

## NCRP STAFF

**Ben Barge**

Field Director

**Brandi Collins-Calhoun**

Senior Movement Engagement Associate

**Avery Crocker**

Communications Assistant

**José Dominguez**

Vice President and  
Chief Operating Officer

**Aaron Dorfman**

President and CEO

**Kevin Faria**

Senior Director of Foundation Engagement

**Elbert Garcia**

Director of Strategic Communications

**Timi Gerson**

Vice President and Chief Content Officer

**Peter Haldis**

Communications Manager

**Jeanné Lewis**

Vice President and  
Chief Engagement Officer

**Spencer Ozer**

Research and Development Assistant

**Stephanie Peng**

Senior Associate for Movement Research

**Lisa Raghelli**

Senior Director of Evaluation and Learning

**Eleni Refu**

Senior Engagement Associate

**Janay Richmond**

Director of Marketing and Membership

**Ryan Schlegel**

Director of Research

**Joelle Thieren**

Executive Assistant

**Ronald Togas**

Membership and Marketing Assistant



**Responsive Philanthropy** is the periodic journal of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

2021, Issue No. 2

ISBN: 1065-0008

© 2021 All rights reserved.

National Committee for

Responsive Philanthropy

1900 L Street NW, Suite 825

Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202.387.9177

Fax 202.332.5084

E-mail: [info@ncrp.org](mailto:info@ncrp.org)

# Working with grassroots leaders has changed our foundation (and business) for the better

By Daniel Lee

We are at a moment of national reckoning. The COVID-19 pandemic, its disproportionate impact on Black and brown communities and the horrific murders of Black people that ignited protests last summer have laid bare the deep injustices that define this country.

In these times, the corporate and philanthropic sectors cannot remain on the sidelines. The new reality is that business and social issues are intertwined, and companies and corporate funders have an inescapable role to play in our democracy – an obligation to lead, not follow.

But supporting social justice issues is uncharted territory for many socially responsible companies and corporate funders. While there has been a recent surge in conversations within philanthropy about how to build and sustain social justice movements, the funding remains anemic, and only a tiny sliver comes from corporate foundations.

Between 2003 and 2016, the median corporate foundation directed just 3.2% of its grantmaking to social justice<sup>1</sup> – most of which was funneled to national nonprofits, not underfunded grassroots leaders.

At the Levi Strauss Foundation (LSF), we're committed to changing this by investing in communities and leaders of color. In 2010, our foundation launched the Pioneers in Justice initiative, a 5-year program empowering a cohort of next-gen leaders of estab-

lished Bay Area civil rights organizations – all of them leaders of color – to experiment with bold new strategies for movement-building. The program was so successful that it became our foundation's hometown strategy.<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, we selected a second cohort of social justice leaders of color for "Pioneers 2020" (named for their graduation year).<sup>3</sup> This group was more grassroots, working to ignite systemic change in the areas of gender equality, climate change, criminal justice, LGBTQ rights, racial equity, immigrant rights and gun violence.

Additionally, since early 2017, our foundation has also granted over \$5 million to local, national and global movement leaders and organizations defending the rights of immigrants and refugees, women, Muslims, transgender people, and Black and brown communities.

Through all of these partnerships, we've recognized the immense value offered by investing in grassroots social justice organizations. They are bulwarks against injustice, first-movers when things happen, and have deep wells of local trust.

What we didn't anticipate when we began this work was how much it would transform us as well. Partnering with social justice leaders has had profound impact on our foundation and our parent company, Levi Strauss & Co (LS&Co). We've learned that partnering

with movement leaders is not top-down but side-by-side, with learning and influence flowing both ways; it also calls for uncomfortable candor, radical empathy, and a kind of flexibility not often practiced in corporate philanthropy.

Yes, we've helped grassroots leaders strengthen their voices, reach new audiences and elevate their ability to lead today's movements. But in turn, they have improved our ability as a corporation and foundation to deliver on our core values: empathy, integrity, originality and courage.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM UNLIKELY ALLIES

For other companies and corporate funders seeking to venture into this largely uncharted territory, we wanted to highlight a few of our most important lessons learned.

