INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIA ESPOSITO – FEBRUARY 20, 2013

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 Virginia Esposito on February 20, 2013. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. 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.

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): Alright. My question is – just to get us started, we have about an hour. If you could give a little overview of how you fit into the picture, Ginny. Why don't you give us just a little of your professional background in the field.

Ginny Esposito (GE): Alright. Well, I've been in the field since 1980. I started [00:03:00] at the Council on Foundations not long after it had moved from New York and it was still in many ways unpacking boxes and trying to organize itself. In those very, very first days of my work there, I discovered the file cabinets on what was then called "area associations". My boss, Charles Rooks, who had once been the President of the Southeastern Council, suggested that that might be something – well, he didn't suggest it, I suggested that no one was paying attention to it. He said "Yes, that would be a good thing to do." I was actually the first staff person ever for area associations and, three months into my tenure, had my first committee meeting with all of them. That was back when every CEO was [00:04:00] a member of the

committee, and Dottie was one of those. That was the beginning. I went on to work in Grantmaker Education which brought me in contact with a lot of folks, including the 1982 Detroit Conference.

In the course of that work, I began working with family philanthropy and then ultimately working to establish the National Center for Family Philanthropy. There've been a lot more intersections with the Johnson Center, and being part of Dottie's farewell dinner and that sort of thing. I guess there's, in terms of tenure and intersections, a lot of points of contact with Michigan.

(KA): Yeah, yeah. Ginny, were you involved with Mott funded community foundation projects at one point, the COF?

(GE): My point of reference for [00:05:00] that was that for nine years, including the start-up, I was part of the founding and oversight of the Community Foundation Conference. So I was not on the Mott funding team, but I was the head of planning for the Community Foundation Annual Conference. So that brought me into contact occasionally with the issues, the work of it, featuring it – that sort of thing.

(KA): Okay, right. Great. Well, let's start with this piece. I hadn't realized that you were there with the start of the area associations so can you tell us a little bit about what was happening at the time, and why there wasn't interest in getting the regional associations together?

(GE): Well, there had been a lot more energy at that point because a lot of the associations, by that point, had developed, if nothing else, some legislative activity. If you think about 1980 being only [00:06:00] about 10 years after the '69 Tax Reform Act, there was a lot of concern about how the national associations and regional associations could work well together. Also that had come to a head because when the Council left New York there was a fair amount of unhappiness, especially from New York, that it had left, which prompted – people will view it differently, let's put it this way – the New York Regional Association was not founded until after the Council left.
There was a lot going on and it didn't always go smoothly. They thought if there was someone paying more consistent attention to even just communications, what are the issues, and how can we be more aware of and attentive and supportive of one another; that that [00:07:00] could help. I like to think it did, although we went through some really difficult times.

(KA): I'm smiling on the other end of [Laughter] the computer here so, yes. Kind of walk us through what your impressions have been of what has happened in Michigan, and the culture in Michigan over the years relative to philanthropy. Is it, for example, different than the rest of the country?

(GE): Yes, it is. It is and I think probably for a lot of reasons. Some of them because of individuals, some of them because of attitude, some of them because of the availability of funders willing to invest in a strong philanthropic community. I think it is different. I think it's clearly very vibrant, very active, and very smart about its legislative focus and that's not only been at the Federal, but the state and local level. [00:08:00]

There's been a sense about the evolving trends and vehicles for giving, things like the community foundation work, and even Eastern European work, and organizational development, and learning. There's probably some good work that could be done in the exploration of values and themes like that. It's just very, I can't think of a better expression, sort of well-rounded. It pays attention to the sector and I think the sector is more vital because of that and, as I said, I think there's a lot of reasons for that. You've had some incredible leaders.

Dottie Johnson is one that comes to mind. She was there at that very first committee meeting I did in October of 1980. She was there when the [00:09:00] National Center was founded. She's been a real entrepreneur. You've had great funders like Mott and Kellogg and others who have been willing to say, "Let's invest in this sector and let's not look just at how it practices its work. How is the field changing? How do we need to anticipate that?"

You've had those funders in there. You've had people willing to do the legislative work. You've had people willing to recognize that there were some really good times for parts of Michigan and there have been some really difficult economic times, and one can help the other. I just think it's an incredibly vibrant community.

