



INTERVIEW WITH KAREN ALDRIDGE-EASON – MAY 22, 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 Karen Aldridge-Eason on May 22, 2012. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity* and Susan Harrison Wolffis, consultant.

Recorded via telephone. 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.

Susan Harrison Wolffis (SHW): My job is to write to flesh out your bio and just add a few things into it and introduce you as a person along with your position. If there's not enough time at the end of our hour, maybe you and I can make a connection to talk you later time just the two of us on the phone. I'm just interested in knowing how you got to be who you are and where you are and we'll let Kathy take it first.

Kathy Agard (KA): So just for the Grand Valley record it is Kathy Agard and Susan Harrison Wolffis interviewing Karen Aldridge-Eason on May 22, about Our State of Generosity. So Karen, I know less about your part of this world than I do about some of the other pieces and Susan [00:01:00] is coming at it from the outside which is the perspective that we wanted her to have. So maybe you could take a few minutes and just tell us all of the components of what you are doing and maybe a little bit about the history of the office.

Karen Aldridge-Eason (KAE): Okay, the history of the office may be easier than all of the components of what I am doing.

(KA): That is great and we may be able to find that on the web site.

(KAE): You may be able to find some of it. We don't capture all we do because we don't have anyone in our office dedicated to doing that and sort of have to count on the good graces of CMF to make some of that a priority. We do have a lot of stories and we have created some notebooks of our own to just capture some things because we don't have our own web site [00:02:00]. The office was created in 2003 based on a conversation between Hudson-Webber President Dave Egner and McGregor Fund President Dave Campbell. The two of them had been in Leadership Detroit with former Governor Granholm and this is prior to Jennifer Granholm becoming Governor-elect. So they had participated in Leadership Detroit together. They happened to be at some event together after the November 2000 election and proposed to her, and the story goes, on the back of a napkin, this office of foundation liaison at the state level and asked her would she, in fact, be interested? [00:03:00] She, of course, said absolutely yes. When it was originally designed, it was designed to be like a five year pilot perhaps, with the first two and a half years being funded by philanthropy and then the funding for the office being provided after that by state government. Kathy, as you may recall, back in 2003 is when Michigan really started getting hit hard with the downturn in the economy relative to state government and the first series of budget cuts began. So I came into the position in April of 2003.

My understanding is that they were looking for someone who had a base [00:04:00] of both government and foundation experience. So I made what I understand to be a very short list. So I came into the work after interviews, and it actually was at a point that I had taken a family leave from Mott because my husband had been quite ill and I took a family leave because I was trying to do too many things and run back and forth to Ann Arbor with him as well as take care of our three adopted sons and it wasn't working. So I was about ready to step back into work when I got a call asking me if I would consider an interview for this position. I interviewed with Dave Egner and Dave Campbell and then had an interview with the Governor and her staff, and during her interview [00:05:00] she offered the position to me. We are a small office; there are two and a half



staff. My colleague Maura Dewan came to work with me in September of 2003 and we have worked well together since then. She was recommended by a couple of different sources. One of my colleagues from C.S. Mott who had been on my payment, had worked for me, says, "I know how you work. She would be a good partner for you" and Dave Egner, understanding the office said, "I know what this office is going to need. She would be a good person." So I didn't have to do a lot of interviewing to find her. She was actually on a maternity leave... She had been on, not on maternity leave, she had been on a family leave from the workforce, as well, [00:06:00] after having had a child. Her child was now three and I convinced her that she could come back to work on this new opportunity. This Michigan office was actually patterned after an office that was in Detroit in the late '80s and they tried to tweak our office in the way that it didn't run into some of the challenges that the Detroit office had. The Detroit office ended up being subsumed into the mayor's office and sort of lost its independence and visibility as an independent agent. So our [00:07:00] operating agreements, we have memorandums of understanding for this office that identifies it as a private office in state government supported by the state with space and resources like computer technology and supplies and things of that nature. We have had small contributions from the state over the years amounting to less than 5% of our annual cost. So that is sort of the history. We have a governing advisory committee that is made up of the foundation community as well as Rob Collier, Kyle Caldwell from MNA, Michigan Nonprofit Association, and a representative [00:08:00] from the Executive office.

