



## INTERVIEW WITH GILBERT HUDSON – OCTOBER 8, 2012

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

An interview with Gilbert Hudson on October 8, 2012. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded during the joint annual conferences of the Council of Michigan Foundations and the Michigan Nonprofit Association in Dearborn, Michigan. This interview is part of a series in the project, *Our State of Generosity* (OSoG). OSoG is a partnership of scholars, practitioners, and funders from four institutions – the Johnson Center; CMF; MNA; and MCSC – that collectively form the backbone of the state’s philanthropic, voluntary, and nonprofit infrastructure. OSoG’s mission is to capture, preserve, analyze, and share the developments, achievements, and experience that, over a period of 40 years, made Michigan a State of Generosity.

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

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

**Kathy Agard (KA):** ...Gil on the piece of history that you uniquely have. Could you tell us the story of how you became engaged with the Council of Michigan Foundations, why it was started and how you got invited to come? So go back to the 70s.

**Gil Hudson (GH):** Okay, well, in 1968 I was invited to join the board of the Hudson-Webber Foundation. So in 1973 the Hudson-Webber Foundation decided that it needed a full-time staff person, and I was invited to become that person and was very pleased to do that. I had been working for the J.L. Hudson Company for a number of years, and the family of the J.L. Hudson Company was responsible for the funds given to the Hudson-Webber Foundation. In 1973, when I became the staff [00:01:00] person for the Hudson-Webber Foundation, I first heard of the Council of Michigan Foundations. I hadn’t been aware of it before that, so I can’t give any history prior to that, but in 1973 I became aware of the Council

of Michigan Foundations and went to a conference, met people and became very interested in it. In 1971, they asked if I would become the chair of the organization. Leonard White, from the Kellogg Foundation, had been a long time involved in the Council, and he had been the chairman of the predecessor to the Council called the Conference of Michigan Foundations, which was an unincorporated voluntary association which became incorporated somewhere around 1972 I think. [00:02:00] Leonard served as the chair of that group for about three years, and he asked if I would serve as chair, and so in 1975 I accepted the offer and became chair of the Council.

The first thing that happened is, I got back to my office after I had agreed to become chair and I got a call from Sophia Gorham, who had been the part-time secretary keeping things going for the Conference of Michigan Foundations. She said “I’m so pleased that you have agreed to be the chair of the Council – or Conference at that time – but I’m sorry, I will have to be leaving. For personal reasons I have to give up this [00:03:00] position.” My heart went down into my feet at that point and so she said, “But I do have an idea though for you, there’s a person that I know of that I think would be good for this job, and I think this person might be interested in the job. So I might have somebody that could fill-in if you would like to interview this person.” I said, “I surely would like to interview this person.” So she said, “Her name is Dottie Johnson,” and so I said, “Well fine, we’ll arrange an interview.”

So I interviewed Dottie and I found her to be extremely intelligent and interested in philanthropy, and in the interview it became clear that she felt that she could make a [00:04:00] difference in organizing and helping further philanthropy in Michigan, if she were to take this position. So I hired her on the spot. [Laughter] I was very relieved to have such a fine candidate presented for the position, so nobody else was ever considered for the position. Dottie was it. The rest is history. Dottie has done a wonderful job for the Council, it got to be recognized nationally as well as locally, for the wonderful work that she had done in so many ways in furthering philanthropy. That was my good stroke of luck. I chaired the Council from 1975, when we incorporated from the Conference into the Council of Michigan Foundations [00:05:00] until about 1978. Those were the early growth years, and while we were coming up here registering, I asked how many people were going to be at this year's conference and they said 800 plus, I think. I can't really remember, but I'm not sure that it wasn't less than 100 when I first started to come to these conferences.

(KA): You know what I was struck by when I read some of the history, was how young everybody was. I mean Dottie was in her early 30s with two little children.

(GH): Yes, I was too, I was 39 I guess at the time, but Dottie was younger than that.

(KA): Did you have any inclination at the time that this would grow into what it's grown into?

(GH): No, at the time I just found that there [00:06:00] was just a wonderful philanthropic spirit in the state of Michigan, and there were a number of just wonderful people that were involved with the foundations -- both family and corporate, but mostly family at that time. These people that were involved were all go-getters, and were very interested in getting together and learning best practices and talking about what could be done to further philanthropy. We had a very strong core group of people. I doubt that



any of us had any idea what it might grow into. We knew that it was going to be good for us, even at the size that it was at that point, because there were a lot of bright people that we could share thoughts and ideas with and talk about the programs. I guess I never really [00:07:00] thought to dream about what it might evolve into that far down the road.