(KA): When you think about the people that you've known, and I know you do a lot of teaching or coaching and in your off-practice, what have you sort of picked up [00:10:00] that you could be specific about? Let me give you an example. You know I've never seen anybody run a meeting like Russ Mawby. I mean he –

(GE): Right, absolutely.

(KA): What kind of behaviors could you point to that might be useful for a young professional in the field, for example, that you would point out in the Michigan –

(GE): Right. First of all, when I think of people like Russ, and I got to watch him too as chair of the Council, I think about a couple of things. One, I think about someone who is genuinely accessible – and by the way, I'm trying to think of qualities that I think exemplify a lot of Michigan leadership. I may talk about him or Dottie or Bill White, people I've known, but I think there are some qualities that I've observed that I think are really pertinent to the question you're asking. [00:11:00] They are very accessible. They get into the work of the field. They participate in organizations. They do host meetings. They're not aloof. They're not apart from the rest of the community.

Very bright, smart people, but I would also add to that a willingness to learn and an openness. I think there's a way to be smart and to either hold information or to use that to distance. And I think there's a way you can be smart, and you do that because you want to be always learning, you want your organizations to be learning organizations, and you want other people to be part of that. There's a sense more of the community process. I think there's definitely a willingness to invest in the next generation – whether that's the next generation of leaders, [00:12:00] young people, or the next generation of philanthropy.

I'm talking not specifically just family, I'm talking about who the next generation will be, where they'll come from, what those issues will be. So I think there's a sense of the future to that, and I find that very appealing. When I was 27, and going through this I found it very appealing when I watched everything from a university philanthropy center develop, Learning to Give develop, the Eastern European work develop, the willingness to invest in new community foundations. There's just a sense of the future and a responsibility to the next generation that is well-rounded, and a respect for legacy.

I think this project probably is another example of that. There's no one that respects their history more. It's not unusual to be in [00:13:00] groups with folks from Michigan and to hear them talk about their history and their legacy; but it doesn't keep them cemented in that past. It's rooted, but there's a real sense of both legacy and the future that I find very appealing. And then if I just had to add something that's less an objective observation and more a personal, so many of the people that I've met are unassuming. They can hold very important positions and not be full of themselves, a down-to-earth quality if you will.

Now, certainly that's not talking about everybody, but I'm talking about something that I've observed more than I've observed the others. So I think it's fair in that point, but [00:14:00] I do think part of that may come from humility. I mean a lot of the people that I meet in this field are very grateful to be in this work and feel grateful to be doing the work with their grantees and those communities. Maybe it's partially the legacy that's responsible for that humility, a sense that you're part of something that goes back and you're part of something that has to look forward. It really makes it easy to sit around the table and roll up your sleeves and work with folks there.

(KA): Right. Nice comments. Thank you, Ginny. You've been really able to reflect on this work for a long time –

(GE): Right.

(KA): I understand –

(GE): I'm not 27 anymore.

(KA): Right, exactly and me either. What kinds of changes have you seen and what are some of the challenges you think that are in front of either maintaining or building on this ethic?

(GE): Well, I think there's [00:15:00] a couple of challenges that I see and not the least of which is the continuing economic challenges that folks face, not just in Michigan, but everywhere. There's probably one that you're hearing about, which I will, at the risk of being redundant, maybe just add a little fuel to that one. It's the fact that some of us have come to take for granted those folks that were willing to invest in this sector; that were willing to get the legislative work up and going; that were willing to fund the development of regional associations, community foundations, and organizations like mine. I think that as those organizations grow and change, they need to be mindful of where their programmatic direction is

taking them. I have to think it has to be very difficult when you look around the table of people that have invested in our field and see fewer [00:16:00] and fewer players.

Perhaps, as a field, we have taken that for granted, and where do we sit down with them and figure out "What have you learned? What's this journey been like? What are you supporting on behalf of the rest of us? Where are some of us," to use an expression I heard just recently about this very issue, "'free-riding'? We're real happy you were doing the work and we were real happy that others didn't ask us to help pay for it," or "We moved on from that work but it was comforting to know you were still doing it." I think there's a fair amount of people who've been pulling out of that space and that can make it difficult.

That's just a couple of the challenges. I think that how it's also different, is that it's very much more sophisticated. The systems [00:17:00] are in place, whether it's the foundations on the Hill or whatever it is. One of the things I think Michigan has been a real leader, and can continue to be, but might also be challenged in is: how do you keep really good, vibrant, passionate, personal participation in that even as your systems get more sophisticated?