(KA): Great, that is really helpful Karen. Thank you. So you have been now in the job for a while, actually you created the whole office. I know some of what you do just because of our relationship through the Johnson Center. You have also been, what a program officer at Mott before you got here. We tend to think of Michigan as being unique in the country in the way that everybody sort of gets along pretty well. I am wondering if, as you've observed the people you have worked with, if you could talk a little bit about what the qualities were. If you were talking to somebody from Brazil who was coming here, what do you see about the way people operate that have helped the philanthropic community in Michigan.

(KAE): It is interesting you said that. I had breakfast with someone from Russia today [00:09:00] who runs the regional association there.

(KA): Perfect.

(KAE): So I had a chance to talk to her. She is a guest of the C.S. Mott Foundation right now. I think for this office, one of the advantages we had is we came into being at the time that, for the first time foundations were really losing resources. They had lost huge parts of their investment portfolios in the downturn in the stock market. So it really made it impossible and it didn't take



Michigan philanthropy long to say, "It just doesn't make sense for us not to be partnering even more with each other as well as with government [00:10:00] as a leverage opportunity." And we have been fortunate that over the years from what I have seen that many of the foundations' staff have had relationships between them. People have gone from one foundation to another, and foundation CEOs for the most part had been willing also to sit at the table in partnership. I think the fact that we have had a strong regional association has helped that tremendously because I think that has been one of the ways of convening foundations around issues to work together and the various affinity groups that we have had within CMF.

(KA): Good.

(KAE): But I also believe that personalities [00:11:00] matter in this work and being able to look at the larger picture of the value of collective resources and collective approach or vision for the work matters and that many of Michigan foundations have recognized that. While we have been blessed with a tremendous amount of philanthropic wealth in Michigan, we also know that that alone doesn't change the world. It doesn't change policy and it doesn't close some of the opportunity gaps and some of the issues that we care about [00:12:00] in the philanthropic community. So I think we have recognized, and particularly through the leadership I think of CMF, the value of going and approaching problems and issues and government or nonprofits as a collective group of like-minded foundations has been an advantage to us and so we've used it.

(KA): Karen, when you think about how that is done, can you put your finger on, you know, what, is there sort of a normal way, let's say that a brand new issue was to rear its head in Michigan right now that looked like it was something that needed the foundation world to come together, or the foundation-governmental world, what is the process that is used, [00:13:00] or is there kind of a normal way that people gather around an issue?

(KAE): Well, I think there are a number of ways, I mean, that is one of the things that our office does, is that we sometimes are the ones who say to Rob, "We need to have a briefing or conversation around this issue" or "We need to bring multiple funders to the table to sort of get on the same page around this issue if we can." I can tell you multiple stories of that happening here. From the start of this office, and I know it has happened on larger projects like around [00:14:00] how the tobacco tax settlement got distributed through community foundations here in Michigan, or how the AIDS fund was set up here in Michigan, you know? But even through my own office, working with the Council of Michigan Foundations and Michigan funders, when I first started in this position we were very much trying to make sure we aligned our work with the CMF public policy committee and so we held joint briefings around early childhood and we reached out. We had folks like Margaret McKinney who was considered an expert on early childhood at



Kellogg but we also knew that we had these family foundations called Ready by Five who were doing their own thing around early childhood. We created a convening, bringing the new governor into the conversation and it was at the time [00:15:00] that all the brain research was being shared across the country saying, "Hey it's those first three years that matter." So we had someone present on that and we encouraged all of our funders to come and when we got a little bit of *I don't know* from some of our smaller foundations, the community foundations and our family foundations, we encouraged them to bring their community partners, their nonprofits, their school district people they were working with on early childhood and we invited all of the various agency people into the room. What we found is that just by having people in the room to talk more [00:16:00] together, they could see ways to partner and to work together and so it was amazing to have Kellogg people talking with, you know, a small foundation out of Southeast Michigan about early childhood. Part of what Michigan has done well is given opportunities for convening and briefing and networking because you've got to build those relationships in order for people to work together. I think we've innately understood the value of relationships in Michigan and I think that's been a huge piece and I think it goes back to Dottie Johnson and how she did the work and it has carried forward with Rob Collier. I believe as this office was developed that would thing that we realized working with Mary [00:17:00] McDonald early on, that we had to establish relationships to develop the partnerships.

