



INTERVIEW WITH JIM KETTLER – 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 Jim Kettler on October 8, 2012. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded during joint annual conference 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): I like to, at the beginning of the tape, to start with just a little orientation for the people who might see this about your relationship, and the four organizations that we're looking at. So your relationship to CMF, the Michigan Nonprofit [00:01:00] Association, Michigan Community Service Commission, and The Johnson Center on Philanthropy, but we don't expect you to have relationships with all four of them, just give us a little orientation about how you... So why don't we start there? Just tell us a little bit about how you relate to those organizations or one of those organizations.

Jim Kettler (JK): The Council of Michigan Foundations is my base organization for relationship here, and that started, as you know, 40 years ago. Prior to that, about two years in the making, in terms of having representation from various areas of the state of Michigan from foundation people, of representation of foundation people, who were really responding to the Tax Reform Act of 1969. That was a wake-up call for foundations where the [00:02:00] federal government – names like Wright Patman

and a few others come to mind – where there were some blatant abuses of foundations' abilities with their funds that were made public. That prompted further talk in change of rules which could have increased taxation, could've eliminated foundations at the end of that road if it were left to go. There were folks here in Michigan who saw that quite clearly, and I would have to acknowledge the Kellogg's foundation role in that and Leonard White and Russ Mawby, who we talked about a little bit ago.

Leonard was really the person to try and find people in the foundation world who could get together with some sense of common purpose, so I simply happened to be at the right place at the right time. I was with a small foundation in Flint [00:03:00] called the DeWaters Charitable Trust. Enos DeWaters, you've never heard of, but he was the second chief engineer at the Buick Motor Car Company and he made a good deal of money based on General Motors stock and things like that. He had no children, and he and his wife gave virtually all of their money to charity, either during their lifetimes or afterwards. So I was called upon to manage that and also another, the Mallery Charitable Trust. Nobody ever heard of Harvey J. Mallery, but he was the chief accountant for Buick, and he also participated in the great stock program that General Motors had at that time. My inclusion, in terms of the early days of the Council of Michigan Foundations, I think was probably related to being [00:04:00] from Flint, Michigan, and being involved in philanthropy, and Leonard and Russ Mawby knowing that these factors throughout the state had to move forward if we were going to speak with any sort of a common voice. That has been my role.

(KA): Do you remember the call in those early meetings? This is wonderful, this is exactly what we need to hear. Can you tell us about the first meeting you went to or how did you get the call to go?

(JK): My memory probably doesn't serve, but number one, I was flattered to be invited. I was literally a new kid on the block at that time and of course, the large foundation in Flint was the Mott Foundation, as it continues to be. They, of course, came into the Council of Michigan Foundation, but were not there as an initial part of it. [00:05:00] So, I think it was sort of a getting to know you and I mean, who are these people? Who is Alpena, Michigan? Who is Grand Rapids? Who is Detroit? And all these sorts of things. When there was enough common denominator, there was a comfort level, as I recall, that was reached in terms of continuing on and discussing other possibilities.

I recall through that process – and it wasn't earlier on, but to me I think it was important – it came up for discussion as to whether, whatever it would be called, the Council of Michigan Foundations should be organized on a regional basis. In other words, Flint and counties, Detroit, Grand Rapids, and so forth. It was obviously [00:06:00] not done, and I think with good reason. Because I believe the reticence on the part of some foundations to become involved with the discussions and the process, was probably some question as to whether there would be any giving away of their ability to make their own grants. I mean these were all individualists, you look at the Dow family and the Mott family and Kellogg, Sebastian Kresge, and so on down the line. These were people – Skillman – and their families that came up making decisions on their own and felt... Charles Stewart Mott felt very strongly about making his own decisions. When it became apparent that the organization [00:07:00] was not out to try to tell other foundations how to make their grants, that that was never the intent, I think there was a sigh of relief and a willingness to continue on in that regard. Had it gone to some regional collective if you would, it would increase the potential for that decision-making process to be different.



(KA): That is a great insight and not one that I've heard from anyone else.

(JK): Well I don't know if you want to publish it or not Kathy.

(KA): It makes good sense about how it turned into what it turned into. That's great. Did you know Harding Mott and Stanley Kresge? Were they at the meetings?

(JK): Yes, I knew Harding Mott well and when I was head of the Ruth Mott Fund, he was on my board. He was actually Mrs. Mott's son-in-law, [00:08:00] same age as Mrs. Mott. Mrs. Mott was C.S. Mott's fourth wife, Harding was a child of the first marriage of C.S. Mott. So I knew them both and Stanley Kresge.

