

Observing Values in Action: Stories and lessons from the work of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

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I. INTRODUCTION

“What are our values? Partnership, relationships -- I think our commitment to listening and truly considering what communities are saying is very real. Not the foot tapping, why haven't you gotten it together – a real appreciation for how hard this work is on the ground and how long it can take to make it happen. Why? We genuinely care about the issue, and believe in what we are trying to do.”

“What the Memorial Fund does is consult with the communities it is trying to support.”

The report that follows illustrates values of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund and how they drive its approach to its work – its values in action. As described on its Web site (www.wcgmf.org) and other materials, the Memorial Fund “works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut’s children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.”¹ The Memorial Fund has chosen to focus its work in Connecticut. That work has involved partnerships with many communities (54 in 2009), more than a dozen statewide and regional grantees, government and other funders.

Over the years, grantees, consultants, evaluators and others familiar with the work of the Memorial Fund have commented on what they perceive to be a distinct approach to its philanthropic work. Several suggested that the Memorial Fund look within and document their approach and what underlies it. They encouraged the Memorial Fund to share their approach in part as information for current and potential partners and in part as grist for conversation in the sector, as a set of ideas about how to offer money and other supports, invite connections with people, organizations and communities, and contribute toward positive outcomes for children.

Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned in response to the types of requests noted above. It was prepared by the Center for Assessment and Policy Development (CAPD), with considerable assistance from two colleagues – Donna Studdiford, Principal of On Point Consulting and Dr. Angela Frusciante, Knowledge Development Officer at the Memorial Fund. We very much appreciate their willingness to review, revise and add to the report in ways that improved it considerably.

We are particularly appreciative of the work of Malwin Davila, Angela Frusciante, Bill Graustein, Nancy Leonard, David Martin, David Nee and Carmen Siberon of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, and Sonya Ahuja, Catherine Bradshaw, Mary

¹See the Memorial Fund website homepage at <http://www.wcgmf.org/> (July 23, 2009).

Broderick, Cindy Guerrerri, Trish Torruella and Paul Vivian who served as consultants (community liaisons) to the Memorial Fund. Their work is what informs this document. In addition, we are grateful for their willingness to provide the stories, insights and lessons that form this document's context and content. We also want to thank Sam Stephens, of CAPD, who directs evaluation of the Discovery Initiative and shared multiple insights and resources that inform this report.

Methods

Opportunities and Challenges

This project offered a number of opportunities plus several challenges – some value-related. CAPD was already familiar with ways that the Memorial Fund approaches its work, and had opportunities to observe and consider values that might undergird those actions, so these could be taken into account in the approach to this project.²

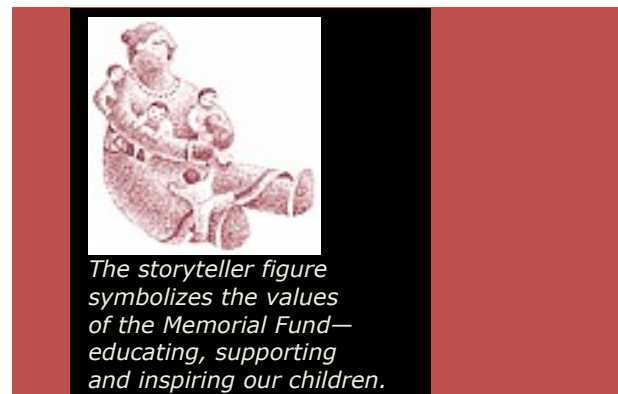
Stories and storytelling matter to the Memorial Fund. They are used as tools for learning, making meaning of peoples' experiences and listening.³ This report gathered perspectives of the Memorial Fund management and program staff about their work – to help them tell their story from their point of view. At the same time, the Memorial Fund tends to offer a modest face to the world. This is in part a reflection of their values, and in part a strategic decision that often shifts attention in helpful ways to the work of partner communities and other grantees. So, one challenge for this paper was to ask management and program staff to tell stories about their thinking and decisions, even if that seemed immodest. We also suggested that quotations and stories not be attributed to any individual both for reasons of confidentiality and as one way to address this challenge.⁴

Another challenge was to look for telling stories about staff and management perspectives that also illustrate the “so what” of a particular set of values in action. Perhaps, as evaluators, CAPD is particularly attuned to this issue. In our experience,

² CAPD has provided evaluation for three efforts of the Memorial Fund: The Children First Initiative (1994 to 2000), Discovery (2001 to 2009), and the Community Leadership Program (2002 to 2009), a personal transformation and values-based leadership development effort for nonprofit leaders in the New Haven area, co-founded and run by Lead Trustee William Graustein. On Point Consulting partners with CAPD on evaluation of the Discovery Initiative. Thus, we came to this research with prior knowledge of the work of the Memorial Fund and relationships with many of its Trustees, Management and staff.

