

Honoring 50 years of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and its imprint on women's funding

By Tracy Gary

For 5 decades, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) has been a beacon of accountability, courage and principled challenge in the philanthropic sector, urging foundations and donors to put power, equity and community responsiveness at the heart of their giving. In celebrating NCRP's 50th anniversary, I find myself reflecting not only on the organization's structural achievements, but also on the generative spirit it has contributed to a broader movement for democratic, inclusive and justice-oriented philanthropy – a spirit that motivated me in my mid-20s and that still propels the field forward today in a tough and regressive period, just as it did around its founding in 1976. I will always be grateful for NCRP's exemplary boldness, availability, activism and strategic leadership.

years – my introduction to NCRP was during the first few years of the National Network of Grantmakers conference. It was a progressive network of foundations, representatives and donors that operated over time with some 400 members from 1980–2003 with a national convening. It also had many field-changing projects I was part of for more than 15 years. Bob stood out for his advocacy and encouragement. I was seeking mentors, and it was clear Bob and NCRP had a lot to teach me.

The Ford Foundation had come out with a study in the late 1970s that said that foundations only gave 1% of all their dollars granted to women and girls, and I sought to work to change that. It seemed unbelievable to me, a donor activist in-



Tracy Gary

how to make change happen. He was not just a good observer and listener, but, with NCRP, always providing great research and evidence. He seemed to have a fearless critique of entrenched philan-

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–Tracy Gary

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON NCRP'S EARLY IMPACT

NCRP's first Executive Director Bob Bothwell was a leader who understood that philanthropy could and should do more than simply write checks – it could help transform power structures that kept entire communities disenfranchised.

As a young 29-year-old from New York – but now in the Bay Area for over 53

heritor on the way to give away all my inheritance (about \$7 million in today's dollars) between ages 21 and 35. I was a young feminist in my 20s when I began funding women and social change. I wanted more people to do so, and for there to be more funder education on what was needed.

Bob was welcoming and encouraging, and he showed up with tons of ideas for

thropic practices. He was, and NCRP still is 50 years later, a steadfast advocate for accountability and fairness to the disenfranchised, including women.

SPARKING THE WOMEN'S FUNDING NETWORK IN 1985

I helped start the Women's Foundation of California in San Francisco in 1979, which wanted to offer itself as a model that could be replicated. The goal was

to spark over 100 women's funds by the year 2000. Astraea Foundation, Ms. Foundation and Women's Way existed in the mid 1970s, but there were no replicated funds.

Bob and NCRP were working on workplace funds as democratized and accessible models of giving in workplaces. These funds showed that philanthropy was not just for wealthy people to give or for them to decide where the money was granted. Activist and community members could be equal decision makers alongside donors. Several of the workplace-giving funds served women and girls. Around the same time, Dana Alston founded the Black United Fund and was encouraging African American women to get involved. Soon Hispanics in Philanthropy was born in 1981 and Asians in Philanthropy in 1990. Along with Kathy Acey and the late Michael Seltzer, I helped seed and propel Funders for Gay and Lesbian Funding (now LGBTQ Funders) in 1982.

In 1982, I was asked to join the board of one of the first national networks of women in philanthropy called the Women and Foundation's Corporate Philanthropy. We were busy training women trustees to speak out about funding nonprofits for women and girls. Bob wrote me a note saying "Tracy, tell the trustees about the federations and about social change funds too." So, I did – in every room I stepped into for decades afterward.