(KA): Just so you know, I'm going to try really hard not to laugh, giggle, or talk, just because I want your voice, but it's very hard for me. So if I'm doing a strange physical things, I want you know it's because I'm saying “good point,” but I'm just not saying it. Thank you, that's a really good summary of what happened, and something we needed to have on tape so I really appreciate that. During your tenure, at the time the public policy issues were around the '69 tax act probably. Was that settled when you started?

(GH): Well the '69 tax act [had] a lot to do with my being appointed a full-time staff person for the Hudson-Webber Foundation because all of a sudden, there was quite a bit more that the foundation had to be watchful for in terms of how we managed our affairs [00:08:00] and how we reported our activities, and also the amount of funds that we dispersed. So the '69 tax act had a lot to do with me getting involved in the foundation field as a staff person, and then joining with the Council of Michigan Foundations. There is one interesting experience that I do remember. We had the 1977 conference of the Council at the Dearborn Inn, not far from where we are here today. Ex-governor George Romney was at that conference and gave a very rousing speech, as he often did, and he got us all stirred up. He was talking about the importance [00:09:00] of philanthropy and government working together, and not being adversarial, and the importance of the foundations making the effort to get to know the government people and work with them, and to try to influence them to pass legislation that would be beneficial to foundations.

That was a major topic of conversation after his speech at that conference, and we talked about that amongst our whole group. That evening Dottie and I got together and said “Do you think we should prepare a proposal for the members for our session tomorrow morning, that CMF develop a proactive program to advocate for foundations with governments [00:10:00], both local and national?” At the meeting the next morning, Dottie and I put forth that concept to the members who were attending the conference, and there was getting to be some considerable enthusiasm for that. A man by the name of – I think his first name was Charles – Charles Strosacker stood up and said “Let's get cracking.” [Laughter] Right after that then the full membership unanimously approved CMF entering into a program where we would staff up and develop a proactive program, where we would set a bunch of objectives as to what we would like to accomplish, and then meet with governmental representatives, both [00:11:00] in the state and nationally, to try to influence their thinking, so that they would take a more favorable view than the 1969 legislation. There was continuing concern after the 1969 legislation that there might be even more restrictive regulations put on foundations, and so we felt it was timely to do that.

(KA): Interesting to me how positive a statement that is after having been, sort of whacked by the government, that the response would be okay, well then, let's get to work and you all did that.

(GH): Well then we had a number of people in the Council that were well placed in the Republican Party, and were involved politically. That made for contacts to be more easily obtained, [00:12:00] and for influence to be more easily spread.



(KA): You’ve made the calls in Washington, haven't you?

(GH): To be honest, I never did make the calls. By the time those got going I was no longer the chair of CMF, and for one reason or another I just never did become involved in that activity.

(KA): That set the agenda which is really great thing. I hadn’t heard that part of the story before, that’s very helpful.

(GH): Well I brought a little article with me that might shed some on that.

(KA): Had you been involved with the Foundation before you were appointed to be the staff person?

(GH): Yes, I had been elected to the board of the Hudson-Webber Foundation in 1968 and I became a full-time staff person in 1973. So I had had five years of experience. [00:13:00]

(KA): Gil, did you come back on the CMF board?

(GH): Actually, I think I was continuously on the board until 2002, with the exception of a one-year hiatus. There was a policy developed over a period of years that an individual would serve two three-year terms, I believe, and then you would have to take a hiatus before you could be considered for reelection to the board. So I did have a one-year hiatus in there, but I think I served until 2002 on the board.

(KA): So you have really seen the development, especially at the board level, but also the organization as a whole. Can you talk a little bit about the nature – you have been on other boards as well – but the nature of the CMF board as a whole? I will tell you as a staff member, one of the things I’ve always been impressed with is how thoughtful the board is, and yet not disagreeable. So could you chat a little bit about (you know there are a lot of risky projects [00:14:00] that came out of that group) the nature of the discussion, what it was like?

(GH): Well, going back to the fairly early days, the board was this volunteer board and this board of people that were most enthusiastic about furthering the state of philanthropy in the state of Michigan in particular. The people were people that would roll up their sleeves and get involved, and we have a lot of very good conversations, but when we came to a vote, I think I remember every vote being unanimous. Everybody would get behind a concept, and everybody would commit to whatever the particular project was. We had people on the board that were business people, people that were philanthropists. We had people that were staff people [00:15:00] of foundations, and it was a very nice mix of people. There was no domination one way or another, but it was a very good, thoughtful group of very sharp people, very committed people.