(KA): It is interesting how that culture gets set and gets transmitted from one group to another.

(KAE): We just did a case study last year around Michigan Benefit Access Initiative and it really was about cultivating relationships across multiple state agencies, the Michigan Nonprofit Association and its outreach partners, and multiple foundations to move a project forward that ultimately will transform how all citizens in Michigan can access public benefits.

(KA): Good.

(KAE): [00:18:00] And this case study really was about building relationships, keeping people talking together, transparency in the communications process, holding people accountable, having the discussions in the room, not outside the room...

(KA): Great.

(KAE): And ultimately reminding people that it wasn't about our individual agencies, foundations, territory, it was about the greater good for the citizens of Michigan and that we wanted to make sure children and families in Michigan had easier access to the benefits they needed.



(KA): Great, Karen is that available online or is it something that we might scan and uses the example?

(KAE): [00:19:00] I don't know if it is at CMF but I can make sure it is sent to you Kathy.

(KA): Okay that would be great we would love to have it. You can just send it to Grand Valley and they will forward it to me. Did you know Robin Leonard when she was at Grand Valley or when she was at Kellogg?

(KAE): I've known her name from both places. Where is she now?

(KA): She is still at Grand Valley and she is actually serving as the coordinator for this project so you could send it to Grand Valley to her attention.

(KAE): Okay because it is an electronic document I don't know if it is on CMFs website but we can make sure you get it electronically.

(KA): Your secretary may have her e-mail because Robin was the one that was setting up the appointment. I want to change a little bit and ask you [00:20:00] if you could talk maybe kind of at the theoretical level to start and then drilling down to the more hands-on about the relationship of the philanthropic community both the nonprofit and the foundation side to public policy. You are one of the few people we have who really has an insight into, you know, is this a legitimate role for nonprofits and for foundations, how does it work best, what are the commonalities between government and philanthropy? Just kind of the, what's the frame for this relationship between these two sectors that are concerned about the public good?

(KAE): I think from the philanthropic and standpoint we've always been kind of schizophrenic about it [laughs]. There is one part of us that doesn't want to be too close to government, you know, where [00:21:00] we say we must be at arm's length from government and we want to be careful that we are not lobbying for something. However, I remember an example I use for community foundations when we were trying to get them to think about supporting prisoner reentry because the Michigan Department of Corrections and the Jeff Foundation which was out of New York, which did criminal justice funding, was really wanting Michigan funders to step up and they said, "Well, what about Kellogg, Kresge and Mott?" I said, "Well, none of them fund criminal justice issues and this is really a local issue" because the state was about to roll out a group of pilots across the state.

(KA): I remember when that interest was there.



(KAE): Right, so my comment to the community foundations was that [00:22:00] if you care about safe communities, you care about children and families, you have to care about the policies surrounding reentry because these folks are coming home. So for foundations particularly some of our smaller foundation or community foundations it is a reminder to them that these policies that are made at the federal, state or even local level impact the communities they care about. So from that perspective it is not so much whether you want to do policy work, it's almost you must engage in it if your grant making is going to be [00:23:00] effective at times or you're fighting a windmill.

(SHW): Karen, Kathy had to step out of the room so this is Susan and is that a particular charge of your office?

(KAE): Well we are here to work on strategic partnerships between government and philanthropy with the intent to move and change systems to better serve Michigan residents. Changing systems often means changing policies. So we are interested in policy reforms that better, that improve, the lives of Michigan residents.

(SHW): [00:24:00] I am going to take this time while Kathy is away and ask you a little bit about your own story, how you got into philanthropy, what drew you and then I am remembering that you are one of the few people who had both government and philanthropy in your background. So maybe you could talk a little bit about how that all happened too.