It was natural for a network for women's funding to exist. Astraea, the Ms. Foundation, and NCRP's workplace member funds decided to meet in 1983. Initial meetings were hosted by NCRP and the Women's Foundation of California. Bob helped us by doing outreach to Dana Alston and WOMEN'S WAY and the "workplace" federations that were geared toward serving and supporting women and girls. Women

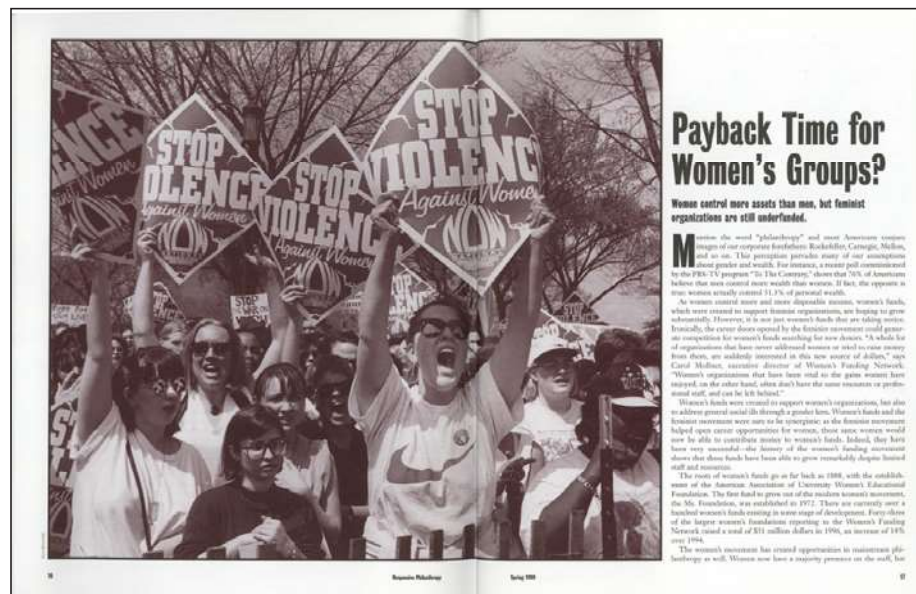
and Foundations helped house and raise funds with us, and we hired Carol Mollner who came to the job after her work getting the Women's Foundation of Minnesota going. Carol was the steady builder of the soon-to-be-named Women's Funding Network (WFN) and its founding conference in 1985. Carol remained as executive director, building the movement of women's funds for 14 more years until 1999. By the year 2000 – 15 years after that first convening – we had 119 women's funds across the United States, surpassing our goal of 100. After, Chris Grumm then Cynthia Schmae Nimmo and their teams built it to its membership of 180 women's fund. Since then, the vision has continued to spread internationally: Today there are dozens more funds connected through what is now the International Network of Women's Funds, called Prospera, rooted in the same democratic giving values that Bob, Dana and NCRP championed.

We planned a convening of at least 12 women's funds and federations in 1985, including both the emerging and established foundations and workplace federations. Though the funds used different approaches, women and girls, equity, justice and diversity were our

shared commitments. As so much of philanthropy was and still is headed by white people, we decided that in order to attend the convening, at least 25% of attendees had to be women of color. Bob cheered us on. There was resistance as many of the funders felt imposing diversity criteria was not "organic." But we persisted. Some of the now-180 funds are very diverse, but others are not. It is a process, and geography and leadership matters.

In 1985, the WFN joined identity-based philanthropic networks that were emerging and diversifying philanthropy while growing leadership. Several were seeded in 1980 and have evolved to be true forces in philanthropy, such as Neighborhood Funders, and Native Americans in Philanthropy in 1989.

NCRP leaders' voices have been of moral clarity. In the early years, traditional philanthropy operated with little scrutiny. Critique was rare and often unwelcome. NCRP's directors – Bob, Michael and Aaron – their teams, and their research helped change that. They insisted that philanthropy had to reflect the needs of those with the least wealth, the least power and the least



opportunity – and that foundations should be held to standards that go beyond tax compliance and ethical impact. Bob’s initial advocacy helped set the tone for NCRP’s mission: not to oppose philanthropy, but to make philanthropy more responsive, more equitable and more aligned with community aspirations.

Our aim was to grow a network dedicated to women’s funding that reflected diverse voices committed to shared power and social justice.