**1. Widen the stakeholder lens.** Corporations and their foundations often view the terrain of social justice and movement-building as risky. But these risks diminish when the corporate sector widens the aperture of "stakeholders" to include not only shareholders and customers but also local communities – particularly the most vulnerable within those communities.

As Seth Jaffe, executive vice president and general counsel of LS&Co. and an LSF board member, put it: "I think we're coming to an age where everybody in a company, particularly if they have a foundation, needs to see the stakeholder world as far broader and needs to be thinking about how the decisions we make impact not just our company but society as a whole."

**2. Bridge sectors and worlds.** Through the Pioneers initiative, our corporate foundation intentionally sought to invest in "big picture" thinkers who aspired to convey their messages to new audiences. With the external context changing quickly over the past 4 years,



Daniel Lee

these grassroots leaders had a frontline perspective that our foundation and business leaders were eager to learn from as well.

In 2017, we began the practice of inviting our grantees to give "state of the state" talks to foundation board and staff, sharing their insights into evolving movement ecosystems, needs they were seeing on the ground and where they felt Levi Strauss funding and influence could make a difference on critical issues.

Social justice leaders and foundation boards don't typically interact, and, if they do, it is only briefly and with some degree of formality. But welcoming movement leaders on a regular basis into the board room – and introducing them more widely around the company and foundation – was essential.

It enabled a funder/grantee dynamic that was less about "us" and "them" and more about recognizing common values and commitments. The bonds and connections that formed between Pioneers and foundation board members were among the initiative's most important outcomes, nurturing a level of honesty, insight and mutual empathy that would not have emerged otherwise.

**3. Learn from social movement leaders.** In a letter to employees sent just after the 2016 election, LS&Co. CEO Chip Bergh signaled that the company would be taking bolder stands in re-

sponse to the political moment. Soon after, he began actively using the company platform to address issues that LS&Co. has long cared about, including gun violence.

In 2016, following an incident where a customer accidentally shot himself while trying on jeans at a Levi's store, Bergh issued a statement requesting that no firearms be brought into company stores, factories or offices.

Then in 2018, in the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and a subsequent surge of anti-gun-violence activism, Bergh and LS&Co. were determined to go further. The company established the Safer Tomorrow Fund, directing more than \$1 million in grants to nonprofits and youth activists working to end gun violence in America.

The company also tapped one of our Pioneers in Justice, Pastor Mike McBride, who founded the Live Free Campaign to connect disparate groups such as suicide victims, white suburban students and Black and brown youth in urban neighborhoods in their advocacy for gun safety. His insights helped inform the company's emerging anti-gun violence platform and bring racial equity to the center of that discussion.

"We cannot stand by silently when it comes to the issues that threaten the very fabric of the communities where we live and work," wrote CEO Bergh in an op-ed in *Fortune* magazine in September 2018.<sup>4</sup>

A year later, LS&Co. led the way on a CEO Letter calling on the U.S. Senate to pass gun safety legislation – one that garnered 145 CEO signatures when it was released, an unprecedented mobilization of corporate involvement on this issue.

And this past September, following the police shooting of James Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Bergh penned a second *Fortune* article: "We can't solve racial inequality if gun violence and voter disenfranchisement persist."<sup>5</sup>

He wrote, "I'm the first to admit that I'm still learning and that we have work

to do in our own house. But the more I comprehend how structural racism intersects with gun violence and voting policies ... the more I am committed to using my and my company's platform to highlight and address the human-made structures that nurture America's racial caste system."

Even the Pioneers noted how unusual it was for a business to advocate for corporate responsibility *and* legislative change.

"They are taking calculated but significant risks on issues of gun violence and trying to shift their advocacy in ways that go far beyond statements," said McBride, who used one of the first Safer Tomorrow Fund grants to launch the first National Black and Brown Gun Violence Prevention Consortium, which works to scale proven grassroots gun violence reduction strategies in impacted communities around the nation.

