now have a supporting organization connected to the Council on Foundations that review standards for all community foundations who wish to go through that in this country – and there are benefits to being in compliance.

(KA): You're right Diana, the community foundations power is local and independent, so why do you think people voluntarily gave up authority over their identities and over their structures.

(DS): We – I can say it from a personal experience – for 75 years, we were known as the Grand Rapids Foundation. It took some convincing of staff and board saying we really are a community foundation and to not embody [00:25:00] that we will still be known in the community as the Grand Rapids Foundation no matter what name we choose. To do that, we went through a series of focus groups that Bob Tobin took people through, and that really helped identify who we really are and what people valued for our role 15 years ago. Armed with that good information,



feedback from donors, community leaders, prospects, nonprofit organizations, the wisdom of people at Grand Valley, Aquinas, from our institutes of higher learning, it took about a year but the board was convinced as was the staff that we needed to go forth. I have to say, I took a deep breath, but we did it. [00:26:00] Now I can say in our 90th anniversary, it has been a real gift to us and it was really necessary, I feel, for the betterment of the field and I am all about that, too.

(KA): Let's go down another little path. With the tax credit, there was lots of angst about small communities and other community foundations being developed. You all made the strategic decision to open your doors to Ionia and to some neighboring communities. Can you talk a little bit about the problem and also how and why you made that decision as an institution?

(DS): I really believe that, as the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, we are not just the City [00:27:00] of Grand Rapids; we cover all of Kent County, a tiny corner of Southeast Ottawa County and also have a Geographic component fund in Ionia. If we are about community, I'm a big believer in people want to identify where they want to identify. County lines don't do it and I'm a big extender of the olive branch.

The best way to have a small town or suburban area or whatever to want to create a community foundation or really emerge is to say to them, "You can't do that, we are the community foundation." Then you get a group of real dynamic people who say, "Oh yeah? Watch us." So if you want to grow community foundations, that's a good way to do it, just be obstinate as [00:28:00] the larger foundation in the area. We found that with the opportunity that the tax credit provided for us to bring in donors and offering them the ability to take a tax credit, that that was going to open up doors to other communities as well.

It also came at the same time that the youth initiative effort was starting through the magnificent funding of Kellogg and that we were given this opportunity. So areas wanted to say, "Gosh, we can get this money from Kellogg if we raise two dollars of unrestricted or field of interest money, we can get a dollar from Kellogg with a cap of \$1 million. Wow. And we can offer our donors [00:29:00] the tax credit." Well the caveat was along the way was that, "Well, you can do that, but in order to do that you need to be certified by the Department of Treasury at the State of Michigan as a community foundation." The stipulation is that there were a variety of stipulations as to what did that mean.

The best choice for communities, smaller communities was to align with and become part of a larger community foundation. The behavior of the larger community foundation is really going to be the predictor as to the robustness and the goodness of that relationship. We brought in our first geographic component fund — the voice of Dottie Reynolds is shaking in my head right now



because she hated the word affiliates – was Wyoming, which is a suburb of Grand Rapids. [00:30:00] Wyoming is a very independent area and they saw the wisdom of coming along with us (plus it took many cups of coffee at the Holiday Inn on a particularly busy road in Grand Rapids at seven o'clock in the morning to realize that I was not about all-consuming, I was about offering assistance).

When the opportunity came up with Ionia County (which is a county that is east of our county), it took 18 months of really sitting down and getting to know people. It is all about relationships, that this wasn't an asset development strategy of our foundation, this was what can we do to really grow philanthropy in Ionia County? Let me tell you, Ionia County is a gem. It is between Lansing and Grand Rapids. There is significant agricultural business [00:31:00] in that county. It is a county that while it could be considered a bedroom community, the leadership in that county is unrivaled in terms of, "We are going to do this." To this very day, when I travel over for many a celebration in Ionia County, they talk about being the fastest growing community foundation in the state. I am not so sure that is true anymore; I'm not so sure it's all that important that it is true or not, it really is a rallying cry for them.