I will relate a story that I've previously related, one of my memories. Probably it would not have done much good for me to have a recording, but I found myself for lunch at one of these meetings seated between Stanley Kresge and the senior David Hunting, which is Steelcase out of Grand Rapids. Here's Grand Rapids, here's Detroit. I'm not sure if the gentlemen had ever talked with each other or met each other before, but both on in years at that point in time. I was seated between them and I remember saying, "Well if you would like to sit next to each other [00:09:00], I will move." "Oh no, you can sit there." So here I am listening to this over lunch, this discussion of two real giants in philanthropy coming from different locations. But you could see the mutual respect, that I remember, and that to me was somewhat illustrative of what CMF has done and allowed to happen, and that is to have people who might never have been seated at the same table – which is what our luncheon was in good part about today – be seated at the same table and find that there are common denominators. No one was threatening one another. And so that stands to me as one of those being at the right place at the right time in the midst of some big people.

(KA): In that case you were representing a much smaller foundation to those foundations, and you still felt welcomed. [00:10:00]

(JK): That's right. I felt welcomed to that discussion. I'm sure there are other illustrations, that one just happens to stand out for me.

(KA): How long did you stay on the board Jim? At CMF? Were you there when it was incorporated?

(JK): Yes I was. How long after that, I probably did... I'm trying to think of the job I had after the DeWaters Charitable Trust. I went to Citizens Bank to head up their charitable trust area, and things of that nature. My guess is that I could've left CMF about that time, that would've been a good four years anyways, 3 to 4 years, so I think that was probably right. I'm not sure.

(KA): Do you think the founders had any indication of what this might become [00:11:00], when you were putting it together? Could you see where it was headed?



(JK): The short answer is no. The initial purpose was to speak as a single voice in terms of potential legislation, potential increased taxation, and things like that. To see it expand to how many people are here, 750? To see it expand to this now, inclusive of other nonprofits and things of that nature. I can't imagine that that would've been a vision of hardly anyone at that point in time.

(KA): I did talk with John Hunting, because he of course was a very young grantmaker at the time. I spent maybe a half hour with him and it had struck me – I said this to Gil Hudson this morning – about how young everybody was. At the start of CMF [00:12:00] people were in their 30s, they had enough experience that they brought their experience, but really they were still very young professionals

(JK): How I landed in that first job in philanthropy with the DeWaters Trust... I had had experience in business, and I have had brief experience in managing a tax-exempt organization. The DeWaters Charitable Trust had a fixed life, they had to distribute everything within 25 years after the death of the donor, which was patterned after a Detroit trust, I think it was the Cousins Trust. They said basically, spend it in 25 years and then let somebody else do the work. At any rate, they were faced, after several years, with more money than they knew they had, and they were looking for somebody, because this was run by Michigan [00:13:00] National Bank at that time, looking for somebody who had some business experience and knew something about the community. Well, I happened to be there and it looked like an interesting place to go, so that's what I did.

(KA): I always laugh, all of us wandered in from somewhere else, nobody really intends...

(JK): No, you don't go to school for philanthropy.

(KA): You have, both from your business perspective and now spending these years observing and being a part of CMF, one of the things I've been interested in, and that I think may be a national model, is the quality of leadership in the state. So one of the things I wanted to talk with you about, is as you have seen your peers and worked on the board and watched CMF, can you describe in behavioral terms what Russ does and Dottie has done and Rob, what do they do that makes Michigan work the way that it has? If you don't think it does work that's okay too. [00:14:00]

(JK): Well it works, but that is a tough one. There is a phrase, and maybe I'm going to it a little too quickly, but I think it perhaps is illustrative of the attitude of the leadership in the foundation area in Michigan. When I first went into philanthropy with the DeWaters Trust, Mr. DeWaters used the phrase in some giving – oh there is a dormitory named after he and his wife at Kalamazoo, there is a DeWaters Art Center in Flint – and I read the old newspaper articles, and he said he considered philanthropy to be a rare privilege, two words. In other words he had no idea that he would have the wherewithal, and he [00:15:00] knew that it was indeed rare, and indeed a privilege to be able to do that. The converse of that is people getting into themselves a little too much, because they do have the wherewithal, or access to the wherewithal, to make changes and maybe get a little too bludgeoning along the way. That's not the word I would've hoped to use, but getting a little bit too forward and never getting above their grantees, and never getting above their peers, and things of that nature. I wouldn't just use that to describe them, I've seen a good deal of that with CMF leadership in one form or another. I have seen a little bit of the other



side of it, not much. Mostly people [00:16:00] don't get out of themselves, we'll put it that way, they don't become blatant and they don't become bruising in their grantmaking. Russ and Dottie were exactly like that. They were quite willing to give credit to somebody else, and so I think that, as an attitude, would have been a factor and one that I believe continues now. I really do.