**4. Advance corporate policies and culture.** In late 2018, LS&Co.'s human resources team drafted a Global Transgender and Gender Transition Guide-

line and turned to Pioneer Kris Hayashi, executive director of the Transgender Law Center (TLC), to review the draft and help with the launch. Hayashi and other TLC leaders were invited to speak at a corporate HR briefing and then an all-staff town hall.

At both events he underscored the importance of shifting corporate policies and cultures and shared his vast knowledge of inclusive practices. Afterward, a seasoned human resources colleague remarked, "I've been in this company for 20 years and have never had to ask these questions about trans visibility – but I realize by not asking these questions we're not doing our work."

For Hayashi and the other Pioneers, this kind of alliance was an unheard of opportunity to extend their influence into the private sector. At the same time, they were seeing how their alliance with corporate foundation could build their visibility as leaders and create a larger platform for their causes. As Hayashi said, "Building a relationship with Levi Strauss & Co. has raised the impact of our organization's work,

and the movements and campaigns that we represent."

Once again, the influence went both ways. In June 2019, at the San Francisco Pride event, TLC staff and supporters marched beside LS&Co. employees, marking the first time a company and nonprofit had paired up.

That same week, Hayashi spoke at an employee forum on the topic of "frontiers of justice and inclusion in the LGBTQ+ movement." The discussion addressed issues of immigration, transgender justice, youth empowerment, aging, gender and intersectionality.

**5. Put your money where your voice is.** LS&Co. has a long history of exerting its advocacy to advance equality in the U.S. Over the last 4 years these efforts have intensified as the company has weighed in on transgender inclusion, the Muslim Ban, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), voting rights and gun safety. It has been helpful for our foundation to simultaneously make investments in movement advocates who'd devoted themselves to ad-

## Corporate foundations and business leaders speak out on voter suppression

Traditionally, corporate foundations and their associated companies have been hesitant to wade into anything remotely controversial. Daniel Lee noted how rare it is for corporate leaders to speak out on corporate responsibility or legislative change.

But more foundation and business leaders have been speaking out in response to the legislation that has been proposed or passed this year to make voting more difficult, most notably the Georgia law that places new restrictions on mail-in voting, strengthens voter ID requirements and even prevents non-election workers from giving water to voters waiting in long lines at the polls.

The Georgia bill, signed into law by Gov. Brian Kemp in March, was passed

after voter registration efforts, led by Stacey Abrams's Fair Fight and NCRP nonprofit member Black Voters Matter, helped Joe Biden win the state's 16 electoral votes and helped elect 2 Democrats as the state's U.S. senators.

Seventy-two Black corporate and foundation executives signed a full-page *New York Times* ad that condemned the Georgia law and called on corporate America to speak out.

And more than 280 corporate executives, including LS&Co.'s Chip Bergh, have signed a statement calling on elected officials to make voting easy for everyone, noting that "our elections are not improved when lawmakers impose barriers that result

in longer lines at the polls or that reduce access to secure ballot dropboxes."

In his own statement, Bergh said: "At Levi Strauss & Co., we're committed to expanding voting rights to all Americans until everyone has an equal say in our collective destiny. We'll continue to advocate to improve access to the polls and dismantle voting barriers designed to disenfranchise communities of color."

But statements aren't enough, and that's why companies and corporate funders interested in making a real impact need to follow LS&Co. and LSF into the "uncharted territory" of working with grassroots movements.

—NCRP

vancing policy reform in these areas.

For example, we supported the International Refugee Assistance Project's mobilization of lawyers at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York and San Francisco International Airport's international arrivals hall following the Muslim ban, the TLC's work following the administration's efforts to legally erase transgender people, and United We Dream and Define American's efforts to organize DACA recipients.

LS&Co. was a founding member of "Time to Vote," a nonpartisan coalition that's grown to include 1,600 businesses committed to removing barriers to vote; the company and foundation also invested \$2.9 million in grassroots voting rights groups like Black Futures Lab, Black Voters Matter, She the People and Native Organizers Alliance.