The support that we provided was that we were there as good partners in attending board meetings, certainly creating their Youth Advisory Committee. That community foundation is in excess of \$6 million today and they have done really wonderful work [00:32:00]. There are other geographic component funds who are part of us. We felt it was a good way of really helping communities grow, the youth involvement in philanthropy. I still firmly believe that, I still abide by our, if you will, contract with Kellogg that we involve young people in philanthropy, that it is a good way of growing a community's pride and ability to plan for its future. We have got great relationships with our component funds, so they're all great, Ionia County in particular.

(KA): \$6 million. That just takes my breath away. (Can't hear Kathy) Let's talk little bit about public policy. You have seen effect of public policy work on the development of the field. What do you think is [00:33:00] important for others to know about Michigan's public policy work?

(DS): It really helps to have Rob Collier at the helm. That is his passion. He is a tremendous builder of strong relationships with all people. Who you see as Rob Collier is who you get all the time. The largest and best compliment he ever got was on one of our visits for the Annual Foundations on the Hill visit in Washington. Sen. Carl Levin, the most senior of all, a man of great wisdom, looked to Rob and in front of 45 foundation leaders in the State of Michigan, proclaimed him to be a phenomenal leader and appreciating his work. So there is that.



The real ability is kind of being able to read the tea leaves and I think our work [00:34:00] as a group in the whole area of the development of the tax credit, the concerns that came up with regard to other issues that we thought were going to erode or impede our ability to really move forth, and not just for community foundations, for all foundations. Rob has been that leader and when it became a concern, for instance, that other types of organizations were going to be lobbying to also be able to offer a tax credit, instead of saying, "Oh, no, you can't," it was, "How can we make this work so that we don't really erode the community foundations affects?" So, solutions and involving all the leaders in every community, regardless of the type of foundation, and getting to know their local legislators, [00:35:00] significant legislators around the state, being able to testify at legislative hearings.

Also encouraging being proactive about the development of public policy, that it is not scary business and that it is indeed — Now with the partnerships of Kyle Caldwell with the Michigan Nonprofit Association and Rob through Council of Michigan Foundations and others, I think that philanthropy, as represented through those two individuals, really has become a respected opinion leader so that legislators listen, not necessarily because we are asking for money, we are asking for how can philanthropy help (which is become a real critical thing particularly from 2008 on because the state has been in a recession [00:36:00] for more than 10 years). This led to the ability beginning in Gov. Granholm's administration of the creation of the Office of Foundation Liaison. I give hats off to Dave Egner and to Dave Campbell for the creation of that which exists now in Gov. Snyder's administration (because it should transcend any governor as an effective voice inside of state government of now, how can we effectively match philanthropy to leveraging state resources or whatever). A good example of that is the Double Up Food Bucks Program that many foundations around the state really added to and benefit access. So it has been... I think the state has realized that this, that our role in public policy has brought resources to them as well as [00:37:00] an intelligent voice on issues. It's hard work.

(KA): So you have had lots of opportunities to meet with legislative people on various levels. What do you wish they knew? What do you wish that they had as their background?

(DS): I went with Rob Collier one time; he does an orientation (which he has to do quite a bit, given the fact that term limits being what they are). So as always a new, excited, eager group of legislators, state legislators, so he does an orientation. I think it's a good way to introduce people. I'm not so sure that everybody understands foundations, and Dottie Johnson has — and all of us have — given humorous speeches on this, have given serious speeches on this. It is very serious from the standpoint [00:38:00] of, what I would say, at the national level. Some of the concerns that I have coming up with regard to, I don't know what I would say, Congress's view of foundations and so anyway...