To my surprise after dedicating 15 years to movement building and then a 20-year hiatus from attending the WFN meetings, I was invited in fall 2025 to Washington by WFN’s Director of Philanthropy Chantal Bonitto to share the founding story from my perspective due to my efforts to grow leadership and more women donors. What brought tears to my eyes and hope to my heart was seeing the conference main hall, in which 75% of the 300 women’s fund leaders were women of color, and where

a majority of all attendees reflected the diversity that we had dreamed of and worked toward years ago! This was a moment of immense, generational fulfillment, rooted in movements that NCRP helped keep alive and accountable.

In 2007, Aaron Dorfman joined NCRP as executive director and is now its president and CEO, marking nearly 2 decades of leadership. I recently interviewed Aaron for a book I am writing with others on “redesigning nonprofits” and feel fortunate that he came to NCRP with deep experience in community organizing and a vision for research that could motivate action. How impressive is it that it has grown from a \$1 million to multi-million-dollar force for change. New partnerships and funders are a necessity now as the pressure to pull in and not fund DEI programs, immigrants’ rights or advocacy can destroy all that has been built. It is not an overstatement to say that new partnerships and funders are more crucial now than ever – to help

fund the advocacy avenues that have been built over the past 50 years.

Given what is happening now because of the administration’s policies and practices, NCRP’s 50th should raise an extra \$5 million to promote courage, boldness and a recommitment of what matters to so many to make lasting change. NCRP’s leadership is essential especially now, and we cannot just depend on foundations that have stripped their DEI commitments or that are earnestly afraid of losing their 501(c)(3) status.

May NCRP keep building new tools and advocate for better funding, fewer federal cuts, and new and better taxation. Having NCRP survive as a beacon for justice for 50 years is no small feat.

Throughout his tenure, Aaron has reinforced a theme that has become central to NCRP’s identity: Communities most impacted by inequity must be central to defining philanthropic strategy. Far from being abstract notions, this idea has shaped advocacy in various ways: urging foundations to prioritize general operat-

Special Report
Rightwing Attacks on Corporate Giving

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‘Defund-The-Left’ Campaign Intensifies, Women’s Rights Agenda Prime Target

A campaign of harassment by House anti-abortion activists directed at local Red Lobster restaurants is part of a much broader campaign by the right to force corporate foundations to defund progressive nonprofits, particularly in the women’s movement.

In the “defund the left” campaign of the ‘80s in search of a mass movement, with anti-abortion activists being carried in the foot soldiers of the right.

These assessments and others developed in this special issue of *Responsive Philanthropy* are the result of six months’ investigation and research by freelance writer Dawn Ransome.

Directed at the chain’s parent company, General Mills, the Red Lobster campaign has included pressure on managers of local restaurants, with picketing promised as soon as the corporate foundation moves in 1990 contribution to Planned Parenthood.

Organized by House leaders of the “rescue” movement that blocks abortion clinics and harasses their patients and staff, it is part of a broadly coordinated national boycott of Planned Parenthood’s corporate donors.

Leadership, international anti-abortion group—the Christian Action Council and Focus on the Family—have recently expanded their anti-Planned Parenthood campaign to include the Children’s Defense Fund, Ms. Foundation, NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, and People for the American Way.

And corporate donors to a major metropolitan funding consortium, Philadelphia’s Women Way, are also targets of a defunding drive being mounted by anti-abortion activists.

Corporate foundations don’t like to talk about it, but these campaigns are having some success and they are being raised as matters of national concern in local donors’ forums and at national philanthropic gatherings.

They are also being discussed in rightwing strategy sessions in Washington, including Paul Weyrich’s “I, Liberty Crusade.”

In fact, while the immediate attack is coming from the religious right, it is best understood as part of the long-term struggle of

New Right strategists such as Weyrich, the founder of the Heritage Foundation.

That design includes a much broader campaign against corporate philanthropy for “repressing the left.” Moreover, it calls on corporations to replace their current philanthropic goals with a new agenda and replace the progressive nonprofits with rightwing culture and replace the progressive nonprofits that they fund with nonprofits on the right.

As part of this, a Heritage offshoot, the Capital Research Center, has recently initiated the draft of its annual political agenda for corporations to replace their current philanthropic goals with a new agenda and replace the progressive nonprofits that they fund with nonprofits on the right.