I would like to just comment on the fact that I think the Kellogg Foundation should definitely be commended for getting the Council of Michigan Foundations going. Russ Mawby is sort of the grandfather of the Council of Michigan Foundations. Before I became involved, I’m sure he did a lot



personally to get people to start meeting together and to nurture them along and to encourage them to get together for periodic meetings. Russ made available an officer of the foundation: Leonard White. Leonard was a very good first chair of the organization once it became formalized and incorporated. Through the encouragement and support of the Kellogg Foundation, I think a great deal happened. They also provided considerable financial support to the organization, and to various projects that were generated by the Foundation. So I think the Kellogg Foundation should receive a great deal of credit for the development of the Council.

(KA): Yours is a substantial foundation and but not as huge as Kellogg. Did you ever feel like they were trying to set the agenda for the state as a smaller foundation than [00:17:00] them? Kellogg was this big huge Foundation. As a foundation that is smaller than they are, did you ever feel like they were trying to set an agenda?

(GH): Never. I always felt that they were just trying to encourage collaboration and trying to encourage the other foundations, whatever their interests were, to come together and to share what they were doing, and to educate others, and just to work collaboratively. I never felt any pressure from Kellogg.

(KA): As the big one in the room. So you would've been on the board when there was the effort to increase and improve philanthropy at these two committees that were set up. Why would foundations care about those two issues. What was the nature of CMF putting [00:18:00] its shoulder behind increasing and improving philanthropy?

(GH): All right. My memory is going back 37 years.

(KA): We'll take what you remember, because you have the only memory of it. So that's good.

(GH): I'm a little bit challenged on that.

(KA): I think Russ had chaired both committees, and one of the things that was of interest to me was the fact that there were two different ones, one on increasing and one on improving. A lot of these initiatives came out of those two committees, I don't know if that helps a little bit but that was the context...

(GH): Well, the increasing was to get more foundations developed in the state and to get more of those that were developed involved in trying to further professionalize their activity. The initiative to develop community foundations throughout the state of Michigan was an ultimate outgrowth of that. [00:19:00] I think that Michigan was the first state in the country where every county in the state was represented by a community foundation. The Council of Michigan Foundations was largely responsible for that, because there were many areas of the state of Michigan that did not have community foundations. Dottie Johnson took that on as one of her projects (with board support) and got people together throughout the state of Michigan in their various communities to decide to develop a community foundation, or for a county that might not be very populous, to join in with a nearby county that had a community foundation (so that they would have a community foundation that would represent more than one county, particularly in the Upper Peninsula). [00:20:00]



(KA): You were involved in the development of the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, right?

(GH): Well I was involved at the very early stage.

(KA): Could you tell us a little bit about that? Here we had a big area that had no community foundations.

(GH): Well, John Marshall, who was president of the Kresge Foundation and on the board of the Council, had previously worked for a community foundation in Rhode Island I believe. He was quite aware of the value, having worked at that Rhode Island community foundation, of having a community foundation, and he was concerned that we did not have an active community foundation in the southeastern Michigan. We were all aware of the Cleveland Foundation, which is not too far away, and the great work that they were doing. That was sort of the example [00:21:00] that we all thought of as *why doesn't Detroit have something?* Here Cleveland is a smaller city than Detroit and they have this huge community foundation that is just doing great work. There was an organization called something like “The Detroit Community Fund” that had been in existence for some many years, and it had developed in its early days some corpus, which was quite modest, but the foundation really had not been employed. It had a board that was not trying to really pursue the development of that foundation. It was pretty stagnant.

John Marshall thought that maybe we could do something to either get that foundation activated or to create a new one. [00:22:00] He called together a meeting of Dottie and myself and the three of us spent some time, I remember, in my office, and the three of us discussed how we might think about this concept and we all agreed without any hesitation, that we should do something for Southeastern Michigan, particularly Detroit was our focus. At that time we decided who would be the best person that we could think of to lead this effort? Amongst the three of us, we agreed that my brother Joe Hudson would be the best person to lead an effort to try to establish a revitalized or a new community foundation, because he had a very strong business contacts in the community and he was very philanthropically involved and very involved in civic ways. [00:23:00] We talked to him and he agreed that he would be interested and willing to do that, so that was pretty much the extent of my involvement is up until that point. When my brother got involved, he took the ball and ran with it.

(KA): What is it now, about \$200 million?

