

# How philanthropy can help us be better as a nation

By Rick Williams

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Rick Williams, Sobrato Family Foundation's chief executive, reflects on his 20 years in philanthropy and suggests 10 priority action items for the sector to help America reach its full potential.

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As I announce my retirement and reflect on 20 years in philanthropy and 30 in the social impact community, I am in awe of the generosity and transformational acts I've seen from individuals from all walks of life.

Their collective efforts have alleviated suffering and created opportunities for so many. Whether building schools and libraries, battling polio, preserving open space, reclaiming communities, protecting our environment and natural resources, supporting social impact entrepreneurs or promoting racial, civil and gender rights, philanthropy has been instrumental in advancing and investing in the hopes and dreams of people working to create a better future.

I believe that philanthropy must use its leadership, creativity, positional power and resources to support the development of a vision for our country that focuses on promoting everyone's collective wellbeing. It's a vision that tackles the structural root causes of our social problems that we resist addressing as a nation.

## EARLY LESSONS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PHILANTHROPY

It was probably my destiny to have a career in philanthropy. Growing up as an African American in South Carolina, I was able to see all facets of this country's citizens' interpretation of the constitutional phrase, "All men are created equal." I grew up in a place



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and time still mired in the aftermath of slavery, segregation and racial oppression. It was a place and time where the hopes and dreams of my many neighborhood friends were either overtly limited or crushed by racist policies and practices, or insidiously through indifference and neglect.

Fortunately, I was born into a loving home with an ever-present extended family. My father served 30 years in the U.S. Army and another 20 building future military leaders as a member of Gonzaga University's ROTC staff. My mother was a licensed pediatric nurse. They both used their opportunities to ensure that doors that were closed to them as children would open for my sister and me.

Social justice lessons of my childhood not only sharpened my awareness of how tenuous a shared belief in a common good is, but also how challenging it is to advance the founding elements of our democracy on a daily basis. They taught me that there are caring, enlightened and committed individuals willing to invest their own resources into philanthropic causes; whether through vast fortunes or the change in their pockets, they worked toward improving the lives of strangers and pushing our country to live up to its principles.

So, philanthropy, large and small, through donated money, volunteered time and expressions of love, shaped me and continues to give me hope – though tested lately by our current national politics – for the future of our country and democracy.

## STRIVING FOR PHILANTHROPY'S FULL POTENTIAL

Philanthropy is defined as charitable giving and altruistic acts motivated by the desire to promote the welfare of others, to better humanity and to make the world a better place. There is a growing preference for philanthropy to evolve into a science, focused on a clearly defined set of inputs that will lead us to a clearly defined result that can be replicated.

I hold a somewhat different view: To achieve philanthropy's true meaning, I believe we need to see philanthropy as

a combination of both science and art.

Our humanity and relationships with fellow humans and the planet are far too complicated to fit neatly within the scientific method. Some of our biggest philanthropic accomplishments would not have met the rigid test of a logic model because their specific outcomes resulted from the “unscientific” investments in the belief of a greater good for society and individuals.

Now, more than ever, we need the application of creative skills and imagination, reasoning, data and passion to change the social condition for a growing number of our suffering neighbors.

While philanthropy is praised for achieving some of the most amazing and life-changing advances in modern times, it is not immune to losing the public’s trust. Recently, philanthropic efforts have been criticized and challenged for focusing on the symptoms

of persistent and systematic injustice, discrimination and oppression rather than impacting the underlying political, economic and social structures at their roots – roots that perpetuate social injustice and massive wealth accumulation by a select few.

#### TODAY’S URGENT NEEDS

We are in a period in which inequality in all its forms is altering the fabric of our neighborhoods and communities.

The potential to realize the dream of climbing the economic and social ladder – a hallmark of our country’s core narrative – no longer feels accessible to a growing number of children and young adults. Too many of our neighbors are scared and frustrated that their hard work does not result in the certainty that they can afford a home and take care of their family. Too many are plagued with worry that one missed

paycheck or one unexpected family expense may cause financial ruin.