Disfavored to corporate CEOs and their boards, these studies brought some initial, progressive grant cancellations—again, mostly of grants to women’s groups. Those cancellations have generally not continued.

In fact, where the right has been unable to link its attack on corporate giving at least to the appearance of a mass movement, it has had no great effect.

Since the late ‘70s, Weyrich and other strategists of the right have mapped a path to power leading through a movement built around “family” issues, with abortion as a spearhead.

Whether or not their anti-abortion strategy will follow, the right’s target is the whole progressive agenda, beginning with abortion, child care, pay equity and other women’s agenda items. And the payoff is the right’s financial backers will be continuing sources of cheap, often female

labor.

Most corporate foundations have not buckled under to the pressure. They cite their program goals and corporate boards that understand them as two of the reasons why.

But observers of corporate philanthropy worry that some have buckled—and have rewritten guidelines to make their decisions easier. They fear a transformation line will appear.

“It reminds me of Germany in the ‘30s,” remarked the executive director of the center. “When we need to know where the pressure is coming from, how it is organized, what can organizations and corporations do to better right back.”



Insider: The right’s defund campaign. Where’s it coming from. What to do about it.

CINCINNATI 1,600

WOMEN’S AGENDA

WILL & MARY HARTWELL

New Group Monitors Funding for Women

The newly formed National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy is asking individuals and organizations for their ideas on how private philanthropy can better serve public needs.

The Committee points out that “studies done recently” document how few dollars from private philanthropy flow to organizations working actively to correct inequities suffered by racial/ethnic minorities, by women and by other Americans generally—especially before the major governmental, economic and other interventions in the United States.

Members of the Committee’s Board—who include Barbara Stodie of the Children’s Foundation, Dorothy Hingle of the National Council of Negro Women, Maggie Kuhn of the Gray Panthers, Leah Moore of the Black Child Development Project and Mary Beth Tully of the NCFW Legal Development and Education Fund—believe that “assessments of the participation of philanthropy would be made in areas major locally and in every critical area of public need.”

“We think,” these assessment continues, “that these assessments should lead to the promotion of philanthropy’s grant giving programs, at the public’s access to philanthropy’s decision-making, and at philanthropy’s accountability to the public.”

Those interested in working with the Committee are asked to write to Bill Southwell, Executive Director, at 1000 Wisconsin Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20007.

Necessary Action
Social Justice Perspectives on What Needs to be Done

Foundations have to do a variety of things which are against their normal style of operation. They have to work to strengthen the influence of non-charismatic and non-organizational as well as empowered voices to put their public policy agenda into play. They have to support leadership building and development in that people can serve as the prime and fully effective, shared leadership. And they have to be willing to support success. There is no short-term solution given to these issues. Foundations must realize this and react fully.

David Cohen, Advisory Director

W hat relevance do foundations have for addressing social justice issues, particularly in these troubled times, and how does their performance measure up? What specifically can and should foundations do, through grantmaking and other strategies, to help social justice organizations fight for their beliefs, address the needs of their constituencies, and build

to develop new answers to these and related questions. NCRP surveyed a cross-section of social justice activists across the country (see page 11 for a complete list of interviewees). With few exceptions, respondents expressed considerable dissatisfaction with how the great majority of foundations known to them are operating, and especially with foundations’ grantmaking strategies. A small number of progressive funders were singled out for praise by several interviewees. Respondents freely shared their thoughts about and reactions to what foundations have been doing, but many declined to go on the record with their criticisms. Their responses with doing so is a strong indication of the lack of candor that can characterize the grantmaker-grantee relationship and of the obstacles that prevent foundations from receiving necessary feedback.

Interviewees offered key insights on grantmaking, including unexpected factors to guide foundation thinking, and proposed several concrete steps for immediate organizational change by foundations. But few of the ideas are currently being implemented.

What’s the Foundation World on the Critical Issues of the Day?