³For example, the Lead Trustee of the Memorial Fund has taken lessons to build his own story-telling skills and has supported workshops led by master story-tellers on story-telling as a social justice and change strategy.

⁴ There are a few times the story-teller's name is given, with that person's permission, because the nature of the story has to do with that person's position in the organization (Lead Trustee or Executive Director).



much of what is available about philanthropic approaches is based on relatively short-term experience. That experience often describes the quality of the implementation of a process, with less information about its results. The kinds of things that foundations, communities, advocates and government work on, in the children's arena and others (health, wealth, education, economic development), are difficult and take a long time to yield measurable changes in the outcomes of interest – even for very good efforts with high quality implementation and attention to all of the elements that might contribute to effective results. So, we were especially looking for stories that reveal links among a value, its application in particular decisions or ways of working, and some tangible results.

There is also one methodological challenge having to do with privacy and confidentiality. As intended, information in this report comes from Memorial Fund management and staff and their community liaisons. The approach is described more fully below. Their stories are about communities and grantees – which were not interviewed directly, and thus, have not provided permission for us to share their stories. For that reason, the stories do not use the actual names of places or people in communities or other grantees, and we avoid other kinds of identifying information. This reduces a bit the specificity of the stories, though we hope, not their contribution to their intended purpose.

Questions

Our work was organized to address the following questions:

- What are the collective values of the Memorial Fund, from the perspectives of its management and program staff?
- How do these values play out in action – in the way the Memorial Fund does its grantmaking and related work?
- From the perspective of the Memorial Fund management and program staff – what are some of the trade-offs and pay-offs from doing work this way?

In addition, to place this work in a context for an audience in the philanthropic sector, work was done to address the following questions:

- What is the Memorial Fund's approach to grantmaking? What are its goals in its major initiatives, and what strategies does it implement or support to help its partners reach those goals? Where does this approach fit within the range of philanthropic approaches – particularly in terms of community/foundation partnerships aimed at achieving an agreed upon set of outcomes?
- How unique or rare are the values and the way they play out? Which are unusual, which are shared with some but not many other foundations and which are fairly common?

- What does the Memorial Fund see as implications and issues for reflection that flow from these stories?

The following tasks were completed to address these questions:

- Review of existing materials – including evaluation reports of the Discovery Initiative⁵ and a draft literature review prepared by Angela Frusciante, PhD, Knowledge Development Officer of the Memorial Fund: “*Focusing on sustainability: A search for the roots and reach of comprehensive community building for early care and education.* (Internal document, November 2008). These materials were supplemented by a targeted scan of additional relevant literature, noted in the bibliography.
- In-depth telephone interviews of the Lead Trustee, and all management and program staff at the Memorial Fund. The main purposes were to surface values and elicit illustrative stories of those values in action.
- Informal interviews with the evaluators of the Discovery Initiative.
- Review of community reflections in 2008/9 Discovery community applications (49 communities).
- Review of other material developed through the Knowledge Development function of the Memorial Fund.
- Synthesis of findings from these sources; presentation of early findings to Memorial Fund management and staff for their review and reflection.
- In-depth telephone interviews with 5 of the 6 Discovery Initiative community liaisons.⁶

Time Period Covered

The stories and quotations that form a substantial part of this document were gathered over the period from winter 2008 through winter 2009. While the information covers current and past activities, it reflects the perspectives of the people we spoke with as of

⁵The Discovery Initiative is described more fully in a later section of this report. It is a partnership between the Memorial Fund and 54 communities and more than a dozen statewide and regional organizations to improve early school success for children birth through age 8 in Connecticut. Discovery was the major initiative of the Memorial Fund as this report was being written, and this paper draws primarily from that work. Because of our own experience with the Children First Initiative, a prior effort of the Memorial Fund in partnership with seven communities, and the Community Leadership Program (described earlier), questions, synthesis and findings are also informed by those efforts.