(KAE): Sure. I had been aware of philanthropy I guess, all my life. I grew up in Flint, Michigan. The C.S. Mott Foundation and Mr. Mott himself were bigger than life [laughs] in my community, okay. To be honest about it, we all thought every community had a Mr. Mott, you know, [00:25:00] because you could see him walking downtown and I had a chance as a kid with my parents the go to their home. So I understood something, a little bit about it, not a lot, but I knew that that generosity helped our community through community education, afterschool programs, the Children's Hospital, children's clinics and all kinds of nonprofit organizations that got their start through Mr. Mott's generosity; so I was aware of it. I come from a family of service. My dad was a pastor, my mom a teacher and a principal. So we believed in doing things that [00:26:00] contributed to society and I was taught that; I served as a missionary early in my career in West Africa. I came back and came into state government. I was in state government in the late '70s, early '80s.

(SHW): Elected or ...



(KAE): No. I actually ran for office once, but I was in a staff position. I worked in the Michigan Senate as a legislative assistant and then later went into the Executive Branch and went in and worked in the Department of Commerce as the Deputy Director of the budget office. I had a [00:27:00] chance to take a position back in Flint as Budget Director for the city of Flint in the mid-80s, so I came back to Flint in the latter half of the '80s. So I came back to Flint because Flint was home for me and I thought it was an opportunity to give back. I came back to Flint, spent five years as Budget Director of the city of Flint and then left and came back to state government again and through some mutual contacts someone suggested that I apply for position at the C.S. Mott Foundation. At that point the C.S. Mott Foundation had not had a full program officer of color that had lasted, and so they brought in two of us together [00:28:00] and I think for the first time really set up an orientation process for us and I was fortunate enough to have a really good senior member of the staff who became my coach and mentor for my first few years there. I came in at a time that they had decided to split out the Flint grant making program into its own program, grantmaking portfolio. They had always granted tons of money in Flint but it came through various other programs and so they wanted to develop a grantmaking, portfolio program that was Flint/Genesee County and so I came in to do that. It started as one person. Everybody came and dumped all of the folders that they had for Flint on my desk [00:29:00] and so I grew the team to about five and worked for nine years doing that work and, you know, you are not a favorite child when you do local grant making [laughs].

(SHW): I bet that is true.

(KAE): You do everything from get accosted in the grocery store, rounding up resources, to being chastised for having turned down a grant proposal and even having your spouse accosted for what you have done [laughs]. I enjoyed the work and that is the [00:30:00] work I was doing, I was director of the Flint area grantmaking program at the C.S. Mott Foundation when I was offered this opportunity. I just found it to be a natural for me.

(SHW): I am going to address this because you brought this up. This is Susan. Maybe could you talk a little bit about being a person of color in both government and public policy and philanthropy? Do you feel as if you brought something different to your work than maybe some of your colleagues did or maybe because you grew up in Flint you brought something different that maybe your colleagues, you know, maybe help me frame that part of your story.

(KAE): [00:31:00] I think we all bring our experience base to our work. Some of us are more conscious of that than others and I think for most people of color, we are more conscious of our experience base and how that can help inform our work as well as sometimes hinder us or



complicate our relationships with our colleagues. So I would say it has been both helpful and at times a curse. I am the daughter of a Baptist preacher.

(SHW): I was just going to say it didn't help to be a preacher's kid.

(KAE): No and a very proactive pastor, who was one of these who spoke out on issues [00:32:00] locally and nationally and marched with Dr. King and did all that kind of stuff. So I had grown up in a household where you didn't sit quietly if you saw an injustice. You weren't out of control, and one of the things I was always taught is there is a way to address, to be heard. At times that has been problematic for me and at times people have looked to me for a better understanding.

(SHW): That is really wonderful Karen, thank you.