There's a real generation of leadership change in Michigan, either happening now or probably in the next decade. I think as you look at a lot of the people who've been really, really key to creating the field that Michigan knows and helping create the field the rest of us value, you have to wonder, has that sense of the next generation included building a cadre [00:18:00] of Michigan leaders for the future? Who follows some of these people that in many ways are completely unfollowable? I would say those are just a few things that come to mind.

(KA): Yeah. That really is part of our concern in doing the project. Is there some way to capture what we think is the culture to be used in the orientation of new people coming in to the this is the way we do things in Michigan? It is of concern because we have had such extraordinary leadership and have taken it for granted. I mean it's been amazing, I think.

(GE): Yeah. Now it really has been and I really do think it's an issue worth taking on because – first of all, I heard somebody not that long ago who had gone to a meeting and she said, "You know, there's a way that they are proud of, 'This is how we do it in Michigan.'" And I was like, "No, you're absolutely right." [00:19:00] I think that it's going to be interesting to see if your project can help serve as a catalyst for conversations about "This is how we're going to be doing it in Michigan." You know rooted, again not anchored, but rooted in, where we've been, who we've been, what we've helped model for the rest of the country – but what we've helped accomplish for our state first and foremost. This is what we want and need going forward. This is what it's going to take to get us there.

I think that kind of conversation is one Michiganders have always been willing to have. I don't want to kick anybody out the door (that's why I said within a decade or so) but when you talk about the Russ Mawbys, the Dottie Johnsons, and the Bill Whites? The people who've [00:20:00] been around a long time. When you then think about people like the Doug Stewarts who are very committed to the Michigan of the future, or the whole Fisher family that is invested in Detroit. I'm just thinking of one example, there's so many, but since Julie's on my board I think of her quickly.

What have they learned from this community of people? What are they taking forward? If you had to line them up, who are the next generation of great Michigan leaders? I know that they're there. One of the things that – this is being recorded?

(KA): Only the edited goes public so… [Laughter]

(GE): Okay. One of the things that has really concerned me is that sometimes, with what we've done on a national level, we sort of pulled away from [00:21:00] giving young leaders a platform. A very strong programmatic annual conference used to identify people that were young leaders and try to give them a voice and a platform.

Michigan can still do that. It has a very, very active educational forum, including its conference. It has an academic forum. It can find those leaders and give them voice, and give them the opportunity to really grow in that leadership, but how do you follow that group? You follow it with people that you're just as excited about; the potential that they have as well as the accomplishments of the people that you've had.

(KA): Right, yes. And it is an ongoing concern for all of us, especially if new people come into Michigan that may not have that same level of commitment. [00:22:00] Good comments, Ginny. We're organizing our thinking around four major themes and I'll just ask you to reflect on any one or all of them.

One of the things we're reflecting on is whether, in fact, Michigan has an ethic of servant leadership. Another is the importance of resources, that we've had money and we've also had people who have put the shoulder to the wheel; I mean both human resources and financial. The work in public policy, and then the fact that some of our projects have become national and international, really without us meaning for that. That's not why we went into them in the first place. Any reflection on any of those that you'd like to make?

(GE): Yeah, I think we've actually touched on them, though not specifically so, but certainly the ethic of what I've been describing is the servant leadership ethic. It is the ethic of someone who appreciates the privilege of the position they have, rather than the privileges it may offer. It's someone who [00:23:00] sees a responsibility to their community however they define that; to their field; who finds a humility in the awesome task that that is. By the way, I'm using awesome as in wondrous rather than its typical [Laughter] overuse.

(KA): Yes.

(GE): So I think the ethic of servant leadership as I always would have thought of it – if somebody had asked me to describe a state where I thought servant leadership was well practiced, Michigan would come to my mind. Absolutely. It just would, because that's what I've always experienced.

I think the importance of resources, we've also talked about. There is something that makes this work happen. People are willing to invest in it, whether it's new community foundations or curricula for young

people to understand and get involved in [00:24:00] philanthropy; whether it's building a field; whether it's willingness to invest in the family philanthropy movement, as people in Michigan have been. I think that's been a huge undervalued issue, and the fact that people like Mott are still vigorously at the table, is pretty darn amazing when you think about how a good dozen of those who were practicing national leadership at one point, have moved on.