⁶Discovery community liaisons are consultants funded by the Memorial Fund who play a coaching and intermediary role with communities participating in the Discovery Initiative. Each community liaison works with several communities, with a total of six supporting the work of 50+ communities). They play a “critical friend” role to communities while also sharing information “from the field” with staff and management of the Memorial Fund.

2008 or 2009. At that time, the country was in a period of deep recession, and there was some uncertainty about how philanthropies could or would be able to respond to economic conditions, both in the communities they fund and as a consequence of their own fiscal health. Both of these issues were on the minds of the Memorial Fund as the stories and quotations were gathered. In addition, the Memorial Fund was involved in a strategic planning process during the same time period. The results of the strategic planning process, along with economic conditions, led to a slight tweaking of the Memorial Fund's approach to Discovery starting in 2010. Those changes are of course not reflected in this document. Please see www.wcgmf.org for the most current description of Discovery and other contemporaneous Memorial Fund work.

Remainder of this report

Findings from the work completed are provided in the remainder of this report. It is organized into the following sections:

- Section II: Brief History of the Memorial Fund
- Section III: Values in Action: Stories
- Section IV: Values in Action: Philanthropic context and analysis
- Section V: Reflections

As this report was being developed, the philanthropic sector was adapting to a deep economic recession. Most foundations lost more than a quarter of their endowments' values during that time. Several laid off or offered buy-outs to more than a third of their staff. Many also cut their grants to communities and organizations. Communities, service providers, self-help groups, cultural organizations and government are under terrific strain to meet increased demands as their sources of support have fewer resources to offer. This climate provides a tough test for all of us – as well as an opportunity to clarify our values and actions. We hope this document provides some fodder for those reflections.

SECTION II: BRIEF HISTORY

This section of the report summarizes very briefly the history and philanthropic strategies of the Memorial Fund over the past fifteen years (when its work expanded considerably). Additional information is available on the Memorial Fund and Discovery Initiative's websites (www.wcgmf.org and www.discovery.wcgmf.org).

Major Memorial Fund activities pre Discovery Initiative

In 1993, the assets of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund grew substantially from its founding endowment in 1946. Those involved note that "*we knew that the way the foundation did business would have to change*". At the same time, they wanted to maintain an awareness of the foundation's history and stay true to its founding values. To do that, Bill Graustein (the Lead Trustee) and David Nee (who later became Executive Director of the Memorial Fund) conferred with a wide variety of stakeholders in Connecticut. That "listening tour" as they called it influenced strongly their decision to focus on philanthropy that contributes to improved outcomes for young children, early childhood education, and kindergarten through twelfth grade education of children in Connecticut. That effort was also a starting point for the habit of active listening and the use of story, both of which took root as core practices of the foundation.

In 1994, the Memorial Fund established the Children First Initiative, a partnership among seven communities in Connecticut to improve life and education outcomes for children birth through age eight. The Children First Initiative lasted seven years (from 1994 to 2000), and included a focus on parent leadership and collaboration as core features.⁷

In 1994, the Memorial Fund also established the Connecticut Center for School Change ("the Center"), which "*consults with school districts to improve student outcomes ... by using a system-wide, integrated approach focused on improving instructional practice and building leadership across all levels of a school system to achieve district goals.*"⁸ In 1999, the Center became a separate 501(c) 3 organization. Its current mission is "*to improve teaching and learning for all children in Connecticut schools.*"⁹

⁷The basic outline for the Children First Initiative was born when Maria Mojica was being considered along with two other finalists for a Program Officer position at the Memorial Fund. As part of that process, David Nee described what he and Bill Graustein had heard on their listening tour. Each of the finalists for the position were offered a small honorarium and asked about how they would put the basic strategy into action. Maria Mojica responded with a concept paper that became the concept for the Children First Initiative. She got the job, and the Memorial Fund established a partnership among seven communities in Connecticut to improve outcomes for children birth through age eight. Key components, or processes, of the Children First Initiative included: parent leadership, collaboration among local entities that support children (government, schools, early childhood providers, and nonprofit organizations), action planning, and implementation of strategies to improve early childhood or school readiness outcomes.

⁸The Connecticut Center for School Change Web site (<http://www.ctschoolchange.org>).

⁹The Connecticut Center for School Change Web site (<http://www.ctschoolchange.org>).

