

Responsive Philanthropy

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IN THIS ISSUE

Performative philanthropy and the cost of silence

By RAY HOLGADO

1

Filling in NoVo's void

By BRANDI COLLINS-CALHOUN

3

Donors and foundations are increasingly supporting movements

By AARON DORFMAN

6

A message from the President and CEO 2

Priscilla Chan embraces her husband Mark Zuckerberg while announcing the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative to "cure, prevent or manage all disease" by the end of the century during a news conference in San Francisco in September 2016. REUTERS/Beck Diefenbach

Performative philanthropy and the cost of silence

By Ray Holgado

My experience of anti-Blackness at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and an urgent appeal to our sector

In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Tony McDade, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) published an open letter expressing support for the nationwide protests and the call for racial justice.

On June 5, Priscilla Chan, who owns and operates CZI alongside her husband, Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, said: "I stand in solidarity with the Black community and all those risking their own health and safety in the fight for justice, equity, and inclusion."

She went on to punctuate the sentiment by declaring, "Black Lives Matter."

The statement, which remains prominently displayed on the CZI website, stands in stark contrast to my experience as a Black man working at CZI for the past 2 years.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS VERSUS THE INTERNAL REALITY

During my time at CZI, I served in multiple departments and roles, performing a wide range of duties, including grantmaking, grants management and operations. Throughout my experience, I was consistently alarmed by the racially discriminatory practices displayed in the organization's treatment of Black employees and its approach to grantmaking, which operates devoid of racial analysis and often with reckless disregard for (continued on page 9)



challenging grantmakers to strengthen communities

Performative philanthropy and the cost of silence

(continued from page 1)

how internally devised “solutions” will affect Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities.

While working at the foundation, I made well-documented efforts to highlight these concerns for members of the CZI leadership team, all while contending with numerous incidents of racial discrimination, including pay inequity, threats to my job security from senior leaders and acts of retaliation made against me.

While these incidents made my experience at CZI contentious and oppressive, I was equally disturbed by accounts from Black colleagues who were facing similar issues at the foundation. These are not my stories to tell, but I must note that the most egregious acts of bias and discrimination were those perpetuated against Black women, who were consistently undervalued, underutilized and treated with callous disregard and disrespect.

Noting that my previous efforts to see these issues brought to light had gone unanswered, on Aug. 20, 2019, I met with Priscilla Chan. I told her that incidents of racial discrimination were occurring at CZI and requested that she investigate these issues further.

My appeal was met with the all-too-familiar sophistry of a leader who wishes to avoid responsibility by minimizing the experiences of their employees. Although she initially expressed concern regarding my statements, she quickly veered the conversation toward a broader discussion of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices.

Priscilla explained to me that “DEI may look different for each of us” – seeming to imply that claims of discrimination could simply be matters of misinterpretation. I countered this line of reasoning, stating that CZI’s DEI strategy was inadequate and amounted to a tokenizing quota-based approach to diversity.



I explained that, while CZI had successfully recruited Black talent, it had failed to empower and integrate the perspectives of Black employees into the work – a point supported by multiple engagement surveys that indicated Black employees suffered a significantly lower sense of inclusion and belonging at CZI, and further evidenced by the exponentially higher rate at which Black employees left the organization.

Knowing that I had only been afforded 10 minutes to discuss these issues, I came prepared to offer a course of action, suggesting that Chan prioritize hiring a seasoned DEI professional with a proven record of success working with similarly stunted organizations.

She pushed back on this idea, indicating that she preferred to select a more junior individual for the role, out of a desire to “give them the opportunity to develop in the role and in their understanding of these issues. In the same way we’ve been able to develop you on the Criminal Justice team.”

This patronizing comment told me all I needed to know about my employer and confirmed the old adage: A fish rots from the head.

While on the Criminal Justice Reform team at CZI, I was paid significantly less than non-Black colleagues in the department, less than employees across the organization who held similar responsibilities and less than the originally advertised salary for the position I held.

Days after joining the Criminal Justice Reform department, I was warned

by a senior member of the team that I should avoid pushing for grantmaking strategies that centered racial equity, as Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan did not believe race was relevant to the issue of mass incarceration. I was told that previous attempts to educate the couple on this matter had contributed to a former employee being terminated.

Every indication I received while working at CZI told me that this was a place that did not value my professional expertise, identity or lived experience and that if I hoped to keep my job, I would need to suppress my values, beliefs and opinions.

Despite having joined CZI with substantial nonprofit and philanthropic experience, Chan’s comment underscored her perception of me as someone who was enjoying the good fortune of “developing” my talents at the foundation. This stood in stark contrast to the reality of working at CZI, which had revealed itself to be an extractive and exploitative environment for me and numerous Black employees.

I left the conversation unsatisfied with her responses and her lack of leadership, but remained hopeful that she would take appropriate action to address the matters of racial discrimination.

That hope would prove to be naive. Following our discussion, no follow-up meeting was scheduled, no HR representative reached out to me, and no one intervened on behalf of myself or my colleagues. Nothing was done.

CZI’S BLACK EMPLOYEES SEND A LETTER TO PRISCILLA CHAN

I cannot speak to why Chan did not take our conversation seriously, but I know that her negligence allowed inexcusable stress and harm to continue against Black employees. Further, I know such negligence is not the mark of someone who truly believes and understands that Black Lives Matter.

As reported by *The Washington Post*¹ in August, the issues of racial bias and discrimination at CZI came to a head when CZI's Black employee resource group sent a letter to Priscilla Chan.