Many interviewees noted that foundations are doing to improve the use of any of administrative initiatives coming through Congress. In the face of what they regard as an onslaught of potentially disruptive and potentially harmful changes in national policy, none are applied, if not curtailed by the lack of appropriate resources and sense of urgency among foundations. As one respondent said: “The world as we know it is rapidly



DAVE LANE, Public Policy Research Institute, conducting a Building Bridges Conference sponsored by Ford for Institute for Economic Studies

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ing support, exposing underinvestment in communities of color, and critiquing philanthropic approaches that repeat systemic inequities.

At its core, NCRP is known as the philanthropic sector's "critical friend" – rigorous, principled and unafraid to name where the sector falls short while offering evidence-based guidance for doing better. Its legacy is not only in research reports or critiques, but in helping shift philanthropy from a mindset of charity to one of justice, shared power and accountability.

NCRP's voice helped start critical conversations on how philanthropy relates to democracy, equity, race, gender and community power, long before these concerns were widely recognized as central to effective social change. In that sense, NCRP did not follow trends: It helped create space for those trends to become visible, actionable and measurable.

LOOKING AHEAD

Now 50 years on, NCRP still insists that philanthropy be more than transactional

– it must be transformational. It calls on foundations and donors not just to give more, but to give differently: Support movements for justice, share power with communities and believe that philanthropy can help bend the arc toward equity. NCRP is not merely part of the philanthropic ecosystem, it helped shape the very questions we now ask about power, equity and impact.

As changemakers, dreamers and doers, we celebrate NCRP not only for what it has achieved, but for the questions it continues to pose: Who benefits from philanthropy? Who sets the agenda? Which voices are centered? Can government, business and funders do more? These are questions that have guided my own work, and I am deeply grateful for the ways NCRP has kept them alive, urgent and meaningful for 5 decades.

If you want the foundation and donor sector to evolve, fund and bring new supporters to NCRP. I commit to it. Join me! Here's to 50 more years of accountability, boldness and systemic change!

Tracy Gary has been a catalyst shaped by the community, its partners, networks, leaders and donors for over fifty years. She was a co-founder of The Women's Funding Network.

Tracy is the author of Inspired Philanthropy: Creating a Giving and Legacy Plan, and is writing a book, Redesigning Nonprofits, (Wiley Publishers, Nov. 2026). She has worked in fifty states and twenty-five countries promoting social justice giving and women's leadership. She helped start twenty-six nonprofits and has been on thirty boards. She engages multiple cultural generations for gifts made through giving from the heart with intention and strong advocacy for justice, equity and equality.

CIRCULATION 1,000

WOMEN'S AGENDA

1981

Constitutional Conventions: Newest Threat to Abortion Rights

Illinois Women Win State Advocate

Debate at Women's Campaign Fund

Responsible Philanthropy

Giving Exceeded \$50 Billion in 1981, Outpacing the Inflation Rate

For the first time in three years, the increase in private giving outpaced inflation, according to Giving USA, the annual report of the American Association of Fund-Raising Councils (AAFC). Total private giving rose 12.1% in 1981 to \$50.2 billion, substantially above the 8.9% inflation rate. AAFC cited this increase "a remarkable demonstration of how caring and generous Americans are."

In most parts of the world, however, could be attributed to the tax change scheduled for 1982, which led many tax advisors to urge wealthy donors to make gifts in 1981, when they would get more tax benefits. A study by the Gallup Organization found that 38% of a sample of taxpayers who consult their accountants say that the tax advantage stimulated their giving.

GIVING (in billions)		1981	Increase	Percent of total
Individuals	\$44.1	11.7%	8.7%	
Businesses	4.9	13.7%	9.7%	
Corporations	1.0	11.1%	8.4%	
Foundations	2.2	9.2%	8.1%	

