

# Going Further Together: Collective Learning for Impact

By Douglas Bitonti Stewart

As the conference wound down, the facilitator congratulated the group for the learning we had done together. For two days, we had listened to experts in the field and convened with funder and research and policy colleagues from cities across the country to discuss best practices in early childhood education. The volume in the room had started to rise as attendees shoved materials into their burlap conference logo bags when the facilitator made her final comment, “Thanks again everyone ... and by the way, do you think we had the right people in the room here? Who are we missing?”

And that’s when it hit me. Maybe it was because the conference was filled with people from all over the country. Maybe it was because the conversations seemed to be filled with less listening and more boasting about accomplishments than I was used to. Or, maybe it was a combination of all of those factors and my initial reaction when I found out that the conference cost nearly \$3,000 to attend. Whatever it was, I was inspired to answer the question with two other questions. I cleared my throat, settled my nerves and asked, “Has anyone here ever had to worry about whether or not you were going to be able to feed your children?” The room went quiet and I asked my follow-up, “Is anyone not being paid to be here?”

When there was no answer I simply said, “Well, I’m sure we’re all thinking the same thing, but it seems to me we need to make sure the next time we’re together

talking about families living in poverty and the challenges they face making sure their children are ready for school, we should have a few in the room learning and teaching alongside us.”

## PLACE-BASED WORK ALONGSIDE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THAT PLACE

Of course, the question of whether the right people are in the room goes beyond conferences, and there are innumerable opportunities for shared learning in every aspect of our social impact work.<sup>1</sup> For the last eight years, I’ve been privileged to serve the Detroit-based Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation. After a 20-year career raising money to support social impact organizations I was passionate about, from people whom I came to adore, I was given the opportunity to work with one of those donor families to galva-

nize their dreams to repair the world. As the first staff person hired, I worked alongside the family to craft a mission statement and outline four impact areas: building the Jewish community, promoting education, supporting arts and culture and fighting HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>

Steeped in their shared Jewish heritage, the family approaches their philanthropic work in the spirit of tzedakah, which is the Hebrew word used to describe justice.<sup>3</sup> Instead of seeing giving as an act of charity or benevolence, this core value means the family works to empower communities because it must be done, and done with a sense of justice. To do so takes a lot of listening and the recognition that the act of tzedakah cannot be done to someone. For our grantmaking to have a lasting impact, the people inside the issues we hope to solve need to allow us and our



Photo courtesy of the Max. M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation.

## New and Renewing Members

American Jewish World Service

Blandin Foundation

California Community Foundation

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

Community West Foundation

Compton Foundation, Inc.

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Funders for LGBTQ Issues

Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE)

Mizrahi Family Charitable Fund

The Needmor Fund

Norman Foundation

Park Foundation, Inc.

Retirement Research Foundation

Ruth Mott Foundation

The San Francisco Foundation

Southern California Grantmakers

Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program  
at Shelter Rock

W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Walter & Elise Haas Fund



*Photo courtesy of the Max. M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation.*

partners into their lives – and we need to let them into ours. All those involved need to be active, willing and vulnerable participants in the process.

### SHARED LEARNING, ALIGNMENT AND ACTION

This value and ideal drove the family to work on the ground alongside people in places of need. One of those areas is a six-square mile neighborhood in Northwest Detroit known as Brightmoor. For the past seven years, through our partnership with the Brightmoor Alliance, we've been working with residents and leaders in the neighborhood to support their efforts, especially in the realm of early childhood education.

Thanks to this focused work and the relationships formed along the way, we have learned a great deal about this critical time in a child's life, as seen through the eyes of the women in poverty who step forward to open early child care centers in their homes and the neighborhood. While we didn't think of it in these terms at the time, we were cocreating together with those partners as we

listened and responded together to the changing nature of the work.

One of the first grant proposals we received from an organization serving Brightmoor focused on improving the quality of the early childhood educational offerings in the neighborhood. This potential grant partner was well versed in the neighborhood and had been working with the early childhood education providers for a few years before we arrived on the scene. After receiving the proposal, we asked if we could meet with the people for whom the effort was intended. After some back and forth and offers of letters of support from women of the neighborhood, the agency agreed to introduce us to a few of the actual women who would be participants in the program and a meeting was arranged.

Zina, Felicia and Sonya entered our offices and thanked us for agreeing to meet. After introductions and comments from both teams about context, we shared the full proposal we had received with the women. While they told us they had never seen a grant proposal before, they knew to

jump to the back of the packet to see the budget. The size of the \$500,000 three-year grant shocked our guests. The women asked if they could have more time with the proposal so they could better understand the scope of the proposed work.

Two weeks later, the three Brightmoor early childhood leaders came back to our office and presented their questions. Humbly, they shared the proposal was missing three elements critical to the success of the work: basic needs to help the families focus on their children's education, transportation to get families to their locations and scholarships. The first two made immediate sense and we knew they represented other long-term issues families in Brightmoor face. The third issue was less obvious. The women described their idea for scholarships as creating an incentive for both the families in their care and their small businesses, which centered on a sliding scale of increasing scholarships tied to quality milestones. The better the quality of the center, the more scholarships they could offer, strengthening both their businesses and the families who always struggled to pay their bills.

Our teams worked together, alongside the grant partner, to align our shared incentives. The resulting work and agreement increased our investment in the project to more than \$800,000. Thanks to Zina, Felicia and Sonya's insight, when the state of Michigan began its own quality initiative once the resources were available, scholarships were tied to quality ratings.

### MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

There's an African proverb etched into the walls at the Gates Foundation that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." The social impact sector lives this message most every day. However, we have a

As a white male who  
enjoys  
all sorts of privileges  
– some earned,  
some not,  
some visible to me,  
some not –  
I'm starting  
to ask myself  
new questions  
and am encouraging  
my colleagues  
to do the same.

little bit farther to go when it comes to inclusivity at conferences where we learn and share together.

So what do we do? Since my questions at the early childhood conference seemed to point a finger at the sector, I've been focusing on pointing a finger back at myself, and challenging how I can make decisions differently.

As a white male who enjoys all sorts of privileges – some earned, some not, some visible to me, some not – I'm starting to ask myself new questions and am encouraging my colleagues to do the same. When I recently had a chance to go to another expensive "you-really-should-be-there" conference focused on the leadership of our local region, I asked myself if my being there would truly benefit those in attendance. I decided to call my partner at the Brightmoor Alliance, a man well-versed in the politics of the region who is very different from me in many ways, including not having enough resources to get to the conference, and asked him if he wanted to attend. Reverend Larry had not been invited but I knew he would be welcomed. He went, strengthened his existing networks, made new contacts and most assuredly made an impact on the conversations in which he participated.

Moving forward together as a social impact sector, let's redouble our efforts to learn alongside our partners – both those who work to address the issues we hope to face as well those inside the very same issues. ■

*Douglas Bitonti Stewart is executive director of the Max M. and Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation.*

## Notes

1. Because the "nonprofit" sector is the only sector described by what it is not, the term "social impact" is used throughout this piece in its place. The author feels "social impact" is a more appropriate name because its chief aim is to make an impact in our world, not to simply break even. The term also places the sector within the context of its sister sector: for-profit, for-impact.
2. See <http://www.mmfisher.org/>.
3. Jacquelyn DeGroot, "Jewish Philanthropy: The Concept of Tzedakah," Learning to Give, <http://learningtogive.org/papers/paper66.html>.