I love the sense, to go back to the servant leadership theme, that that really shows a responsibility to the effective practice of philanthropy, and that it's important to them that that continues to be vigorously and well-practiced. So it's a reflective mindset, but it is also very practical. When you look at what's been produced [00:25:00] specifically by Michigan-centered events, there are real results, and there's real interpretation of those results by others who work in public policy.

It's just impossible to underappreciate what's been done in Michigan at so many different levels, and how that has served not only as a model for others around the country, but continues to be so well-practiced. I don't know that there's another state in the Union that people would point to the vigor of their public policy. I'm referring to the public policy related to the practice of philanthropy, and encouraging new philanthropy, and things like that. I have no idea what's been done in public policy in some of the issue areas, so I can't speak to that.

I think pretty much every state in the Union, if you ask them to pick the one that's been [00:26:00] the leader in philanthropic public policy, I'd hazard that 90-some percent are going to say, "It's Michigan." There is that reputation, well-earned. Projects growing to national scale are important. A lot of the work that we've seen with the public policy, whether it's the community foundation stuff or interest in philanthropic education, have been picked up and run with. One of the things that I think has been so helpful about that is that Michigan has supported it, it's not like they resented it or anything like that. In addition to being excited that other people were taking it, they were willing to help it along. I think [00:27:00] there's been an awful lot that you all will be able to identify in how that grew to other states or even to the national level.

(KA): Right. Thanks, Ginny. Yes, those are terrific responses. Would you mind, and this is going down a little side road, but you are the person who's the expert on this. Would you comment a little bit about Paul Ylvisaker and the early work in setting up an academic center? I think you have important background to the centers.

(GE): Paul was teaching out of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard and was teaching classes on philanthropy, education, and community service. He was highlighting the practice of philanthropy through his programs long before there were official centers. In many ways, one [00:28:00] of the things that I wish we had more of, or we had thought to do was that Paul was actually bringing national leaders to his classroom every week: featuring them, getting the students to talk to them about what they did, why it mattered, and getting some of those students, I remember, to grill them on how well they were doing. It was a fabulous, fabulous experience for them, and it was one that had to grow to some kind of scale.

At some level it was the personal interaction between a philanthropic leader and a classroom full of graduate students. Maybe you couldn't replicate that except at the local or university level, but it was really a remarkable thing. These leaders then [00:29:00] went out into the world and talked about what this was, and how important it was, and Harvard learned how important it was to bring that aspect into its work. It was an interesting phenomenon to watch. It included policy leaders and government leaders but it was this real notion that philanthropy is not apart from, it is an integral part of, so much of community and how we identify and define community.

I think people saw that that could be done and some people even saw that it could be done not as a fundraising arm of the university, which was one of the things I think he feared. They could see it could be done to really enrich the school and to really help [00:30:00] advance the practice of philanthropy. The interaction at the university level of all of these different players (whether they were university-based, philanthropy-based, policy-based, whatever they were) and the students – that was so exciting. It was such a sort of viscerally exciting experience for everybody and critically important to understanding how communities work.

Anyways, I really do think that that whole notion of watching him develop that and then going around to other universities, and watching his concern for how the field of philanthropy continued to bring the young person's perspective, the university's perspective, the grantee's perspective, and the civic and political perspective to the table. That it was in that [00:31:00] mix which we were going to find the real richness, the real potential of it all. I do think that had a lot to do with universities thinking this could happen, and that it would elevate the status of the university. I remember watching the University of Texas piece emerge, and realizing what a sense there was that having this center there elevated the university in ways I hadn't even considered. It distinguished the university in some way.

I remembered David Frey at our 10th anniversary symposium in Washington, DC (and David had been invited by Tom Lambeth, our founding chairman, because they're both North Carolina alumni at heart, Tar Heels – University, of course). And David saying to me, "We can do this [00:32:00] in Michigan. This is important to do in Michigan. We've got this center and the notion that there can be a family philanthropy component, and we can convene people like this. This can happen in Western Michigan." I thought that was pretty fascinating. Of course, I got to be there the night that the marching band moved in announcing the Dorothy Johnson [Laughter] Center. Clearly this is something that Michigan has picked up on, but what it does is sort of "lift all the boats." It has been interesting to watch them all now emerge, and to see what particular niche they chose, whether it was Indiana's or USC's or whoever it was, and of course to be a little bit more close to the evolution of the Johnson Center and the Frey Program and things like that. [00:33:00] If you look at those beginnings in the early 80's and bring them forward, it really is very remarkable.