During this time period, the Memorial Fund also made other grants and worked on other efforts at the state and regional level and in some communities. It made Policy Research and Advocacy grants and Community Engagement and Parent Involvement grants as one part of pursuing these goals.^{10 11}

In 2002, the Lead Trustee of the Memorial Fund also founded the Community Leadership Program (CLP). He helped to design the program with Dr. Susan Fowler. He also served as one of its facilitators, a role in which he continues to serve. CLP was eventually designated a program of the Memorial Fund, though it continues to operate as a unique and independent effort of the Lead Trustee.

CLP is an effort to support nonprofit leaders in the New Haven area. Its mission is to [offer] *“leaders the opportunity to explore their personal values and understand more fully the opportunities and challenges of leadership in service to communities.”*¹² This places the program effort within the category of values-based personal transformation leadership efforts¹³-- focused on helping people reconnect with the values that brought them into non-profit leadership in the first place, and then choosing to act more consistently or fully to align their behaviors with those values. To date, seven cohorts (of 20-25 individuals per cohort) of non-profit emerging and senior leaders from the New Haven area have enrolled in the year-long program. A number of current and former Memorial Fund program and other staff have participated in CLP. CLP is one of the efforts that illustrate the values of the Lead Trustee, and because so many Foundation staff have participated in it, it also helps set the tone at the Memorial Fund.

¹⁰ See the Memorial Fund website for descriptions of past programs (http://www.wcgmf.org/simple.php?name=grants_past).

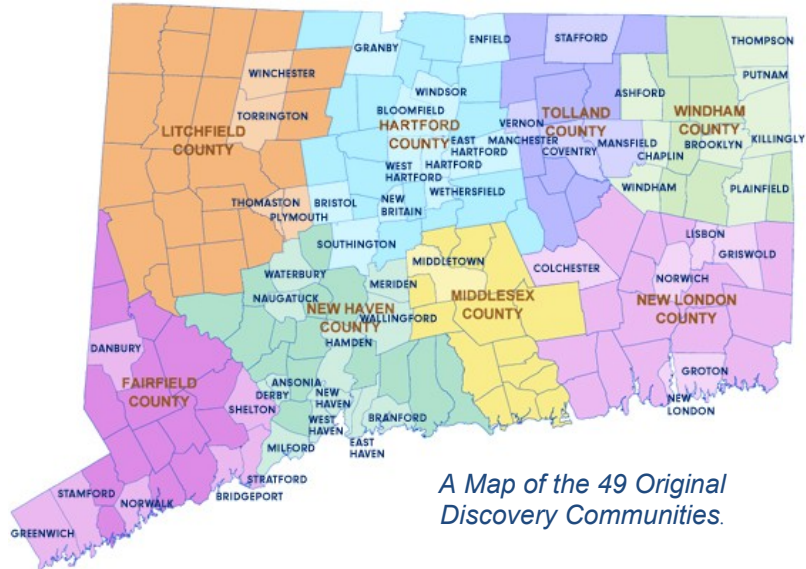
¹¹One of the ongoing struggles of this work, discussed more fully later, has been to create a balance between funding work that contributes to policy change that benefits children and families, and respecting the grantees' role in setting a policy agenda. As a charitable organization, the Memorial Fund operates within the constraints of all tax exempt organizations – that is, it does not and cannot directly support or oppose candidates for public office or engage in lobbying activity. In addition, as a Board and organization, it does not choose to define its policy interests in other than very broad strokes, consistent with its belief in with its belief in letting parents, communities and its other partners define what is most important or timely.

¹²The Graustein Memorial Fund Web site (<http://www.wcgmf.org>).

¹³See Hannum et al, eds., *The Handbook of Leadership Development Evaluation*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007, Chapter 7, which includes a theory of change graphic and logic model for CLP.

Discovery Initiative

The current¹⁴ and largest initiative of the Memorial Fund is Discovery, which is also the context during which story gathering was conducted. Discovery's goal is to improve school success for children from birth through age eight with parent engagement and collaboration as chief values. It operates as a partnership among the Memorial Fund, 54 Connecticut communities and more than a dozen statewide or regional grantees and partner organizations. Among them are collaborations of organizations such as the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance and Connecticut Association of Human



A Map of the 49 Original Discovery Communities.

Services (CAHS), research organizations such as Connecticut Voices for Children, and parent focused organizations such as Connecticut Parent Power. Communities receiving grants include all 15 of Connecticut's priority school districts and other districts qualifying for school readiness funding.¹⁵ Priority districts are mostly urban. Priority and other districts that receive school readiness funding from the state qualify in part because of a high proportion of children in poverty. More than half of Connecticut's children through age 17 live in these districts.¹⁶

Major components or features of Discovery include:

- Planning, implementation, transition and continuation grants to communities, and grants to statewide or regional grantees.

