



INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HUNTING – OCTOBER 14, 2011

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

An interview with John Hunting on October 14, 2011. 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): So my first question is, the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) was just getting organized, as I read the history, at about the same time that you were organizing Dyer-Ives, and I'm wondering if you could describe for us [00:01:00] what the political environment was like for foundations, or what the legislative environment was like? As a relatively young person going into philanthropy, can you go back and recall for us what it was like to first get involved with philanthropy and the Council of Michigan Foundations?

John Hunting (JH): Well, I got involved with philanthropy before the Michigan Council on Foundations (CMF). I was pretty young, I was like 35, which would have made it 1966, and there was no support out there whatsoever, and now young people get involved with philanthropy and there's all kinds of support groups available for them, but I was kind of out there on a wing and a prayer. I had taught, and I had been in the Army, but I had this income coming in, and I decided that I could do something with

that. It was kind of the age of Kennedy when they asked, “Ask not what your country can do for you, [00:02:00] but what you can do for your country.” That was kind of the general ethos at the time.

So I came back to Grand Rapids from New York and I started two programs, which I won’t go into, but I had to hire a secretary to help me. The first one was a very nice lady but she didn’t work out too much; the second one was Sophia Gorham. So we were working away running our delinquency project and down in Washington, I don’t have the exact dates, foundations were on the grill in the Senate. McGeorge Bundy, and I bring his name up because McGeorge Bundy was born in Grand Rapids and he never acknowledged it, his father was a bricklayer in Grand Rapids, I think he lived here until he was a teenager and then moved out East and became an Easterner. Well, he went down to Congress and really angered the Senate by being very arrogant. He was the CEO of the Ford Foundation at the time. So [00:03:00] the Senate passed some laws, and one of those laws was, as I understand it, that foundations could not have a certain percentage of their holdings in one stock. Well this got the Kellogg Foundation’s attention, because the Kellogg Foundation was all Kellogg stock.

My understanding is, or my assumption is, that they decided we better get some allies here and get organized. Russ Mawby was chair of the board, CEO I should say, and he had a sidekick named Leonard White. They came up to the Dyer-Ives Foundation and met with Sophia Gorham, and Sophia and Leonard hit it off – maybe they met at a conference somewhere along the line, but anyway, they hit it off. She was a very competent woman, and so they decided to try organized foundations in Michigan. So we got together, the big four – [00:04:00] Kellogg, Kresge, Mott, and Dyer-Ives. I should add, Dyer-Ives, which I started, is named after my two grandmothers. So Sophia became their first Executive Director, and she worked out of our office which was at the Waters building. She was there for, I don’t know, a year or two when she and her husband moved to California. Then Dottie took over and moved the office from Grand Rapids to Grand Haven where it has been ever since.

(KA): Perfect, thank you. That is exactly what we needed. Can you tell me a little about... You were at the first meetings, then? This is great.

(JH): I remember the first Michigan Council on Foundations, or whatever we called it, meeting, and that was Hillsdale, as I remember. The President of Hillsdale was quite involved. In those days my father was still alive (he was the chair of the Steelcase Foundation board), and he was always kind of supportive [00:05:00] of me, and he was supportive of this idea. Mr. Kresge came, Stanley Kresge, and Mr. Kresge was a Beta Theta Pi, as was my father, at the University of Michigan, although I don’t think they were there at the same time. Mr. Kresge always opened up the meetings with a prayer, he was a very religious man. I remember the President of Hillsdale was a kind of a dynamic guy, and he always said, “Put your name tags on the right because that is where you lead up,” and he was always very involved with process. Other than that I don’t remember much, except that we did meet.

(KA): Would you say that the original hopes, or underlying purpose for the meeting was in reaction to the legislative agenda?