(KAE): And you have to learn to moderate it and I am old enough now to do that better than I did 20 or 30 years ago. [00:33:00] My dad, I remember, I will tell you a story. My dad had a... I was dating a young man who was aspiring to be in the clergy and having grown up in that household that wasn't necessarily something I was that interested in continuing to be in, but he went and met with my dad one day and said, "I don't know what's with her, she is so radical." And my dad just chuckled and said to him, "Well that is probably my fault." It kind of took him back, because he thought he would get my dad giving me a talk [laughs], but.... [00:34:00] And that wasn't what happened.

I think I always feel that if I am having a discussion and I have certainly had it in this administration, to sort of raise the sensitivity around policy issues and what does it mean? I had a conversation yesterday with Governing Magazine, which is partnering with AARP of Michigan around creating age-friendly communities and the young lady who was chatting with me about it, because they wanted to engage more foundations in it, said to me, "You know, we are looking at Traverse City and we are looking at Grand Rapids." "Okay, so [00:35:00] then you are narrowing your focus on who it is you want to serve," I said to her and she said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, Traverse City and Grand Rapids tend to be two of our wealthier communities. I am not saying they don't have low income seniors in those communities, but that is not the profile they have or want." So helping them be an age-friendly community would say to me that that is helping mid to upper income individuals in those communities feel comfortable staying in those communities. I said, "Are you going to think about how you help people in Lansing..." Oh she said, "We tried to reach out to Lansing and [00:36:00] Flint but we got nowhere." I said, "That doesn't surprise me. They're resource strapped, under siege. That is the very problem, the seniors in those communities, mostly seniors of color, are under siege in their homes and they can't move or get out. They can't move to Traverse City or to Florida." So as you think about age-friendly



communities, how do you help communities that are now struggling as a result of the lost manufacturing base and have these seniors who were okay when they were working, but retirement incomes have literally put them into poverty?

(KA): What was her answer Karen?

(KAE): That she had never thought about that [00:37:00] and I get that quite often. People, when it comes to issues of poverty or color and the impact, they often haven't thought about it because that is not their experience base. And so one of the things that concerns me even across the country, you know, that the recent hearings in DC around Roe vs. Wade where the legislators wouldn't let the females speak. You remember that? Okay, well there is also that lack of voice of the people of color or the people who [00:38:00] are struggling with poverty, when policy decisions are being made that directly impact their lives and no one in those conversations has an experience base that can better inform the decision making. And I just use that example because I think most women can relate to that. But that happens day after day, relative to impacts on disenfranchised populations.

(SHW): Karen, while Kathy was away, you were starting to talk about sometimes when you change systems then that affects policy.

(KAE): Changing systems is about policy, changing policies often. When [00:39:00] foundations sometimes struggle with this notion about that they don't want to be seen as influencing policy, but we talk all the time about wanting to change systems, then you have to understand its policies that create systems.

(KA): Yes, gotcha. That is exactly right. When you first came into the field Karen, what surprised you?

(KAE): In philanthropy? I think in philanthropy, well first of all, I was coming out of budget and state government, okay? My thing was, I was so used to saying no it was so hard for me [00:40:00] to say you are giving money to somebody to do this? Are you kidding me? [laughs] So I had to adjust to the looser standards and understanding that we did some risk funding and that we were the ones that could offer opportunities the government could not with taxpayer dollars. So that was one of the hardest things. The other thing was the fact that you were paid to learn. You know, which you were not paid to do in state government. Whatever education you pretty much had coming in, was it. The notion of being paid to learn, the notion of allowing [00:41:00] resources to be experimented with, to some degree.



The other thing was the timidness of philanthropy to get out of something they might have been funding for 20 years. That was another thing, their unwillingness to have their reputation tainted by pulling away. So those were some of the things, but at the same time, sort of remembering that we are really just stewards of the public resources just like government is, and so being... [00:42:00] I saw foundation staff who were very humble and understand that it wasn't about them and they were privileged to be able to do this work and others who you would have thought it was their money and who treated people with what I saw to be not very much respect in the nonprofit sector. So in my own work doing local grant making, I really worked on listening to our grantees and our community to do the work and being willing to hear what they had to say, even if I couldn't be responsive to it all the time.