¹⁴ The current initiative period is ending in December 2009 with a transition phase to the continuation of Discovery to begin in April 2010. The new initiative will see some changes with explicit inclusion of attention to race and economic inequity, systems building as a lead strategy and a strong results emphasis. One staff person noted that the organization is “*engaging in internal reflection on how to remain true to values during times of strategic transition and economic stress.*”

¹⁵“In 1983, the [Connecticut] State Board of Education requested \$2 million for a new state grant for school districts with the greatest academic need. The new grant became known as the Priority School District Program (PSD).” (Connecticut State Board of Education Web site <http://www.sde.ct.gov/>).

¹⁶Discovery 2009 Fact Sheet. Available on the Discovery Web site at http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_866.pdf.

- Substantial opportunities to participate in multiple forms of technical assistance – including multiple day institutes, an annual conference with workshops developed by communities and regional and statewide partners, other topic specific and process specific training, more generalized meetings for peer support and discussions, availability of coaching (through “community liaisons”) and access to a Discovery website and other online supports
- Emphasis on parent engagement and collaboration, both as ends in themselves and as means to improved outcomes for young children. For example, communities are encouraged to develop a “collaborative table” to take responsibility for Discovery work.
- Emphasis on development of a statewide and regional network
- Communication support and strategies
- Evaluation
- Ongoing relationships among Discovery communities and statewide and regional grantees with each other and with management and staff of the Memorial Fund.

All of the history above is background and context for the stories that follow.

One other point is worth mentioning -- management and staffing of the Memorial Fund has been remarkably stable. The Lead Trustee, many of the Board members, the Executive Director and many of the staff at all levels have been at the Memorial Fund since at least the mid 1990's. Turnover, while it occurs, is rare. Further, the organization remained relatively lean as it geared up to begin the Discovery Initiative, even though the number of communities with which it partnered increased by a factor of seven (from seven to 49 at that time). New staff was brought on only in the past few years to help support that expansion and to develop the knowledge work more fully. This level of stability facilitates the infusion of a set of values and its reinforcement over time. At the same time, the particular values being practiced also appear to contribute to the remarkable stability of the organization.

SECTION III: VALUES IN ACTION: Stories

This section of the document provides stories to illustrate several core values and beliefs that have become part of the organizational culture of the Memorial Fund. We found considerable consensus among management and staff about what these beliefs and values are and their influence on initiative design, guidelines and requirements, capacity building supports and many other aspects of the organization's work over the time period covered by this document.

Three core values emerged over and over. They are:

- Valuing relationships
- Valuing self-determination
- Valuing the means by which work is done as well as its ends

Management and staff articulate a set of operating beliefs that flow from these values. In their own words, these operating beliefs include:

- Never quitting on anybody (staying the course)
- Meeting the people who work within systems and communities where they are
- Valuing the people who are engaged in the work
- Being non-directive
- Collaboration and working within systems as core strategies
- Parent leadership and engagement as core strategies
- Continually working to reduce power imbalances
- Walking the walk
- Story as a method for knowing and a strategy for change

The stories we were told suggest that these beliefs permeate the organization. Newer staff members became aware of them in multiple ways -- starting from discussions about them in their earliest interviews for positions at the Memorial Fund and continuing as they participate in meetings in which senior staff consider options and newer staff observe the bases on which decisions are made. Newer staff report being impressed by the fidelity with which they observe these values and beliefs driving decisions. Senior staff shares stories of push-back from other managers and Trustees when it appears that approaches they recommend might contradict the values or fail to honor the beliefs. While these other approaches receive serious consideration, they seldom move forward unless the trade-offs or tensions among them and the core values and beliefs can be reconciled.

The remainder of this chapter defines what Memorial Fund management and staff mean by these beliefs and provides examples of some of the ways they have played out in their work. Where possible, we have tried to cluster these stories around valuing relationships, valuing self-determination and valuing means as well as ends. However, these values are highly interrelated and stories generally illustrate multiple beliefs and values.

In the stories that follow, the word “community” is used loosely to refer to a place (a town or school district), the people who live there and/or the people in that place who have come together to work in partnership with the Memorial Fund. Its more precise meanings should be evident from the story. The Memorial Fund recognizes that communities are not one entity or monolithic in interests, norms, culture or behaviors, and the use of the word “community” is not meant to suggest that they are.