GETTING (in billions)		1981	Increase	Percent of total
Religion	\$24.8	12.2%	86.3%	
Education	7.4	12.7%	14.0%	
Health & Hospitals	7.3	13.4%	13.8%	
Social Welfare	3.3	12.9%	8.4%	
Arts & Humanities	3.0	13.2%	9.2%	
Civic & Public	1.5	13.2%	2.9%	
Other	3.7	18.1%		

is either "very important" (14%) or "somewhat important" (24%). Corporate giving went up 11.1% (to \$3 billion) even with a 3.1% decline in corporate profits. This increase in giving coincided with a decline in profits caused a big jump in corporate giving as a percentage of corporate profits, to 1.2%. For more than a decade, the figure had been about .7%. The AAFC survey found that the majority of corporate gifts will likely continue. Ninety percent of the corporations responding to the survey said that more than half of the organizations they currently support had received contributions from them at least once before during the past three years. Thus, AAFC concluded: "An organization not receiving corporate support may have come abruptly parting in the future."

The study also found that corporations received 97% more requests for support after the federal budget deficits were announced, and that 7% of corporate gifts, totaling about \$1 billion, were not reported to federal officials.

Women's groups have been particularly active in this regard. They believe joint fund-raising will help increase the efficiency of their fund-raising efforts and give them access to a larger number of women in the workplace. Members of the New York City Women's Fund for Children in Philadelphia in raising more than \$200,000 for joint fund-raising events. Many of the women's groups are continuing from workplace gifts. These are plans in fact.

"There hasn't been any real change in the right place, but their pens are busy writing checks."

Corporate Giving Will Go Up, But Not by Much

It is not clear, President Reagan's frequent call for increases in corporate giving has led to a big increase in studies of corporate giving, with at least four being completed in the past six months or so.

The results of these studies are mixed. Though they generally agree that corporate giving will not increase nearly enough to offset the Reagan budget cuts. Indeed, a study of 427 of the largest corporations done by the Conference Board, a prominent research business research institute, found that only 8% planned to increase their giving in the President's many administration. And, an earlier study of the New York City company trust had reported, "Even if you could raise more corporate giving 40% more, you would still need more."

And finally, a Council on Foundations study says that 40% of the corporations it surveyed plan to increase their giving. However, the corporations surveyed by the Council had probably by the other studies, since not every representative of all corporations. 40% of the surveyed corporations make charitable gifts, while only 23.4% of all corporations make such gifts, according to The American Association of Fund-Raising Councils.

Have the President's messages encouraging more corporate giving had an effect? The study by the International Association of Business Corporations (IABC), says that the 17% increase in corporate giving could be "modest, in part, to the extent that corporations are going on to increase their giving in response to the President's call. In March, the Council had a just now administrative candidate, Key Mims, and began to work in earnest.

Similar trends in Seattle and Washington, D.C.

At a December press conference, Virginia Corbin pointed out that the benefits of reducing taxes at their workplace by contributing to a wide range of social and other types of gifts. "Their hearts may be in the right place, but their pens are writing checks."

Also speaking at the press conference in support of the Council was Carl Kellars, New York City Council president. In March, the Council had a just now administrative candidate, Key Mims, and began to work in earnest.

Corporate giving has always been primarily a reflection of profits, and that is likely to remain so, says the study. "Perhaps by a substantial margin."

The Institute for Corporate Responsibility study says the bottom line impact of the Reagan tax changes may actually be to discourage corporate giving, "perhaps by a substantial margin."

Alternative Funds . . .

Some new use of which raise money through payroll deductions, social action and public interest alternative funds (such as the Cooperating Fund Drive in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Women's Way in Philadelphia), National Health Agency and International Service Agencies.

The 34% increase in giving to alternative funds was more than three times the average increase recorded in 1981 by United Way (10.3%). However, United Way still leads the country in the majority of funds raised at the workplace—more than 90%.

The NCFP survey acquired specific survey figures for 21 alternative funds in 1981 which, combined, raised \$4.7 million. In 1981, 10 alternative funds raised \$6.7 million, with the increase coming primarily from payroll deductions. It was estimated that the first 12 hours of fund-raising raised \$1.2 million, resulting in the \$7.8 million estimate for money raised in all alternative funds in 1981.

The survey found that the corporations are not leading United Way, they instead their contributions more than average increase for all United Way. The report is available from NCFP for \$1.50.

Responsible Philanthropy