(KA): I do too. And one that I'm hoping that by getting some of this down, that we can help to use this as an orientation to the people coming into the state.

(JK): I haven't found a better phrase and I have worked for foundations, I've been on foundation boards and things like that, but it's not in my family that these funds came from, and I think and I hope that has been a bit of guidance for me along the years. It is a rare privilege to be able to do that. [00:17:00]

(KA): Did you get engaged in some of CMF's public policy work? You mentioned that that was one of the reasons for the forming, public policy. Have you gone to Washington, have you been part of that whole...?

(JK): Early on I was, I believe to Washington once. I haven't been on regularly to Washington trips. I've been able to have some contact with local politicians, whether it has been helpful or not, I don't know. I know public policy was important, it continues to be important, but I haven't been as active in the public policy issues as, thankfully, many have.

(KA): When you have conversations with people in your home district, have the legislators known very much about philanthropy? What's been their reaction?

(JK): Way back when (primarily because of [00:18:00] the Mott Foundation) legislators were generally aware that philanthropy had been pretty important in the Flint, Michigan area. They look at the Community School Concept, they look at everything like that, and they knew where that came from, so I would say they were aware. But I think it was important to remind them that the Mott Foundation wasn't the only kid on the block, I mean, there were other good things happening through other foundations in that area, in that region. That may have been helpful just making sure they had annual reports in front of them and "Thought you'd be interested Mr. Senator," and representative and so forth.

(KA): It's interesting to me that, talking about wealth, that all was created out of one auto industry wasn't it? That not just one foundation came out of the auto industry.

(JK): It's not unlike the Dow people [00:19:00] in Midland, you look at all the families, the Strockers, the Gerstackers, Bob Allen, in addition to the Dows and the various branches there. The short answer is it really spewed out.

(KA): It's a wonderful thing for a community. One of the things that I'm going to write about is using a little bit of money to leverage change, and how people think that it takes huge, big grants. Would you chat a little bit about that? Have you seen projects where small investments have made some major impact?



(JK): I'm harkening back, let me first go back to the DeWaters Trust. I seem to going back to that more than I thought I might. [00:20:00] We had the latitude, as a private foundation to – I don't want this to be put negatively – not be encumbered by say, political processes and things of that nature. We had a very good scholarship fund, which brought other money, in this case into the Flint Board of Education which was, I believe, very helpful and significant. We had another project, I recall, that went directly to teachers instead. "You have a little project in your classroom that might be [00:21:00] \$1,000 or \$2,000 that you would like to have support for." We got a wealth of requests and we made these grants and that sprung forth other things that may have been expanded to other things in the school system.

The third one there, the biggest grant we made was that at the time the University of Michigan was contemplating moving its campus to downtown Flint. They had to go through, of course, the political process, they being the U of M. Mott Foundation had not made a commitment to them. We made a commitment for \$1 million and this was huge, this was way out of our realm, but we thought it was important enough to do that, and we put that on the table. When they talked to some local legislators, and then the Mott Foundation came in shortly [00:22:00] thereafter. I doubt that we prompted it, but we eased the path just a little bit with that one.

The Welch Foundation, which I have been on too long, and will be leaving next year, finally. [Laughter] We have the goal of supporting projects for young people, programs for young people that might not be available through the regular course of events or whatever. We supported, for a number of years, for instance, The Flint Science Fair (which is now regional), allowing people to participate not only locally, but at an international level with science projects, and we continue to support that. We have supported [00:23:00] a program for young people with the Flint Institute of Music, which has grown into one of the largest in the United States in terms of participation. It might be teaching lessons that might be, whatever. But it has been gratifying to see the expansion, not that we have stopped supporting it, but that more support has come in from other directions, somewhat as a result of maybe what we did. There would be a couple examples of those sorts of things.

(KA): You've raised a question also that I've been looking at, and that is the great case of the U of M Campus, where you all made a decision to really take a risk. It was a big grant and to be out there to make something happen. Over CMF's history there has been this history also of just kind of stepping out and doing things that haven't been done before. [00:24:00] Could you reflect just a little bit about the willingness of CMF and CMF's board members to take on big, risky things and not to be afraid?

(JK): I think probably the reason for it is the success that has been enjoyed here locally, or a factor. It might be Dottie Johnson or Rob Collier saying "Look, we've done all this, we can be helpful by expanding what we have done and so forth." So that ultimately goes back to the board because, ultimately, it is a board decision as to whether you are going to go forward with that. I do think that the successes that were realized over the years, not necessarily just the early years, but over the years, can prompt that sort of activity. And [00:25:00] probably Rob or Dottie might've had a dollar in their pocket that maybe would help that process along from some foundation that thinks like them or whatever. That's what I would say. You build on your successes and expand from that point.