What I wish that legislators would do for at least 10 to 15 minutes, is just listen. That's all I ask, because were not selling them on anything; we are providing them good information and good education, that we are partners in the growth of the State of Michigan. I work hand-in-hand with our County and City Commissioners each and everyday and I am a familiar face at our County Commission. It's not just at the state level, it's also at the local level and I have had many a session — and I can do this walking very briskly to lunch with a County [00:39:00] Commissioner or a person working in the bureaucracy — but any opportunity I have of “just take a breath and listen for a minute and then you can ask all the questions that you wish.” So that is what I wish.

(KA): I'm going to shift gears on you a little bit. You have been the advocate and the visionary about the use of database decision-making. Can you talk a little bit about where that idea came from, how it has evolved and is it right, is it a good thing?

(DS): I am a big believer in data, and also having good data when we make decisions, but that is not the only factor that goes into decisions. Thirty years ago I was working at another organization and I was asked to compile what is called an Environmental Scan. At that [00:40:00] time there was really no resource, what I would say, on the economic and social conditions that was compiled in one place. So — and this predates personal computers — I went to Calvin College, a local private college here in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They have an exceptional, at that time and I'm sure now, an exceptional library of resources that frankly is at a graduate-level, not just undergraduate. I poured through every reference book I could get my hands on for two weeks, from the Michigan Statistical Abstract to Census Data, whatever. I came back to the office and drew up a report that I still have and am amused by now, something called the “What Lies Ahead? An Environmental Scan of Kent County.” I drew graphs and a pie graph with the bottom [00:41:00] of a glass and all that. I thought to myself, this is crazy, there needs to be... We have business data, we could measure housing starts, etc. Why can't we have data in one place and social conditions so that we can grab hold of that? Fast-forward to the Center for Philanthropy was here at Grand Valley and in its early days started to talk to a number people who served as directors.

It wasn't until Donna Van Iwaarden (who was the Executive Director of the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at the time, in the late 1990s), along with Margaret Sellers Walker (who was a leader in the Center at that time), talking and talking and talking. My vision was: I want to be able to sit in front of a corporate CEO [00:42:00] and to make the case for the impact that a grant could make, not necessarily for fundraising, but to get their involvement, and then to be able to move that community needle on a particular issue. Thus was created ultimately the Community Research Institute.



Today, it is really emerging as not only a local data provider, a statewide provider and I think it has got the attention of folks at the national level as well. It is a factor in many discussions around this community in terms of partnering perhaps with other research entities and really providing greater strength in particular issue areas and topical areas. It is now a resource that not only are we using in terms of information and data, [00:43:00] we are also starting a collective impact effort here in Kent County and the Community Research Institute is an integral part of that so that we know how are we doing. I also was a big believer, and still am, that the work of research, data analyzing and all that did not belong at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, it is the work of a university. Grand Valley State University's stature has grown tremendously and it will continue to grow. Research people are snobs and they like the names of Stanford, Harvard. I add to that Grand Valley State University. I am a big believer in the effectiveness of the Center's work with the Community Research Institute [00:44:00] and I will tell you there are people not only in our community but throughout the state that really appreciate this work as well.

(KA): So this was a quick snap project put together, right?

(DS): Oh, gosh yes. It was amazing, in 5 minutes we put together. The biggest trial was explaining what was coming out of my head; there wasn't really a mental model of it. Certainly universities have social research centers and things like that. I was talking about more in depth than that and when some of the staff at the Community Research Institute showed us the ability to do mapping and bringing data alive at a block level, a household level, it was not from the standpoint of invading privacy, but "wow, if this neighborhood is having these kinds of issues in relation [00:45:00] to affordable housing, persons who are really needing public assistance, unemployment rates, maybe we ought to be providing services in that area. Maybe we ought to be offering youth employment services, maybe we can really figure out all this stuff." Because I didn't have, perhaps, the lingo, the correct language. It really took the faith and trust of the leaders here at Grand Valley to finally say, "Okay, does this look like what you want?" And the fact that Donna Van Iwaarden was the person who basically looked to me and said "you do realize, if we build the research capability, this is an institution that really believes in the education of students and I don't want to run counter to that, but we are really going to need dedicated staff. Can you help with [00:46:00] that?"