**6. Leverage corporate platforms.** We are in a "movement moment" full of pain and promise, and it's important for those of us with access to capital, influential platforms and global brands to use every tool at our disposal to drive change. Since June, the Levi's corporate brand has hosted an Instagram series called "Use Your Voice: Live," featuring conversations between movement leaders, artists and influencers, and reaching 7 million followers.

The program has featured LSF grantees including Mike McBride, Tarana Burke (MeToo movement), LaTosha Brown (Black Voters Matter), Jose Antonio Vargas (Define American), Aimee Allison (She the People), Ai-jen Poo (National Domestic Workers Alliance), Alicia Garza (Black Lives Matter), Jeanine Abrams (Fair Count), Cristina Jimenez (United We Dream) and Desmond Meade (Florida Rights Restoration Coalition).

Leveraging this media platform has enabled these leaders to reach much broader audiences on critical issues of the day, including systemic racism, gender justice, immigration and gun

violence prevention. During the past 2 months, this series has focused on increasing voter turnout and combatting disenfranchisement and reached hundreds of thousands of consumers.

By building bridges between grassroots leaders and brand audiences that never existed before, our company and foundation have been able to play a more additive role in bolstering movements and bringing about systems change.

### THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BUSINESS AND POLITICS

We believe this work reflects the new reality that business and politics are intertwined – and that companies and their foundations have a critical role to play in defending our democracy and in shaping the future.

Over the last 4 years, we've seen businesses take bolder stands on issues such as climate change, gun safety, immigration and civil rights. But very few companies are pairing these actions with strategic investments in social justice movements or partnerships with social justice activists.

"Corporations remain invisible in our work at our own peril," said McBride at the outset of the Pioneers program. "How can we challenge the corporate sector to be better political champions?"

The willingness of our grantee partners to step into that relationship has given both LS&Co. and LSF practice in funding social justice movements and in elevating our own values and voice.

"If there's anything I'm most proud of, it's the way that we have been able to align the goals of the foundation, the goals of the Pioneers and leaders like them, and the longer-term goals of the company in having an outsized impact on the world and leading through our values," said Seth Jaffe. "The Pioneer program started as a way for us to invest in these great organizations but helping them has helped us as well."

The big revelation of the Pioneers initiative was how profoundly the Levi Strauss Foundation, and the Levi Strauss

& Co., would be changed by entering in unlikely partnership with these social justice leaders. It inspired us to do more, changed how and who we fund, and to take moral stands in ways that would not have been imagined.

In this "movement moment," it is time for all of us, as institutions and individuals, to ask ourselves hard questions about who we align with, who we stick our necks out for, who we give money to and who we're willing to be changed by. What we stand for matters, but who we stand alongside matters even more. ■

*Daniel Lee is the former executive director of Levi Strauss Foundation and vice-chair of NCRP's board.*

## Notes

1. Based on new National Center for Responsive Philanthropy analysis of Candid data on corporate foundation giving from 2003 to 2016, conducted for the Levi Strauss Foundation.
2. Our lessons learned were captured in a reflection Daniel Lee I wrote for SSIR (<https://ssir.org/articles/entry/supporting-nonprofit-leadership-a-pre-flight-briefing>) in 2014, as well as a by Heather McLeod Grant case study by Heather McLeod Grant (<https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Levi-Strauss-Foundation-Pioneers-in-Justice.pdf>).
3. Kris Hayashi of the Transgender Law Center, Pastor Michael McBride of Faith in Action's Live Free Campaign, Vanessa Moses of Causa Justa Just Cause, Zach Norris of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Aparna Shah of Power California, Terry Valen of the Filipino Community Center, and Miya Yoshitani of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network.
4. See <https://fortune.com/2018/09/04/levi-strauss-gun-violence-parkland/>.
5. See <https://fortune.com/2020/09/01/levi-strauss-ceo-racial-inequality-voter-disenfranchisement/>.