(KA): Often they did have a little bit. Enough to get people's interests like your million dollars, just to open the door a little bit. Would you mind sharing with us a couple of your favorite Michigan philanthropy stories? You've watched the sector for a long time and when you swap stories of people what kind of things have come to mind about people or events?

(JK): Well we've got to think out-of-the-box, right? This might not have much to do with philanthropy, but it does in a sense. I was invited [00:26:00] as the executive director of the Ruth Mott Fund to attend a session in Ann Arbor which President Ford and President Carter cooperated on after their terms were through. They would meet in alternate years down at Emory University they would meet for President Carter in Ann Arbor and they would discuss international issues. The Ruth Mott Fund was involved at that point with international security as one of its programs, so that allowed me to get out of the house and go to various places in the country and it was very interesting, a great growth period for me personally.

At any rate, I was queued up for this breakfast, and I turned around behind me is President Ford. I said, "President Ford, welcome back to Michigan." He said "Oh, how wonderful" and I told him I was from Flint, and the Ruth Mott Fund [00:27:00] and so forth. He said, "Let's sit down together. I want to talk about Michigan." Now here were all these Zgibniew Brzezinski and you name it, people wanting to get on his elbow, and he wanted to sit down and talk about Michigan. We talked in large measure about environment and his parting shot, which is still applicable today, he said "you know, Michigan would do well if academia in the state would get together and work hard on finding a solution to desalinating the ocean's water." We're about 1,000 miles from an ocean, but his desire to protect the integrity of the Great Lakes was clear at that point in time, and that continues to stick with me. Would it be a worthy project for Michigan universities, academia, [00:28:00] to cooperate on, to try and do that to protect the Great Lakes? Not that it's not important to keep carp out of the Great Lakes, things of that nature, I am not demeaning that, but he was really thinking about the integrity of our water supply.

Let me tell you another story, and it introduced me to a bigger world of philanthropy. It was my first trip to New York City after I was with the Ruth Mott Fund, and I flew in on a Monday morning, it was 1980 and it was almost to the day 32 years ago. At any rate, I arrive in New York City and I take a taxi to the hotel I was staying at, and I unpack and I walked to every place in New York [00:29:00] I want to visit. I was walking down Central Park South, and there was this commotion ahead of me. So I stopped, and out of this hotel comes Luciano Pavarotti dressed as Christopher Columbus and there is this steed, the biggest horse I've ever seen. It is Columbus Day and he is Grand Marshal of the Columbus Day parade in New York City and so I wait for his entourage and he mounts his horse, he has three steps to go up this platform, great big out guy, big plumed hat, dressed like Christopher Columbus. I go on and there is this parade that is forming and I hear sirens and I look and here comes a couple cops in a limousine with the window open and this fellow waving. [00:30:00] It's President Carter who was running for reelection in 1980, defeated by Ronald Reagan. Here before noon in New York City, I see Luciano Pavarotti and the president of the United States. I said "Jim, this is pretty good. This sort of works." Now, that has very little to do with philanthropy, but I went on to make visits to other foundations and things like that. I guess you need something a little bit different than that for...



(KA): No, I think that's perfect because I really think it talks to of experience many of us have had of just being amazed at being surrounded or having opportunities to have that experience.

(JK): Well, I've had the privilege of having some wonderful board members and it's the people who count in the final analysis. Helen Milliken was on my board; Norman [00:31:00] Cousins, head of Saturday Review, advisor to presidents, and things of that nature; plus members of the Mott family; and this goes on, my gracious. George Woodwell from Woods Hole, Massachusetts. And that, I mentioned briefly, was a period of great growth for me in large measure because of the board that I was able to work with when I was there.

(KA): What kind of advice do you give when you have young people or members of your family that come up to you and say "I'd really like to have these experiences, or I'd like to be in this kind of a job," about how to be successful in this work? What do you think helps to make...?

(JK): Number one, I think it's important – it was pointed out today – to be active in wherever you are in a volunteer community. As a volunteer, before I got hired in philanthropy, I was on [00:32:00] boards with automobile executives, I was on boards with community service people, I was on boards with bankers, and I was on boards with you name it. I would still suggest that as a starting point that may lead to something in philanthropy. If you're in the right place at the right time, and you get lucky, and things like that. That's where I would start, voluntarily.