Valuing Relationships

“It’s a calculation – Connecticut is a small state, we are neighbors – we intend to be here for the long term – we are about building relationships – doing what will best sustain these relationships.”

“What came out of the CLP experience was a real aha about the dynamics in relationships...which is, if you are clear about what you want to be accountable for, and then, when you inevitably mess up, you admit and let people know and respond...that is a hugely powerful intervention – people will recognize your efforts and will do a huge amount to support you – and will share their mistakes with you when they happen.”

A great many of the Memorial Fund’s stories are about maintaining long-term and genuine relationships with grantees. The most common way that the Memorial Fund staff talk about their concern over relationships is in the idea that they “*never quit on anybody*” – that is, they stay in relationship with a grantee or community over long periods of time, and almost regardless of the ‘progress’ towards particular goals that can be observed. Staff point out that this is not because the Memorial Fund does not have goals for the work it funds, but because the Lead Trustee, management and program staff have come to understand that building and maintaining long-term relationships are both a value, and often one of the key factors that allows those goals to be met.

There are lots of assumptions that underlie the emphasis on relationships and the way that emphasis leads to staying the course. First, there is an understanding at the Memorial Fund that it takes time to build authentic relationships among individuals and an assumption that the time invested is worthwhile – it will pay off in better work. Second, there is an awareness that things change, so having an ongoing relationship with an organization or community provides the opportunity to be there when openings for new work occur.

Never quitting on anybody (sometimes described as staying the course)

“It’s in our DNA – we just never quit on anybody.”

Discovery began in 2001 as a non-competitive grant opportunity for communities, with each community receiving a \$25,000 grant to engage in a planning process. Over the next 8 years, and continuing into 2009, communities received between \$10,000 and

\$50,000 annually. All communities were encouraged to reapply each year and were all but guaranteed funding for six years. Discovery was subsequently extended for an additional two years. The longer term funding approach was deliberate to establish the idea that the communities and the Memorial Fund together were in a learning stance, and to change how each viewed their relationships with each other. . Further, to the extent a community's work was judged by the Memorial Fund, it was viewed against a community's own expectations and progress and not against the progress of other Discovery communities or external measures. Communities were also permitted to carry over substantial portions of their grant each year and given great flexibility in changing their work plans-- essentially, whatever it took to keep them engaged in their own work for young children.

One staff member shared an experience that illustrates how deeply embedded this value and accompanying belief have become within the Memorial Fund:

Staff was considering ways to get more structured in what we offered to communities – to be more clear about the needles that need to move and to align our capacity building more specifically to moving the needles. I suggested we partner with those communities with some movement and real commitment — let's set some criteria and move the bar – all communities would stay in the family but receive funding tied more to their level of movement. The resistance to that [at the Memorial Fund] was fascinating –we were doing some mapping [in an internal meeting] – to see that all of the capacity building and the grant itself were fully aligned – to share what we expect and make it clear, so [there were] no[longer] more implicit but all clearly laid out expectations – it was fascinating, [I] literally thought others [at the Memorial Fund] would explode – to my surprise – during that conversation others [at the Memorial Fund] really pushed back – they said: we are not abandoning the notion of meeting communities where they are – those kinds of guidelines would not meet community where they are.”

The issue was resolved such that capacity building did change but the guidelines and funding strategy remained untied to particular levels of progress until the evolution of Discovery in 2010.¹⁷

How this approach makes a difference:

The willingness of the Memorial Fund to remain in partnership with communities as they struggle has been motivating for several communities. A community liaison told the story of one community that was having difficulty building a collaborative and getting its work moving on a sustained basis. The Memorial Fund, listening to the struggles in this and other communities, completely changed its approach to capacity building-- offering

¹⁷ In 2010 “*capacity building and support became more differentiated to align with each community's self-assessment (made in discussion with the Memorial Fund) of their ability to engage collaboratively in community decision making, comprehensive planning and implement plans to support the children of their community.*”

more systemic approaches and delivering the support in an entirely different way.¹⁸ The community embraced those supports and the community liaison reports,

“You see the values of collaboration and staying the course in the community now – and the community believes the Memorial Fund is open to hearing what they have to say; their way of approaching this work.”