(JH): I think the legislative agenda is the issue that forced it to move ahead. I'm searching for a word, but it was the major force for [00:06:00] pulling together the foundations. Kellogg had a vested interest in it, and they were a big foundation, and I think the times were right. The National Council on Foundations met and I was a member of that, and I think they welcomed action like this. We were one of the first states to get together and I think we are one of the biggest even today, the Michigan Council on Foundations.

(KA): Can you talk a little about the uniqueness of foundations, or the freedom that they have around this issue of them being able to be advocates?

(JH): I am a great believer in democracy of foundations. I recognize there are foundations on the right and on the left. [00:07:00] The Council on Foundations is more or less the more moderate to liberal area, and the conservative foundations have their own organization. I think they should be inclusive and they should have debates, and so forth like that. I believe in trying to create change, and so we push up to the line as far as we can without crossing the law. Therefore, I think it is important for every foundation to have a good lawyer, number one, and number two, have a good lawyer who knows electoral law and any law that is relevant for foundations. The great problem, as I see it, is too many smaller foundations, they have the old family retainer, a guy who knows nothing about this area and so he always says no (it is usually a he, always says no), because if he doesn't it means he has to go to work, he has to learn this kind of law, so they tend to say no. So I would urge all foundations to try to get a lawyer on board [00:08:00] that is familiar with electoral and related law.

(KA): When you got together did the foundations know each other? Did you know any of the other foundation people? Were you surprised at how many? Did you meet people? What happened in those first meetings?

(JH): Well, I didn't know many people. I knew the Grand Rapids Foundation – I don't know if Ed McCobb was still running it, I don't think so, I think Pat Edison was running it then, it was very small, one person and a secretary – and the Steelcase Foundation, because my father ran it, and maybe one or two others. So I don't remember this specifically, but I am sure that as I went to these meetings I met foundations from all over the place that I never knew anything about.

(KA): You didn't have a sense of there being a network at that time [00:09:00] of foundations?

(JH): We were very small, we just stayed to Grand Rapids, but I am sure that Kellogg and Kresge and Mott had informal connections; they must have because I'm sure that they had funded some of the same projects. So I am sure there was something going on, but you should ask Russ Mawby that.

(KA): You were on the board of CMF for a short time, right at the very beginning. I think probably before Sophia came on, is that right?

(JH): I don't even remember to tell you the truth. I didn't think I was on the board.



(KA): It may have been called the Conference of Michigan Foundations, before it was even incorporated.

(JH): Probably, that would be quite logical, but I don't remember that either. My memory is getting, frankly, a little fuzzy, but I do the best I can. [00:10:00]

(KA): You've spent, as I understand it, the bulk of your philanthropic career in New York and Washington, mainly with a lot of leadership of the Beldon Foundation, and yet you've kept a presence here. Can you compare and contrast for me the nature of the relationships between the foundations in New York, and in Michigan, and Washington D.C.? Is it different, is it about the same? How do the foundations relate to each other in your three experiences?

(JH): In New York, when I was there, before I came back and set up Dyer-Ives, they had the New York Foundation Luncheon and there I did meet different people. It is there that I met Steward Mott, son of the founder of the Mott foundation, and we were good friends through the years. It was really a good meeting; I enjoyed it because you get to know these different foundations. [00:11:00] They always had a good speaker, but that was it. Out of that grew the Council on Foundations. There was also the Foundation Center, was allied with that in New York, and now I think Washington. As far as I know, in Michigan there was nothing going on at that time. That is the difference. There was a network because New York had so many foundations. Michigan had a few, quite a few compared to other Midwest States, actually.

(KA): You were all very young, as I read the history. I mean, you, Dottie, Judy Hooker, Bob Hooker, and Russ had to all have been in your early 30's to mid-40's...

(JH): Well not early 30's, [00:12:00] but certainly mid 30's to early 40's, Russ is a little older.

(KA): Can you talk a little bit about what it was like... Were people young and feisty? What was the energy level like, because you were all young professionals at the time.