(KA): Great. Thank you so much because his work was really seminal to everything else happening and it's nice to have your perspective on it. Do you have any stories? Do you have a story or two you want to share?

(GE): I'll tell two real quick ones. The first one was when I was very, very young and the second one was at a very critical stage for family philanthropy. The first one was when I was young, one of the very first responsibilities I was given at the Council was that Jim Joseph, the brand-newly selected, not even invested and not even in the office yet, wanted to revisit these principles and practices that had been developed. He asked me to [00:34:00] call all the members of the people who'd served on that Advisory Committee and to ask them if they would be willing to convene one more time to talk about, now that these things had been out and about for a while, what did we need to do to take them further? What did we need to do to really ensure that they were in people's consciousness and they were in people's practice, et cetera?

I knew quickly that this was not going to be an easy task because the process of creating those principles and practices had been – difficult is too mild a word. They had really, really hammered and cajoled and finessed those. There were people of lots of different kinds of foundations and giving, there were very different political and ideological perspectives. So it had been a real tough job just to hammer out a set they could agree on. [00:35:00]

However, when I called [Laughter] Bill White, the first thing that happened was Bill White took my call, okay? 27 years old. "Never heard of you." But as soon as he understood what it was that I was calling about, got on the phone. Okay, I explained what I was doing and that I was hoping he'd be one of the ones who would agree to reconvene and [Laughter] it was something like, "Oh, hell, Ginny. Do I have to?" [Laughter] I realized, first of all, somebody in this field is candid and honest, and somebody in this field who had a difficult time, absolutely was the first to say, "If there's going to be some good to come out of this and all that work, I'll come back." It was incredibly impressive because there were so many reasons I could have been palmed off, or he could have found a different reason to be busy that day. [00:36:00] So the investment that people in the highest positions within Michigan in this field was clear to me from a very young age.

Another great story was when the national center was being formed, and there were a lot of unhappy people. Some people were unhappy because family philanthropy was getting this attention. Some people were unhappy because they mistakenly thought that community foundations would be undermined if you highlighted the work of donor families, and there are thousands of them in community foundations, so that wasn't going to happen. Some people were just angry that the Council was not continuing its project and continuing to do this.

I knew that Dottie Johnson was sitting in the center of a lot of these politics. She was one of the regional association presidents. She was a much respected [00:37:00] leader of the National Council on Foundations, but she is such a visionary and entrepreneurial thinker that I knew, if I was going to do this, I wanted her to be part of it. I remember the day in the office when I phoned her to ask her if she would consider being part of it, knowing that there were all these people out there, including some of her really good friends in community foundations and in other spots that had been at the Council, et cetera, who were not sure about what this was. That it was not going to be, at least at the very beginning, a politically advantageous leadership position.

Dottie immediately said yes. She said how much this needed to happen, how it could invigorate regional associations and the national practice, how much it could really [00:38:00] highlight these families and this work. I actually said to her on the phone call, "Now, you know that not everybody is going to be thrilled with you," and it was like that hardly mattered. It mattered that this was a good idea. I will say that she was kind enough to say that she trusted me to be part of it and that was very reassuring, especially to somebody who was sitting in the middle of those politics. But that she was willing to do it and it wasn't about whether her resume or other things might be challenged by it. She was the first and, for a while, only regional association president I approached, and, for several years, the only one that was serving on the Board.

She wanted to make sure that I wasn't going to be caught up in any negative politics. Here I was worried about her, she was worried about me and between the two of us, we decided neither one of us are going to be worried. We're just going to do really, really good work. The best we possibly can, and we're going to invite anyone who has an idea or a concern to come and talk to us directly. And we're going to address it, and we're going to do that fairly, and with [00:40:00] integrity.

I just felt – as I did my very first committee meeting ever in philanthropy – when she came up to me and she welcomed me to the field and she said, "Whatever you need, we are so excited you're here. You're in a really important position for these associations. Tell me what I can do to help you." Here we were years later and she was doing the same thing to help an idea get off the ground. It was such a powerful moment for me, and it was a great feeling that people whose judgment and experience I respected enormously wanted to be part of this, and how could it possibly fail?