(GH): Oh I think it's \$600 and some million. When they first got started, what they did is they talked to the group that was managing the Detroit Community Fund to throw their lot in with the new community foundation, and so they turned over their assets to the new community foundation.

(KA): Did CMF and Dottie play an important role in that, or a secondary role?



(GH): Dottie played an important role in that. She gathered information from around the country about community [00:24:00] foundations, how they were organized, how they operated, and she provided that information to my brother, and to people that my brother had originally gotten together to serve.

By the way, just going back to Dottie's involvement, this was a typical example of how Dottie and the Council of Michigan Foundations furthered philanthropy in the state. [00:25:00] She was very active in helping the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan in getting established, and her work was very helpful in getting that going. This has been done over and over and over throughout the state of Michigan, getting community foundations established. This is probably the biggest effort. There were many other successful community foundations that were established with great help from Dottie and from the Council.

(KA): You have been really good, Gil, at spotting talent and working in the right direction with Dottie, and selecting your brother, and with the efforts that you have been in. One of the things I'm trying to capture in the project is the nature [00:26:00] of leadership and the fact that we don't seem to have people who fight, people seem to get along. Can you talk a little bit about, as you observed Dottie and Russ and yourself and Ranny, what kind of behaviors have the senior leaders in Michigan brought to the work? I'm looking at the nature of leadership itself.

(GH): Right. It seems to me the people that have been involved at the Council have all been people that have been interested in teamwork, and have encouraged collaboration. In my experience at the Council, we never had people who led forcefully by dictate, or who went down their own path without full consultation with the board [00:27:00] and without full agreement. It seems to me that the people that have been involved have all felt that they should lead by example in how they managed their own affairs, and their own foundation, but also for developing a team approach to whatever has been agreed upon should be the direction.

(KA): When you are coaching a new young professional, somebody coming in say to Detroit to one of the new foundations, or is new to the work, what kinds of advice do you give them about doing this work, about being successful? What do you think the young people need to know?

(GH): That's a good question and [00:28:00] I'm not sure how well I can answer that, but my feeling is that the people have to be committed number one, to whatever they're doing. And that they need to put their efforts in where they feel they're the most committed, and where their board is fully behind them, and that they really need to consider this teamwork approach that we've been talking about to developing others who might share similar interests. A foundation can only do so much by itself, but a foundation can start something that has maybe never been tried before; but it is only likely to be successful as other people are drawn in [00:29:00] and brought along and feel that they are a part of the program. When I was active at the Hudson-Webber Foundation, I was involved in a number of collaborative efforts where we got a group of different foundations that had interest in the subject matter to come together and share ideas and develop a program that we could all participate in. Maybe one of the latest examples of that (that I was not involved in) is the New Economy Initiative that Dave Egner, who is current president of



the Hudson-Webber Foundation, is the president of that organization, as well as the president of the Hudson-Webber Foundation.

(KA): I think it is wonderful that you have made his time available to do that. It's a great gift.

(GH): Well we felt this was a very important activity for the [00:30:00] Southeastern Michigan community and it furthered a number of the same interests that the Hudson-Webber Foundation has, so our board felt very comfortable in sharing our president with that initiative and so that the two of them could have the same staff person. We thought that would work well and our experience to date has been very positive. We are very happy with the way that's worked out.

(KA): Especially when you have a talented person like David, it's really good to do it. One of the things also that I've been sort of writing about and exploring is the fact that a lot of these things the CMF board approved were really risky ventures. I mean, they hadn't been done before, they were brand-new, so how did everybody get the courage to do this kind of risky... Were you worried that we would fail? [00:31:00]

(GH): I don't think we were ever worried we would fail, but we weren't always sure just how a project would evolve. We picked areas that we thought were important. We had Dottie Johnson on staff to oversee these efforts, and we felt wonderful confidence that Dottie would be able to oversee these efforts, and we had some terrific staff people that were appointed to each of these projects. I remember you are one of those people. Let's see, it was the education...

(KA): It was MCFYP that I did, (we're kind of mixed up) and then the youth grant-making and the Learning to Give.

(GH): Excuse me for my slip in memory as to exactly, but I can remember what a wonderful job that you did for those two projects that you were involved in, and we had good fortune to have good staff leadership for each of the projects [00:32:00] that we went into.

(KA): Yeah, I always felt that we could do it because we all felt confidence that the board would not come down on us negatively if something went wrong. It was a really nice partnership, between the board members and the staff members. It was really good. I want to change tone just a little bit because we only have a few minutes left. I like you to tell me, Bob Payton from Indiana University used to call it, your philanthropic biography. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about you? We would like to write a little profile about you and maybe you could tell us about how you were raised, were your parents actively engaged (certainly the foundation would indicate maybe that they had some interest). Were you born in Detroit?