We are unable to address the root causes that create this sense of helplessness and frustration in a growing number of people across the country due to polarizing government and policy debates. I believe that philanthropy, as a field rather than as individual institutions, should and must play a role in framing, leading and providing resources to drive a new conversation and test promising new ideas that focus on bettering the nation.

The social challenges we seek to solve will require persistence, intuition, innovation, risk-taking and no small measure of faith and hope. And philanthropy is best positioned to bring those traits to bear.

However, this can only occur if philanthropy, which represents the voice of hundreds of leaders and influencers,

## New and Renewed NCRP Members

A Black Education Network  
Allegany Franciscan Ministries  
American Jewish World Service  
Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute  
Black Voters Matter Fund  
Borealis Philanthropy  
Center for Popular Democracy  
Community Coalition  
Community Foundation of Tompkins County  
Cricket Island Foundation  
Charles K. Blandin Foundation  
Con Alma Health Foundation  
Consumer Health Foundation  
Headwaters Foundation for Justice  
Heising-Simmons Foundation  
Kansas Health Foundation  
Korean American Community Foundation

Liberty Hill Foundation  
Lumina Foundation  
Minneapolis Foundation  
Ms. Foundation for Women  
National Guestworker Alliance  
Pay Our Interns  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Ruth Mott Foundation  
Seattle Foundation  
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network  
The Annie E Casey Foundation  
The California Endowment  
The Heinz Endowments  
Virginia Organizing  
Voqal  
Walter and Elise Haas Fund  
William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

is prepared to speak out against the systems that not only enable it to thrive, but also enable the unconscionable detention and separation of children from their families at our nation's border, the absence of justice for the killing of Black men and women, and the lack of punishment for the financial schemes and products that caused the Great Recession (which has been projected to cause a 40% decrease in the wealth of Black households by 2030). These are just a few of many examples.

### 10 MOST CRITICAL ACTIONS FOR BOLD AND ENTREPRENEURIAL PHILANTHROPIC LEADERSHIP

Now more than ever, members of the philanthropic community must collectively come together to ensure that our democracy and way of life regains its moral footing and operates in a manner that ensures benefits are accessible to all. The people behind philanthropy, the resources under their control and the tax benefits that foundations receive demand nothing less.

In a sincere attempt to provoke the discussion and action that I believe are urgently needed to help change the troubling direction where the country is headed, I humbly submit the following 10 priorities for the philanthropic community:

1. Acknowledge the inherent power, privilege and subsidies, which enable vast resources of philanthropic wealth to accumulate.
2. Commit to stewarding this wealth toward alleviating suffering, removing structural impediments to upward mobility and affording marginalized communities a voice in local, state and national policy debates.
3. Allocate resources to help the country engage in the long overdue discussion about race, segregation and discrimination and their persistent and current impacts. Seek to reverse class and racial segregation

in our neighborhoods, schools and churches.

4. Allocate resources to prevent the degradation and erosion of our democracy to ensure that all residents are represented, and that our governing institutions and the press commit to advancing human rights.
5. Focus on building healthy, diverse communities so that a child's life outcomes can no longer be predicted by their zip code or the price of the houses in their neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

6. Be a leading voice in talking about systemic barriers and oppression that have left too many communities behind. Ensure that community advocates know they are not standing alone because capitalism, while positive in many respects, is not a guardian of social justice and equitable opportunities.
7. Support efforts that enable all citizens to experience the benefits of art and the world's diverse cultural works that low-income and rural communities typically find inaccessible.
8. Advance our intellectual and scientific understanding of the facts related to who we are as a species and the world we live in.
9. Embrace your role as a venture capitalist for social good and social justice. Find and bet on social impact leaders and entrepreneurs, take risks, be willing to fail and learn, and be responsive and connected to the community you serve.
10. Maintain long-term commitment to your areas of focus and partner organizations through multi-year general operating support and flexible resources. It is only with long-term partnerships that we can drive lasting change.

The field of philanthropy must take a proactive role in helping America realize its potential.

Dream big. Because if you don't, who will? ■

*Rick Williams is CEO of the Sobrato Family Foundation, which seeks to make Silicon Valley a place of opportunity for all its residents.*

## Notes

1. For more on the social determinants of health, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/index.htm>.

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