We have been happily providing in a partnership arrangement, financial support to the Center for Philanthropy for many years now, as well as for the Community Research Institute. Now the whole Center has become so connected with the Community Research Institute that the work that is going out in other areas of the Center, it really has fed into that. It was really trying to put the right words to what is the vision and trying to help people understand we really need to have



good information to make good decisions and what does that look like? It took some convincing and now I think every Grand Valley State University president from Don Lubbers to Mark Murray to now, Tom Haas, realized that it [00:47:00] is an essential resource and they are proud of it. And they should be.

(KA): One of the things I'm going to write about is two pieces that you hit on another grant, the tenacity of people in Michigan to stick with things for long periods of time and to work through problems when problems come up. I'm going to do a couple more of these before you move on. Can you talk a little bit about the role of money in Michigan? Kellogg has been a big funder, but could you do this in a place that didn't have a 'big uncle?' Can you talk about how Kellogg has used its money in ways that were useful?

(DS): Kellogg has the ability to really make things happen, I will put it out there. Certainly the vision of Russ [00:48:00] Mawby will continue to live on forever. His vision has come from, I would say, kindness in his heart; that giving people the ability to do things, not necessarily to lean on, but okay make it happen, and high expectations. I kind of think about that from time to time; his love came from his heart. When Joel and many others came out of that environment, even though Joel would write 17 pages of questions on a proposal, it came, we always would say, out of the love.

So I say that humorously but I would say that Kellogg has a history of working in partnership with its other [00:49:00] foundation partners in the state, and could this happen anywhere else without Kellogg? I have to say, not to the degree, and to be quite frank, not to the degree that it has. Could it happen? Yes. Could it happen if foundations in a particular area that didn't have a Kellogg or CS Mott Foundation, because really Mott was and has been and will continue to be a key leader as well, in particular, that it would take a real strength of foundation leaders in a given area to say, "We really need to convince a larger independent foundation to assist us." That might take some convincing. It took some convincing, frankly, back and forth with the Kellogg Foundation when it related to the growth. When we had the vision of growing community philanthropies [00:50:00] through community foundations, covering the state of Michigan was our vision and the Kellogg Foundation said, "You know, that's a great idea. We also want you to involve young people in philanthropy. That will really root it well." I would also say because of that condition, if you will, that that is why it has continued to work well in this state, because the condition was growing the pipeline for the next generation of philanthropic leaders and it was like, that is a great idea.

There are examples of other states in the United States that have had a large foundation helping to develop them and I would say it has been successful. I would say it is a completely different train of thought however and so [00:51:00] it's all good, not bad. I would basically say with the



strength and the wisdom of the Council on Michigan Foundations (which really was the convening place for community foundations and all other types of foundations, but community foundations in particular) and hand-in-hand with the Kellogg Foundation, I just look at... now we have covered the State of Michigan with community foundations. We have, in many places, still very active councils or committees of young people making grant decisions and developing, what I would say, leaders, and we have examples of young leaders now in the State of Michigan who are former members of these Youth Advisory Committees. What a gift Kellogg gave us. Hopefully it can continue to have that love coming out [00:52:00] of the heart like Russ Mawby has had.

(KA): Before we change gears completely, when you thought about today, was there anything else that you wanted to make sure got on the record about the experience of Michigan philanthropy, these infrastructure organizations and what might be both helpful and unique?

(DS): The Council of Michigan Foundations in particular that, as a Regional Association of Grantmakers, has gained a lot of strength in terms of the services it provides its members. It has not been without some pain. I would say that listening to members is really critical, and to understand what they need and what they want and really what those [00:53:00] members can bring to the table as well. It is a two-way street. I would say that the Grand Rapids Community Foundation could not have had the success that it has enjoyed and is continuing to enjoy had it not been for the strong moral support, intellectual support of the Council of Michigan Foundations. I will just say that. And added to that, I continue to be indebted to both Mott and to Kellogg Foundation as well, and under Kyle Caldwell's leadership, the Michigan Nonprofit Association is really gaining strength. It is a leader in this country and we do lean on them as a member with regard to policy information, understanding issues better as they affect not only ourselves but also, [00:54:00] I'm a big believer in the growth, not necessarily in the numbers, but the strength in the leadership of the nonprofit sector.