(GH): No. Actually, I was born in Buffalo, New York. My father's father had run a department store in Buffalo, New York, and my father succeeded him in running that. My father's father was a brother of J.L. Hudson [00:33:00] who started the J.L. Hudson Company in Detroit, and he had sent his brother to Buffalo to run a store that he had bought in Buffalo. Anyhow, my father decided to stay in Buffalo and we were born and raised in Buffalo. My father was very involved in the civic life of Buffalo, but we were not



involved in philanthropy at that time. My father was very civically oriented. I came to Detroit in 1956 to work as a trainee for the J.L. Hudson Company, and when I got to Detroit, and got to know the Webber family I learned how involved they were in the civic life of the community. They had established three foundations, which ultimately became the Hudson-Webber Foundation. I learned at that time the J.L. Hudson Company, the founder of [00:34:00] the company had been probably the most philanthropic person in the city of Detroit at the time when he was successfully developing the J.L. Hudson Company. He had started all sorts of initiatives in Detroit, and was involved in almost every civic and community activity, and he was a very generous man personally and gave a great deal to many causes.

(KA): Can you pinpoint where that came from? Was it religious belief? Did the money get made during his lifetime?

(GH): He had made all of the money in his lifetime. He had grown up in Ionia, Michigan and his father had had a small department store in Ionia, Michigan. He left to come to Detroit and had worked for a company by the name of Mabley & Company [00:35:00] and had become very successful in managing that company, and then decided to go out on his own. He was really a self-made man and he made whatever money he had through his own resources. He was very philanthropically inclined, and he imbued in his nephews, the Webber brothers, who succeeded him in the management of the company, this philanthropic and civic spirit. So it was catching when I started to work for the company. This is part of the family history and I felt that it was very important and very commendable, and so I became interested in philanthropy myself through that family experience.

(KA): What have been some of your own, not necessarily the foundation's [00:36:00] interests, but what are some of your personal philanthropic interests? Where's your passion about causes?

(GH): Well the organization that I worked with for the longest, and was probably most passionate about, was Children's Hospital of Michigan. I served on their board for well over – well I'm still on part of their board. The hospital now has become part of a private, for-profit corporation, but they still have an adjunct board that I'm on. At any rate that was my major interest, and I served in many different roles on that board, for many different years. I was also involved in a number of other civic activities that really came through the foundation as opposed to [00:37:00] initiatives that I might have otherwise selected on my own. I brought along a little bio that lists what some of those organizations were.

(KA): And now you have grown children and grandchildren. Have you tried to instill this ethic in them and how you done that?

(GH): That's a very good question. That is very important. I must admit that in the early days I didn't really know how to go about doing that. Then you developed a Learning to Give program which really set the model for the state and for the country actually, I think, in how to do that. I have made some efforts in that connection, [00:38:00] but I can't say that I have been as organized about it as I might have been. But I'm very fortunate that I have my daughter Jennifer here with me today, and she followed in the footsteps of civic involvement, and was involved in projects in the city of Detroit, which have helped with the revitalization of the city of Detroit. Then she was invited to join the board of the Hudson-Webber



Foundation, and succeeded me as chair of the Hudson-Webber Foundation, which she has been now for probably seven or eight years.

(KA): It is amazing how you teach without knowing you are teaching.

(GH): So I guess some of that has rubbed off on my daughter there, which was very pleasing.

(KA): With the limited amount of time left I have two questions that I want to ask you. [00:39:00] One is if there is anything that I haven't asked you, that you want to make sure that gets on the record about this sort of extraordinary period that we both have lived through about the development of philanthropy and the organizations in Michigan.

(GH): Nothing in particular, but I just can't think of how philanthropy would've evolved in this state without the Council of Michigan Foundation side. I don't think that it would be nearly as much philanthropy. I don't think – well it goes back to the increasing and improving, way back to the early roots. I don't think we would have as much organized philanthropy in the state, by far, as we do without the Council and I don't think that it would be nearly as professionally managed. I just can't say enough about the work that [00:40:00] the Council of Michigan Foundations has done in encouraging and developing and helping to organize philanthropy in this state.

(KA): My last one is do you have any favorite CMF stories?

(GH): None come to mind right at the moment.

(KA): You can call me later and say okay, this is one I want to tell on Russ or Ranny. Thank you. You were great. I really appreciate your time.

(GH): A pleasure.