This community reports that their collaborative efforts have improved the transition for children from early childhood education to kindergarten, contributed in a change of Board of Education policies to increased training and support for early childhood programs, and increased information going out to families and opportunities for parent leadership in the community.

In another often told story about “never quitting on anybody,” another community declined to apply for funding because the Superintendent (a required signatory on the application) said he was not interested in the opportunity. The Memorial Fund sent back a letter saying that they would hold the funds, which would be available to the community if or when it decided to ask for them – giving the signal to the community that the opportunity was still in their hands to make happen or not happen. There was turnover in the Superintendency and, about six months after the new superintendent was in office, the Memorial Fund sent out a letter reminding potential signatories that funds were available. The community applied with all required signatories and received funding. According to Memorial Fund management and staff, the community liaison, and community self-report, the Discovery work in this community is now flourishing. The collaborative group is viewed by school principals and others as the “go-to” group of experts on early childhood issues for the community. The community took advantage of Kindergarten Transition capacity building institutes offered by Discovery through the Center for School Change and revamped their kindergarten registration processes. These changes have contributed to a uniform district registration plan and a dramatic increase in complete, on-time kindergarten registrations.

Challenges of this approach:

For some, the value of “I never quit on you” raises concern. One close observer described her sense that some grantees and communities develop a sense of “*unconditional guarantee*” that might “*erode a commitment to doing well.*” In addition, Trustees, staff and management know that they are deliberately choosing not to use some common accountability strategies -- such as tying Memorial Fund decisions more directly to indicators of progress – which could provide political cover or impetus for people within a community or grantee organization to press from within.

¹⁸Starting in 2007, the Memorial Fund's approach to technical assistance changed, based on what they learned and heard from community participants. Instead of offering “one-shot” workshops, attended almost exclusively by the community coordinators, the institute model of multiple sessions over a period of months was introduced, with the requirement that communities bring a “team” to each session. More opportunities for individualized technical assistance as follow-up to the institutes was offered and the Memorial Fund sought the expertise of outside organizations to deliver the technical assistance.

One of the things that new staff report learning is how the Memorial Fund thinks about accountability, in light of its often repeated and deeply ingrained value of staying the course. In thinking about the foundation's strategic planning process, one staff person considered,

“How do we think about groups or communities the Memorial Fund has been supporting for a number of years – maybe there still aren't a lot of people at the table, still not doing much advocacy – how much time do you keep investing in a grantee or a community? There is an awareness that every group or community starts at a different place, will have different struggles. We are engaging in a strategic planning process, but there are some things the process can't resolve for us that our values can.”

Meeting people where they are

Evaluators, philanthropists, academicians and others sometimes tend to romanticize work at the community level and demonize work at the system level. One of the lessons for the Memorial Fund is that

“people are people, no matter where they are – a lot of people are really intent on doing good work, though they get caught up in structures that are not conducive or efficient... if you stay at the place of demonizing the system, in that position, you can't get anything done.”

The Memorial Fund management and staff try to remember that everyone at a table will have his or her own interests and organizational needs, and to take this fully into account as they contribute to negotiated solutions. Memorial Fund management and staff also tend to avoid confrontational strategies generally. This is partly because of a shared belief that confrontational strategies may produce short-term gains, but at the cost of shutting down transformational learning on all sides which might contribute to longer term ones.

How this approach makes a difference:

One example of this thinking was the work the Memorial Fund did in support of the Parent Trust Fund, an organization created by the Connecticut Legislature that provides funding for small grants to communities to underwrite parent leadership training. One of the challenges in Connecticut in 2007 was to find ways to maintain and increase support for this work. To attract new investment, the Memorial Fund offered a challenge grant to the state to match new investment in the Parent Trust Fund. Even after the Governor's proposed State Budget for SFY 08 and SFY 09 included no funding for the Parent Trust Fund the challenge proved effective in preserving and increasing the funding for parent leadership training.¹⁹

¹⁹Discovery Contributions to Recent EC Policy Results: The View from State Level Grantees and Stakeholders, Discovery Evaluation, April 2008.