(KA): Ginny, great story. Yes, thank you for sharing those. They're just perfect. Yes, because nowadays, people always are skeptical about ideas or they come across with some hostility rather than a sort of welcoming, let's go do it kind of attitude.

(GE): Right, right. [00:41:00]

(KA): Right.

(GE): I do find it enormous. It's not that I'm not practical but I do find it occasionally a little frustrating that you can be in groups who immediately have to figure out why something will be difficult or won't work before they invest in why this could be good. I think that if you can think about why this is an important idea – any idea – why it's a possible trend or an advancement, flush out what we can learn from this and how it can be important and useful in the field, then let's challenge the idea. But don't kill something before you have chance to vet it a little bit because when you then challenge it, you've got in mind all of the really good things that it can do. Maybe there's a way this idea should be handled differently, or maybe we should just promote it, or whatever it is. I [00:42:00] really have to say, in both of the stories, there's this notion that, "Let's figure out how this can be a really, really good move for the field and the practice of philanthropy, and we'll deal with the challenges. We will."

(KA): Yes, yes. So that's terrific. We have about 15 minutes and there're two more things that I want to accomplish. One is I want to make sure that you have said everything for the record that you would like to have on the record, and then also I'd like to hear a little bit about your personal philanthropic journey. Why did you get into this work or why has it stuck? So let's pick the first one first. Is there anything else that when you were thinking about this that you wanted to make sure that we have on the record?

(GE): Let me think because I was just thinking about… No, I hope that I've communicated that after a very, very long career (we're working on, oh my goodness, 33 years. [00:43:00] Is that 1/3 of a century?), the enormous respect I have for Michigan's philanthropic journey and contributions. It's personal. I could tell stories about Julie, I could tell stories about Russ and Norm and all kinds of people, you, Miles. People I've come to know that really helped me in my work, and in my thinking, and in my own understanding of the field.

I could tell a million of these personal stories but the overall story is one of enormous respect for not only what's been accomplished, but for how it's been accomplished. But I think, yes, I think I'm on the record.

(KA): Okay, [00:44:00] that's great. Those are good comments and very nice of you and also very succinct. So it was well stated. So then tell us a little bit about you. You know you grew up thinking, "I'm going to become a founder of the National Center for Family Philanthropy…" [Laughter]

(GE): Yeah. Yeah, really. No kidding.

(KA): Was your family philanthropic? Did you grow up in a –

(GE): You know I grew up in a house that had seven children, a military father. So, clearly, lots and lots of discretionary cash was not out there, but I also grew up knowing that when they wanted to build a church in our area, my father was making sure that if there's a pledge, we were contributing to that. I grew up in a family where volunteering was something you saw all the time. Being part of [00:45:00] a nonprofit, whether that was religious or civic or whatever it was, I watched volunteering all of the time, and was a volunteer going back into high school. In fact as a senior, I chaired the high school's volunteer efforts to get not only seniors, but all high school students into volunteer activities. Now, I thought that was a really nice thing I did on my sideline. It was not something I thought I was going to do for a living. I guess I just didn't realize how much it was taking hold.

No, I thought it was going to be something very different. Clearly I taught school to repay my debt to the state of Virginia, and then I took off thinking maybe it would be arts or whatever, administration. I had to work in order to get an advanced degree and that's the day I showed up at the Council on Foundations [00:46:00] and saw what was going on there. I can't believe I took that job – within 10 minutes of being offered that job, I had been offered one that was in my field where I'd been teaching. It was better pay. It was a better title and there was just something about it that didn't feel right, you know? It felt like I needed to go to the Council work.

I thought I was going there for a couple of years. And every time it seemed like I had explored what I needed to, Jim Joseph or Alice Buhl would find something else that they thought I might do, or I would find something and I thought it could be helpful to the field. As a young person, I couldn't get over the people I was meeting and working with. You know in addition to Bill and those phone calls, you'd be calling Jean Fairfax or Maggie Mahoney and these people were incredibly invested in the field and in helping me. So I was sitting [00:47:00] in a first class philanthropic education just in the position I was.

Then when I took over education, Jim wanted to make sure that I had a mentor in that work, and he brought Paul in as the special consultant to education. So for 10 years there was Paul as an addition to all these other wonderful volunteers moving in and out. I think the passion for the work was just infectious. The notion that this work could be supported in ways that I thought were intriguing and excited, and that I was sort of an instrument of all these committees. I used to wonder why people thought this was me because I saw myself as just facilitating all these wonderful committees to do what they wanted to do for the field.