I am going to pause here a moment because what I would also like to say, having been a person whose entire career has been in the philanthropic nonprofit sector, the growth of the social sector as Jimmy Collins penned it... My personal belief is that we are an extremely strong sector and to not be discounted. When I sit in meetings with many persons from the for-profit business sector, their comments are often patronizing and "oh, those poor little things." I'm a big believer in the speaking up by saying, [00:55:00] "There is tremendous strength in this sector. Did you know that hospitals in the State of Michigan are not-for-profit? Did you know that universities and some private colleges are not-for-profits?" So when we talk about the nonprofit sector, understand that it is as diverse as somebody saying a blanket statement as the business sector (because then you all go into the whole thing of well you got the financial sector, the manufacturing sector, biomed sector). I just have to say it is important, as a foundation leader, to



really continue to advocate for the strength of leadership in the nonprofit sector and to grow the capacity of the sector to meet, what I would say, some of the largest problems facing our state, our country, the world.

(KA): [00:56:00] I want you tell me a story. I want to know one of your favorite fun stories. At some point, Robin has us in the back of her mind that we are all going to get together in a back room with drinks and tell the stories. But it has to be one you can share.

(DS): I had the good fortune back in the year 2000 of being selected to be a part of an exchange program, the Transatlantic Community Foundation Exchange Program, which was in its pioneer year. Regrettably it is no longer in existence, but it was a partnership of the King Bedouin Foundation in Belgium (which is a large community foundation), the CS Mott Foundation and a really great organization, the German Marshall Fund. [00:57:00] That was a selection of five people from the United States and five people from Europe and it was not a direct exchange, but our role was to go over to a particular area in Europe and vice versa here. We were focusing on just community foundations.

I had the good fortune of being asked to go to a little town in northern Italy called Lecco and at the time, and this person is still there, a gentleman by the name of Bernardino Casadei, who had traveled to the United States and connected up with the Council of Michigan Foundations, he wanted to learn everything he could learn about community foundations because he wanted to do this in Italy. Their system of bank conversions led to an [00:58:00] amazing amount of money to be able to do this.

I'm in northern Italy in the year 2000 (the context of the time was the fact that the stock market was still soaring, the tech bust had yet to occur) and Bernardino had some real plans for me. He was also my translator, which was quite interesting. Bernardino was quite taken at the time by a gentleman who was a leader, a community foundation leader in California by the name of Peter Hero. Peter Hero ran a foundation in Silicon Valley and Peter Hero was featured in Forbes magazine for having his foundation raising \$500,000 a day and really, what I would say, investing in the stock market as the venture capitalists in Silicon Valley would do. So here [00:59:00] I am, from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and we are doing great, we are doing great, we are not investing like venture capitalists in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

We are sitting in an organizing meeting in Monza, Italy and Bernardino says, "Tell your story." So I told the story of community foundations in Michigan and our investments and our philosophy and really what community foundations can do to communities. This was about my second week into this fellowship. Bernardino looked at me and smiled and translated for the group.



Beautiful Italian poured out of his mouth and then the words Peter Hero came out and I looked at him and said, "What did you just say?" "Well, I told them not to listen to you as far as investments are concerned, that we really needed to be aggressive like Peter Hero." [01:00:00] So the story was that he has and continues to be a leader in the Lombardy region in Italy, but he was certainly not translating my words. Bernardino was using me to translate his thoughts out to the groups around Italy.