(KA): One of the things we want to get on tape as well – Bob Payton, who founded the Indiana Center on Philanthropy, Bob calls it your philanthropic biography. Now, you've told us some about this, but wondering if you could go back and chat a little bit about your own life, and was giving and serving a part of your family tradition? Did you have a UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] box like we all did when we were little? How did [00:33:00] you become interested in this?

(JK): I was raised in a small town in Ohio, about 1700 people; my graduating class was about 25. I went to school and graduated with a degree in business. I think the early service, you can't ignore the church, and the founders of our Constitution and our country did not ignore the church either. That is why we're here, because of this sector which is not governmental and not business, and the church was the start of that. So you learn to give a dime at church, you learn to share little bit there. You might be put, not on a committee, but you might be asked for advice along the way. That I'm sure was a factor in my upbringing.

My mother, I have a brother who is still alive, 62, severely retarded and handicapped. [00:34:00] She did everything, including building a building for him; didn't pay for it, but she was out hustling other people to help with that process to do something better for my brother Joe. I look back on that as clearly a factor. My father too, but my mother was really the – he was out trying to make money and mom really worked hard at that and with good results. I suspect that's all a part of it, and then to get involved – this may seem almost an aside, but raised in a small town, big city scared me, colleges scared me. After I got to Flint, Michigan I was able to put aside my fear of being in front of a group of people, [00:35:00] Toastmasters in this case. It could be something else for somebody else. I didn't learn it in college, and came to that, and that led to more volunteerism, and then for whatever route it took. I've run the DeWaters Charitable



Trust, the Mallery Charitable Trusts, the Ruth Mott Fund, I am still on the board of the Welch Foundation after 10 these many years, I was on the board of the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] Foundation, and on the board of the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, its predecessor which was the Flint Area Health Foundation. I was on that board and helped with the merger of two groups which formed the community foundation, so one thing seemed to lead to another to another and a lot of them were obviously [00:36:00] related to foundations and philanthropy.

(KA): Do you have any children?

(JK): Three children.

(KA): Have you tried to instill the same ethic in them? How did you do that?

(JK): Well, I don't know how. Yeah, let me talk about the kids a little bit. My son is a sound engineer and sound designer. He's independent now and he travels all over. He lives outside of Atlanta and he worked for their cultural center or their Alliance Theater Company for a lot of years, and was in charge of three theaters there as far as the sound is concerned. Because of his traveling, he doesn't volunteer as much as my other two children, but he probably volunteers more than I'm aware in one form or another, giving his services or something of that nature. He's quite busy at this point. My daughter Susan [00:37:00] is in Hayward, Wisconsin and she has a Master's degree in social work and psychology and she's a counselor who deals mostly with substance abuse and drug abuse issues. She has her own business now which she started up and she volunteers regularly, somewhat not in the same political thinking that I do, but she is a volunteer across the board there. My youngest child, Melissa, is in Flint. She has Down syndrome. She is 42. She works two days a week, part of two days, a week at the YWCA, she volunteers two days a week at the public library. So volunteering has been a part of her life too and in that sense, the importance of giving time I think is in the family.

(KA): What a great story. It so meaningful for you and for her [00:38:00] to give service like that.

(JK): Well, it meant a lot to me at the outset. I'm cutting back now on volunteer commitments, and I will give you this list and this goes back a ways, but it is not long and so it's somebody else's turn. That's all that is to it.

(KA): We're all in the process, I think, of turning it over to the next generation.

(JK): I think we've got to, that's all that is to it. It has to happen.

(KA): So my last question is as you thought about coming today and we didn't give you a lot of background on the project, but did you think about something that you wanted to make sure that we get into the record and that you have a chance to say that we haven't asked you about or that you want to elaborate a little bit more about? It's fine to take a minute and look at your notes.



(JK): One minute. [00:39:00] I'm somewhat restating this, but I just can't get away from the importance of the people, the quality of the people, and the importance of sitting at a table. Like today, I went to a table and I said, "I want to sit at a table where I don't know anybody," and I did. It's through that process, and meeting some really, really big individuals over these decades, which I think continues to be important. As we get more – I don't know the right word, it's not inundated – as we get more taken in to the technology, the [00:40:00] potential for that contact I believe, may decrease. I mean Twitter, I can stay in my room and get all the information I want, and so forth. The importance of what this conference has done – one of the ways – is sitting at a table with a variety of people. I met some great people today. I think to be important in the fundamental precept that it's the people who count, I mean, it's the people who count. Be them grantees, be them fellow trustees, be them whoever, but it is the people who count, so that I would emphasize.

(KA): That's perfect, thank you very much. It's really, really good.

- End of Recording -