So I think that sense of energy I got from them, that sense of being able [00:48:00] to make those visions, at least in part, happen, was very, very important to me. It clearly became something I deeply valued, not just a job. When I discovered in the mid-1980s these families where the donor or members of the donor's family were still involved in the giving, I couldn't help but wonder why this wasn't a bigger part of the way we do our work.

I know that some people who still felt that *well, the Tax Reform Act and the regulations and all of this stuff, we have to be very professional. We have to show that we have policies, we have forms;* were very nervous about bringing in this very personal aspect of the donor and the family into the process. Where I found it incredibly invigorating is where it starts, and even the independent foundations [00:49:00] started with someone making a gift, even community foundations were networks of donors trying to enhance their communities.

So this became something that sort of brought together how much I valued family with how much I'd come to care about the field and the practice of philanthropy. It was like the perfect coming together. Now, it was not a perfect experience. As I said, there were a lot of politics. There was a lot of anxiety. But for every bit of that I experienced, I experienced all these families who just were so thrilled that someone cared about their experience and wanted to make it even better. That someone wanted to look at the collective experience and figure out how that could help move a field, not because I wanted it to move in a specific way, but, again, go back to the facilitator. I realized that the concept needed to be [00:50:00] there for a truly collaborative organization: one that could enhance a lot of organizations that touched on the lives of donor families.

I realized I had a lot of experience to do that. I'd been working with associations; I'd been working with committees. I knew that you were going to have to have credibility in the field if you were going to be advancing an idea that not everyone embraced. I realized I had the background for it, but even then, I didn't think about doing the CEO work. I did all the concept papers, the focus groups, the individual

interviews. I went to the funder meeting and did everything I could, thinking only toward the end, Gee, I might have to ask these people for a job. This is really going to be terrific.

It was very, very funny because when I was going to be an arts administrator, I realized that I didn't [00:51:00] probably want to be an arts administrator, because I didn't want to run anything, I didn't want to raise money, and I didn't want to do public speaking. Here I was thinking about this work and thinking, you're going to have to do all three of those. What I had to realize, first of all, is that my committee who had been helping me think about the center told me that I was the only one who didn't think I should be its president. And then I realized that all those three things I was going to have to do, and I didn't want to do for the arts administration, I had found work that was important enough to me that I was willing to do those other three things.

Taking on those jobs was a way to help advance this idea, and again with a lot of good volunteers, a lot of great co-workers, and things like that – ultimate facilitator; that you can raise money, you can do public speaking, [00:52:00] and you can run something if it's something you care deeply about. So even when younger people ask me or I get invited to the Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy – because I'm not emerging anymore – I tell them "It is something, ultimately, you're going to say things that are difficult. You're going to have opportunities that are new. You're going to have days when you wonder if you can get this through. What's going to sustain you – it's not going to be a paycheck or a title – what's going to sustain you is the fact that you absolutely care about this work happening."

I think where I've been enormously lucky, is I was able to put a body of experience behind something I could care deeply about. That is a gift, and I don't take it lightly at all, [00:53:00] that my journey has been one of appreciating those gifts. Whether it was the Dottie or the Paul or the Alice; whether it was the opportunity to be at the table with all of these wonderful thinkers and different committees; whether it was the gift of all these families who tell me their most heartfelt and sometimes painful experiences because they think I can do something good with it. This has been nothing but gifts and I think appreciating that sort of gets you out of bed in the morning and says, "This is where I want to be."

Now, I will not lie to you, Kathy. I will tell you that my sort of secret hidden goal is that one day the National Center will be so viable, so critical to the field and so sustainable that I can be its senior fellow, [Laughter] not its president.

(KA): [00:54:00] That day is ahead of you. I'm sure of it, you know?

(GE): I'm hoping so. I'm hoping so.

(KA): Alright. Well, we're just about out of time and I do know how busy you are, and that was perfect. Thank you. So really it's interesting to hear the journey for sure and will be helpful to other people. Anything else that you want to make sure to share?

(GE): I feel like I've been blathering for a long time, so I don't think so. Of course, you know if there's something I've left out and you need to get back to me, you just have to pick up the phone.

(KA): Yes, okay. Well then I'm going to turn off the recording so I can just chat with you a couple of seconds. Here we go.

(GE): Okay.

-End of Recording-