He was nice enough, however, to bring me back about five or six years later to speak at a conference in Milan and by that time, he had been a little bit more toned down. The experience was great and Bernardino still thrives to this day. The fact of the matter is, I had also bought all these books about how to do business in Italy and there was this book about, "Italians are explosive, Italians do this" and so I'm reading this out loud to him in the car on one of the roads and he took the book out of my hand and threw it out the window. He said, "Those are [01:01:00] people in southern Italy." Whatever. [laughs]

(KA): Diana, so how did you get here? I'm just going to let you start. Were your parents models, did you learn in college, where did all this come from? You dedicated your whole life to this particular field as a whole and foundations in particular. Tell us your story.

(DS): My formative years were the 1960s. In the 1960s were the emergence of the Vietnam War, Civil Rights and Women's Rights. I was deeply influenced by that. I will say that my parents were definitely role models. They were persons who did allow for, what I would say, the open discussion. They were very conservative. I think that by the time that I hit junior high school, now known as middle school, [01:02:00] that — because my parents didn't influence me to the point of, you must share our opinions — I think with the war raging, which I didn't really understand all that well, but more importantly the Civil Rights Movement. I don't know how any person in the 1960s couldn't have been influenced by the Freedom Riders and by just the struggle and Martin Luther King and the passage of the Civil Rights Act and all that stuff that was going on. I started doing a lot of reading and so from junior high through high school, while I was a good student in all the appropriate things, I was also a good student of really trying to feel, what does it feel like?

I grew up in an affluent, suburban area in Detroit and I really wanted to understand [01:03:00] others' experiences. I volunteered one summer (and this again, wasn't because I was this naïve little white girl from this suburban area, I really wanted to learn). I volunteered for an entire summer at an elementary school in the core city of Detroit, in the east side of Detroit, and when Head Start was just starting (that tells you how long ago this was). I worked with primarily children who were from kindergarten to third grade whose motor skills were so not developed that they needed to learn how to walk and all that. I got to tell you, the teachers, the students, the



parents, it was a great time to be exposed to all that and to become friends, not just, “I’m here to help” but more, “I’m here to learn.” That [01:04:00] was a big moment in my life and I knew at that time that I wanted to get involved with something that meant I could really dig in and [create] social change.

I will tell you that every student across this nation who has ever applied to college or university has to always write an essay, and how many essays start with “I want to change the world?” Well I did. So I pursued a course of sociology and at that time, becoming a teacher because that is what women did in that era, something to fall back on and I took sociology. I was fascinated by sociology. It talked about all the things that were happening, why, with the emergence of Martin Luther King and how did that movement... Just fabulous time and I knew I wanted to get involved in somehow, [01:05:00] somehow. I was somewhat influenced in the seventh grade, I did write a paper about the fact that I wanted to be a social worker. Where that came from, I don't know. So then I, through a variety of circumstances and all that, I got a job when I moved here to Grand Rapids. I moved here to Grand Rapids to be married and then ultimately that didn't work out, but the career did. I was a caseworker at the American Red Cross during, what I would say, the last few years of the Vietnam War; my job was that of service to military families and veterans and disaster services, a great first job. A tremendous first job; I got to know systems and problem solving and working with people. I then wanted to go on to grad school and I did, and for a couple years I took courses [01:06:00] as an extended degree student and then finally had to dive in and do this full-time.

I got this wonderful opportunity to work with Pat Babcock, who at that time was a legislative aide to Governor Milliken, as well as a woman by the name of Pat Curran — both social workers but in a different way, a policy way. My degree is a Masters of Social Work but with a concentration in policy planning and administration, or as I say, back in the day it's the MBA of whatever. After grad school and after that wonderful internship I became, immediately upon graduation, an Associate Executive of the United Way of Kent County here in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to really learn and to execute social planning, allocations to agencies, [01:07:00] diving into issues, understanding leadership. It was a good training ground. I loved it and I became the head of the planning division and had learned what it was to be the head of something, working with other community leaders and learning about the interesting world of foundations.