(JH): Well gosh, I don't know how to answer that. Sophia certainly was enthusiastic; I mean this is a great job for her, a great break. I was interested in it because I think it was important, that foundations get together. Russ has always been sort of a serene guy overlooking everything. Len White had a lot of interest in it, and I think a lot of people picked up interest on it. I think there was a sense we were doing something but, of course, this is sort of a secondary issue for us because running the foundation was the first issue. We were certainly willing to help and it worked out well. [00:13:00] Of course Dottie got involved, and she is nothing but high energy, so there was always a lot of energy going on.

(KA): Are you surprised about where it has ended up?

(JH): I never thought about it at the time, but I certainly didn't think when we first started off that it would grow into such a large organization, but that happens a lot. The Council on Foundations was pretty small. I was on the board of the Council on Foundations for four years, and it has gotten huge too. Even though on the state level, there are many, many states now that have their own foundation gatherings.



(KA): What advice would you give to a young person with inherited wealth who wants to make a difference in the world on an issue they care about? [00:14:00] And would you have them engage with CMF and COF? Or if you were starting over again, or as you look at young people who are maybe in your same position, what advice might you give them?

(JH): There are several organizations – which I cannot name off the top of my head, but you can Google them – which are set up to help at least progressive young people in their wealth. There is an outfit called Bolder Giving which consists of, or at least attracts, people who have made a decision about how to spend their money out. I am on their website, as are a lot of wealthy people who have spent out their money, one way or another. I think going to the Michigan Council, or the Council on Foundations, or anything else is good. As I said before, the most important thing is to get a good lawyer if you are going to set up a foundation. Also, now I think there are alternatives to foundations; [00:15:00] we didn't have the community foundation having all those various pockets you can put your personal holdings into, and so those offer options now we didn't have before.

(KA): Can you talk a little about the decision to spend out?

(JH): I just came back from the Michigan Council on Foundations last meeting, last week and I was on a program, on a panel, speaking on this very topic; it's a hot topic. When I started off with Beldon Fund and decided to spend out it wasn't so hot, but by the time we ended 10 years later suddenly it is a hot topic. Yes, I think there are many reasons why I think people should consider spending out. Even if you are not planning on spending out, [00:16:00] there is value in going through the exercises of pretending you are going to spend out, just because spending out forces you to focus on what you want to do, and what you want to get accomplished. The problem with perennial foundations is that you can always worry about that tomorrow, the money will always come in, and nobody is looking at you to see how effective you are.

But the reasons why the foundation should spend out are many. One is, at least for me, the philosophy is: spend today's money for solving today's problems. Related to that is the concept that we are going to have an enormous transfer of wealth coming up in the next 10-50 years, so you don't need to save for the future, because there is going to be this huge wealth coming down. For myself, personally, number three is I wanted to see the money spent in my lifetime. I didn't want to let it be spent in the future. Related to that is the concept of mission drift, if you die and other people take over your foundation, [00:17:00] suddenly where there is money, there is interest, and they start taking it away from projects that the founder might not be interested in. Spending it out gets rid of that problem. Another problem is the value of money. If you have to spend 5 percent every year and if you don't have a good manager of your money, your money is worth less as time goes on.

Finally, if you are an environmental foundation, I think it is a crime against humanity not to spend out because environmentalists know global warming is here. We know this is going to affect our world profoundly in spite of the resistance of conservatives to the obvious scientific facts. The denial of science is the great problem today and we have to solve that problem now. Every year we stall means more destruction coming down the line in the forms of droughts, and floods, and population movement, and



unsettling of cultures. So that is my pitch. I hope [00:18:00] you can play this everywhere, put it on YouTube or something, because I think it is very important to do this.

(KA): Anything else you would want to have in particular around the networking, CMF, Michigan Nonprofit Association, or anything else?

(JH): I just think it really worked out well, and it's due to the individuals who got behind there and put their shoulders behind there and got it done – Russ, Leonard, Sophia, and Dottie, those four more than anyone else. My role was minimal.