(KA): [00:43:00] When you think about circling back, because as we have kind of hit these last few minutes, to your morning conversation with the folks from Russia and I don't know if there are other people like you now in the country.

(KAE): The University of Southern California, their philanthropy center, I was there like a year and a half ago to talk and Mary came over and met with me. This April, just before the Council of Foundations meeting, they held a round table and we helped them create the list of those of us around the country and so they convened a day and a half of those of us who are in this work.

(KA): [00:44:00] How many of you are there?

(KAE): There are less than a dozen of us. Some have come and gone in the last few years, including the office that was established by Kellogg in New Mexico. And what has been surprising, they are going to be doing a white paper on the offices and what is surprising, you may know Jim Ferris; I don't know if you know him...

(KA): I do.

(KAE): Jim is the one who pulled this together. What is surprising is that the offices at the city level seem to have sustained a little bit better than those at the state level.

(KA): Interesting. I don't know whether city government is less political but [00:45:00] maybe it is much closer.

(KAE): I don't think it is less political. In fact, in some ways I think, having worked in both areas, in some ways, you are much more closer to the politics in local government. That was one of the



things that I saw when I made the transition from working in state government to working in city government. It is personal in city government.

(KA): I am glad that the offices, some of them have at least continued to exist. Was this the first office in the country of its kind?

(KAE): We believe so. Other than the attempt that Detroit did back in the '80s, but we are the first and we are the longest serving. We [00:46:00] are going into our 10th year.

(KA): So when one of your young colleagues calls and says, "Okay, old timer, tell me what I need to know."

(KAE): We have mentored a couple of the offices over the years and New Jersey, Newark, New Jersey has one and Jeremy Johnson, who is in that office called me up right away and I talked to a regional association president and members of the philanthropic community there even before they set the office up.

(KA): What did you tell them?

(KAE): A couple of things. Don't expect miracles in the first year or so. It takes time. This is about building relationships and creating opportunities to partner where you have a shared interest [00:47:00] or shared vision. Foundations and government have to be able to give a little for effective partnership and knowledge can be just as valuable as dollars.

(KA): Great advice. As we come to a close, thank you. You are just wonderful. It has been fun to have a chance to know you a little better and you have great insight into all of this. When you thought about us calling and talking to you today, was there anything else that you wanted to make sure that was asked or that we would, you know, that you could really put like on the record about here is what others need to know about how things work in Michigan.

(KAE): Well, I think Michigan has been willing to be maybe a little bolder and a little more proactive than [00:48:00] some other places around using its instruments of wealth and knowledge to make our state better. I think just as Michigan was an innovator in manufacturing and the auto industry, I think we been innovators around philanthropy and partnerships with our nonprofit sector, with government and recognizing, you know, Rob will say over and over again all of Michigan philanthropy can't save the state budget, you know, would fund you one of the programs of state government for a day or two at best, you know, so I think our willingness to see ourselves [00:49:00] as a part of a larger environment that, you know, requires us to work



[together]. You know we did some magnificent work seven or eight years ago around protecting the shorelines, working with state government. I think something to just given us an opportunity and, you know, protecting the Great Lakes has been one of those and the shoreline where you couldn't do that by yourself in philanthropy, you had to have the partnership with government.

(SHW): Those of us in Muskegon on Lake Michigan really thank you for that too.

(KAE): I think we just been fortunate to have some leadership that has, [00:50:00] while they have stood up and stood out, they have also understood how to work with others.

(KA): Great. Susan, anything else you want to ask?

(SHW): Karen, if you don't mind when we put this together, it will not be immediately, but relatively soon, after I go through the notes and see what I am missing. If it is all right with you I will give your office a call and will leave my name and number if you are not there to set up a time when we can have a little bit of a follow-up conversation.

(KAE): That would be fine.

(KA): We know how busy you are and we thank you so much for your time today. It will enhance a lot about the project. You have some insight in the public policy side and [00:51:00] in the whole field that is really helpful to us. Thank you.

(KAE): Thank you for the opportunity to participate.