I had heard and I had worked with people that had applied to the Kellogg Foundation, I thought, “How do you do that? How do you get to know people there?” I had heard on the horizon a little bit about the Council of Michigan Foundations, but at that time, this is in the 80s, still foundations were a concept to me, not a reality. I did get to know the woman who, at that time, was executive



director, then known, of the Grand Rapids Foundation; got to know the people who were leading the Steelcase [01:08:00] Foundation. Those were the two primary foundations in the Grand Rapids area and getting to know them and understand them. When Pat Edison decided to retire – and she still is a significant part of the Grand Rapids Community Foundation and truly a mentor and a really, a great person – I thought, “Well, what do I have to lose?” So I applied for the job and I got it.

Well, I had a part-time secretary at the time who realized that I was going to be serious about working and she decided that maybe she needed to do other things, so for six weeks of my life; one of the most social people I know sat at the Grand Rapids Foundation and said, “What am I going to do?” I will say, I poured [01:09:00] myself into understanding the history of the foundation, wrote the history, so I could have an understanding, along with two people I hired within four months of my coming on board, so that we could understand the culture of the foundation. They are still with me today, Lynne Black is our CFO and Marcia Rapp is our VP for Program. I will tell you that the three of us really made that place sing within a year – and it was already singing – and became connected to The Council of Michigan Foundations and other entities that were just like us around the state and realize the heart of who we are. Just like Russ Mawby’s heart and love, was the fact that we could do things in the community – not to denigrate grant making because it is at the core of who we are and what we do, but we could also do other [01:10:00] things. We could influence policy, we could get involved in issues and be a voice at the table, heck, we could create that community table and go out into communities, visit with neighborhood associations, understand how grant dollars are used. Gosh, and then along the way, how we could leverage those grant dollars with government dollars and how we can build those partnerships. So over the course of the last 25 years, we have grown tremendously, not out of ego but out of, *darn it all, we are going to make this work.*

I am feeling that certainly a large part of me is at the core of the foundation, along with a large part of our trustees and our staff, and we have a really committed and dedicated staff. I would say that I really love to speak out on [01:11:00] a variety of issues, not in a hurtful way but in a clarifying and educational way, but my roots of philanthropy, my roots of understanding social change go back to the little girl in the 1960s watching television, hearing on the radio, living through the riots in the city of Detroit and hearing the gunshots in the middle of the night – because we live that close to the border between the suburb I lived in and the city of Detroit – and then really wanting to understand more what’s going on here and let me put myself in the place of others so I can really understand; so that was my big influence.

(KA): When you think about these skills, and you got so many that you brought to the table, what kind of advice would you give my daughter, [01:12:00] who’s in her 30s, and now that her kids are



getting older, when you think about the actual skills of the job, what kinds of things do we you need to know how to do?

(DS): Well, I do believe that you do need a good knowledge background and I do believe that you need a good education. I still draw back on some of the things in particular that I learned in grad school and I still have some of those books sitting on my shelf, now more for, "Oh yeah, it is in there." So I will say that. But boy, I'll tell you, the biggest thing is still that empathetic thread and understanding critical problem-solving skills, not because you have to be the person that saves the world but [01:13:00] that you really can take apart a particular issue or problem. That really is more born by experience than anything. I would say to your daughter, read everything you can like I did back in the 60s and still do. Now we have so much information and as a person who is addicted to Facebook, Twitter and all things social media, my primary news source is links and reading the New York Times online and now, every daily newspaper online. Surround yourself with good information and be a curious person. That is something you are not going to learn, but that is something that, "Well now wait a minute, what's the basis of that? Let's learn more about that." It's a whole thing of continual learning and I know that I will be a continual learner until [01:14:00] the day the lights go out.

(KA): One area that I didn't ask you about that you brought up and I'm glad you did, is tell me about the board; about working with the board, the relationship between the board members, the power of the relationship — can you explore that a little bit for us?