In the letter, the collective body of Black employees outlined the systemic racism, discrimination and anti-Blackness present at CZI, citing its treatment of Black employees, its underinvestment in the Black community and the lack of action taken by leadership to address these persistent disparities.

In addition, the letter included a list of recommendations that the group believed would serve as good-faith first steps towards building a more inclusive and just environment for Black employees.

Unfortunately, Chan once again failed to grasp the seriousness of the issues the letter raised, refusing to meet several of the group's requests, most notably, declining to provide transparency into CZI's pay equity data as it related to Black employees.

Instead of working through the plan of action that was put forth by Black employees, she tasked a recently hired chief operating officer with devising and implementing an alternative course of action. Having witnessed the dynamics of passing the buck and placating employees with half measures play out multiple times at the foundation, I recognized that further efforts would be in vain. On Aug. 31, I left CZI.

Earlier this week, I filed a discrimination claim² against CZI with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on behalf of myself and fellow Black employees who have experienced racial bias and discrimination at the foundation.

In addition, I have chosen to publish the claim in its entirety here, detailing the discrimination and systemic racial bias I have faced and witnessed while working at CZI.

After careful deliberation and counsel from colleagues in the field, I felt compelled to take these actions to ensure that CZI and its leaders are held accountable. I believe it is irresponsible and dangerous for an organization of this magnitude and influence to operate without care or consideration for race, while tackling issues related to voting rights, housing, criminal justice, immigration and education – issues steeped in a history of systemic racial bias and inequity.

Further, I know that my experience of discrimination at CZI is indicative of a larger problem concerning the treatment of Black people in philanthropy, and I believe my silence would only serve to reinforce the acceptability of similar practices.



CZI is not the first philanthropy that has sought to portray a commitment to racial justice, while privately operating in a discriminatory and racially biased manner.

Too often philanthropy devolves into a grotesque performance, where funders court a public image as “progressive,” “trust-based,” “anti-racist” and “responsive to community needs,” all while failing to do the work required to earn those accolades.

Inevitably, Black employees become enrolled in this performance and are resigned to serve as window dressing for institutions that we ourselves recognize as deeply flawed.

Against our better judgment, we are expected to publicly uphold, defend and promote philanthropies that we are rarely positioned to shape or influence. Worst still, if we attempt to affect change from within these institutions, we are reprimanded, our voices are suppressed, or we are quietly asked to leave.

This is an unprecedented moment in our country's long and grisly history of racial and economic inequity. We find ourselves contending with a global pandem-

ic that has disproportionately ravaged the Black community, a renewed social movement to end the violence and brutality perpetuated against Black bodies, and a presidential election that has seen the topic of white supremacy become a central matter of discussion and debate.

Now, perhaps more than ever, philanthropy should be rushing to center Black voices and expertise and to build authentic partnerships with the broader Black community.

Yet, as I speak to colleagues, friends and associates in the field, I am disheartened by accounts of Black professionals who, like myself, have been disempowered and displaced in this moment.

Programs are being cut, positions are being eliminated and the established trend of Black professionals leaving the industry at an alarming rate³ seems likely to only continue in the face of the growing need for our presence and “lived experience.”

Even now, BIPOC professionals who have spent the last decade calling for foundations to embrace racial equity as a priority across their grantmaking, organizational culture and operations, are finding that their appeals continue to go largely ignored as institutions remain resistant to change.

All the while, many of these same institutions have been the quickest to capitalize on opportunities to publicize and self-applaud the marginal efforts they have undertaken to “respond to the moment.”

I think I speak for many of my colleagues in the field when I say I did not enter this industry to settle for the appearance of doing good. I am a Black man who grew up across the low-income neighborhoods of Queens, New York, and have experienced firsthand the effects of urban poverty and the intricacies of generational disenfranchisement.

I have faced many of the same barriers and challenges affecting the communities our sector purports to serve. My commitment to Black liberation and my deeply

held desire to empower BIPOC and historically marginalized communities is not a matter of academic curiosity or charitable sentiment – it is core to who I am.

I believe philanthropy, much like our country, has arrived at a critical juncture and the choice before us is clear:

- We can accept, as many of our harshest critics have indicated, that this industry is irredeemable and beyond self-reform.
- We can accept that justice cannot serve as a guiding principle for a sector that emerged as a byproduct of this country's history of racial and economic inequity.
- We can resign ourselves to “performative philanthropy” and accept that our work will remain inextricably tied to generating publicity for individuals who have often amassed their fortunes through extractive and unethical means.
- We can accept the status quo and allow this moment to pass, just as it always has.

Or alternatively, we can commit ourselves to doing the hard work of reimagining all that this industry is and can be.

- We – industry executives, practitioners and professionals who came to this work seeking to center the needs of the communities we cherish, only to find ourselves enrolled in shadow theater – can commit ourselves to holding institutions accountable even when that means prioritizing our duty over our jobs.
- We can commit ourselves to serving as true partners and co-conspirators for movements and communities entrenched in the fight for liberation.
- We can commit ourselves to denouncing acts of performative philanthropy, recognizing that when institutions fail to align their private actions with their publicized values, when they choose media attention over community empowerment and power hoarding over trust, and become bastions for bias and ex-

tensions of white supremacy – We can commit ourselves to calling these institutions to task and exposing them for what they really are.

This is the choice before us, and the stakes have never felt higher. ■

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Notes

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/08/16/chan-zuckerberg-initiative-black-employees/>
2. <https://rayholgado.medium.com/chan-zuckerberg-initiative-racial-discrimination-claim-4d4637f054d8>
3. <https://www.abfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ABFE-The-Exit-Interview.pdf>

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New Visions Foundation
Rachel's Network

Richmond Memorial Health Foundation
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