(DS): It has taken me a number of years to be able to say that I really work arm in arm with the Board of Trustees. Our current Board of Trustees are the most tremendous leaders around and that is not hyperbole, it really is true. I would say in my beginning years, it was a board that didn't know how to work with the then executive director and an executive director who had never worked with a board either. One of the things that I learned how to do [01:15:00] out of the shoot, was going to meet with individual board members. I would say that I had struggles the first five years of me being president of the community foundation, not from people not wanting to do things, but there was a power dynamic and I would talk to them about "what is the role of the board, is policy and high-level activity. Your primary role is the hiring and firing of the leader and good fiduciary responsibility and governance, but we are going to do the staff work. This is what staff work is and this is what board work is."

I think a breakthrough for me frankly was back in the late '80s and early '90s, I asked Kathy Agard to come and [01:16:00] assist with the strategic planning process which had never been done before and insisted that our board members become a part of that. I think that the board then realized that this was an entity that wasn't just about meeting every other month and making



grant decisions, that there was more to this than that and sat up and they paid attention. My thing is that I have never taken my role for granted. I say that to my leadership all the time that I am there as their leader but also as the person who is their support, who listens and wants to listen. We are the executors, we are the implementers and we certainly want to have their good insight on policy matters and major decisions and [01:17:00] certainly be involved with strategy development to a degree. Now the leaders on our board are people who have had the experience of being on boards, on for-profit boards and larger nonprofit boards, so it isn't a matter of telling them this is board work and this is staff work, and this is what I would say a real strong partnership. It took years to develop that partnership and it took me of being able to have the confidence as a leader to be able to do that in a respectful manner.

(KA): Without giving a name, but a type, who is your favorite type of board member?

(DS): My favorite type of board member is, what I would say, the synthesizer. The person that gathers it all in and then is the person who, after a lot of discussion, will provide [01:18:00] the insight by saying — and the summarizer — “From what I've heard today, this is the insight that I will give the board, and I think we have agreed on this, correct?” There are two people in particular, a current board member and a former board member, who serve in that capacity, who by virtue of their — and let me tell you that these two people are significant leaders and they provide the vision and the aspiration and they provide the, what I say, positive momentum even when I have made a mistake, it's put in a way that says, “You know there's opportunity in this and let's move forward,” because there have been a lot of decisions that have been made by me and the foundation that haven't turned out the way that they're supposed to. These two individuals are people who understand that in order for us to really make change and to be about [01:19:00] change, you have to take risks and you have to make mistakes. So it is that kind of, that type who, the strength of their leadership isn't how much they talk or the volume of their voice. Don Lubbers and Margaret Sellars Walker.

(KA): So anything else you want to say? That you want to have on the record at Grand Valley, about philanthropy in Michigan, about your life in philanthropy, about the foundation?

(DS): Well, I will end with where I began. I am probably one of the most fortunate people around. I don't view my job as a job; I view it as my life's work. I do know how to go on vacation, however, and I do know how to have fun. [01:20:00] There isn't a day that goes by that I don't understand my good fortune. I constantly remind our superior staff that we don't have much time on this earth, so use the opportunity of being in an organization that is open enough to really want to listen and to make some significant change, to not just sit back and fill out a form and say, “Okay I've done a lot of work today,” but understand what it means to make a difference. It means going



out there and getting involved, talking to people, arguing, coming to peace with people and really being a model of what does it mean to be a strong community leader? That isn't about our ego, but is about our putting out there, what is best for, what I would say, the best part of our state [01:21:00] and the strength of our state.

The other piece in this – and it's probably not about philanthropy – is about building a real strong staff (and we have had the good fortune this last year of being honored in a variety of ways of really developing good staff and good morale). What I've learned in the past seven years is the fact that there isn't a day that goes by that I need to pay attention to that and that we need to measure that and we need to understand that; as well as making sure that all of us at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation embrace diversity, inclusion and change – and not just use words, but that we demonstrate it, we live it and we are it.

(KA): Thank you.

(DS): Thank you. [01:22:00]