However, as the changes went into effect, the paperwork requirements to apply for these small grants went from 10 pages to 60 pages. Several places that might have applied chose not to apply. Rather than withdraw the challenge grant or be privately or publicly critical of the paperwork requirements as a strategy to pressure the state to change them, the Memorial Fund listened to its state partners. One of the state partners had been “*vilified on the pages of a newspaper for a month*” for a different decision, and was feeling the need to make sure that the current process was very well documented with respect to every possible relevant requirement. So, the Memorial Fund and the state partner worked together to find a third partner that could distribute the funds in a more streamlined process. One of the people involved noted,

“From the relationship that had been developed, we knew it wasn’t the person; she had to operate in that world. But to get to the goals, there had to be a state government that is invested in parent leadership training...so there are reasons to have this responsibility there...we found the collaborative solution, within the system...because we were able to meet our partners where they were, and we were able to do that because of the relationship we had developed.”

There are also many examples of ‘*meeting communities where they are*’, and how that has paid off over time. One community spent several years struggling to engage parents in leadership roles in their Discovery work. However, as one community liaison put it, “*this is a community that understands and appreciates what makes the Memorial Fund different from other funders.*” They developed a collaborative table, but one that was dominated by professionals and providers, rather than parents. At the same time, they took full advantage of technical assistance and other supports offered through Discovery. For example, they connected with their community liaison, with the understanding that “*community liaisons are there to advocate for you and to help you... a presence that is about supporting not checking up on a community.*” They also took full advantage of the Kindergarten transition sessions offered by the Connecticut Center for School Change. They continued to raise their concerns with the Memorial Fund about the lack of parent leadership, and to try new and targeted strategies to address that issue. The Memorial Fund continued to fund them in spite of their lack of parent leadership and continued to encourage them to take advantage of available supports.

By 2008 their Discovery group was able to report several successes, including an improved kindergarten transition process. In addition, several of the changes being reported are comprehensive and multi-level, backed by policy changes within the Board of Education, with a potential to be sustained and to go to scale in the community. The group had also applied for funding from the Parent Trust Fund and was attempting to increase opportunities for Spanish language parent leadership training and to bring Parent SEE to their community (which they have since done).²⁰ These actions illustrate

²⁰ParentSEE is a 12 week curriculum offered by the Connecticut Center for School Change in partnership with the Connecticut Commission on Children. It focuses on parent leadership partnering with schools to bring about change. Parent SEE is an opportunity open to all communities. The community has to sponsor it; they have to find the funds and recruit the parents, for example. It is one of many parent support efforts available in Connecticut.

what happens when a community decides for itself how it wants collectively to support its children, and is given the time, space and supports to come to these decisions.

According to the community liaison, over the years, members of Discovery in this community got the message over and over from the Memorial Fund that

“we will work with where you are and we will make sure you know about the opportunities but will not require or be directive about them.”

The community liaison also credits some of the more recent capacity building offerings – those that are more structured such as the Kindergarten Transition Institutes, Results Based Accountability training and collaboration skill building workshops – with helping this community turn a corner on its work. These were not available earlier in the initiative, and it is not possible to know whether or not they would have been useful to this community if they had been. What is clear is that this community, like several others, built itself to the point where it could take good advantage of these supports, knows its strengths and weaknesses, and has seen itself stay the course to good effect.

Challenges of this approach:

Meeting people where they are, and recognizing the constraints of major systems and the boundaries within which people within systems work, can be slow and uncertain. It argues for philanthropy that is less prescriptive than more traditional approaches. It does not always work – though that is true of more prescriptive approaches as well. Community liaisons described communities that were developing at their own pace, drifting, and some that still could not sustain the work if not for Memorial Fund funding. Community liaisons and staff do not have confidence that every community engaged in Discovery, for example, will make progress for children. In an era of reduced endowments, some staff is concerned about the fairness of continuing to support grantees that appear to be less able to use supports effectively than others.

Valuing the people who are engaged in the work

“There is a strong value of being welcoming – when anyone comes in – just even in the office – that’s something that is driven home. We do this a lot more than we talk about it. We have a little policy book that discusses this, but even before I read that, you just pick it up right away. It’s like at home, we are welcoming.”

Most foundations have a value of respecting the organizations and communities with which they partner. Many are also aware that their ability to do their work is completely dependent on the work of their grantees. However, the Memorial Fund’s emphasis on relationships extends to specific actions intended to let people know that they are valued as individuals and as partners in the work of improving outcomes for children.

One simple but ubiquitous example is the level of hospitality people encounter when they visit the Memorial Fund. As is true for other philanthropies, the Memorial Fund

provides meeting space to community organizations and various partners and coalitions; and it hosts many meetings in which it participates. People invariably talk about the high level of support for these activities, the courtesy with which they are welcomed and the caliber of the food. It turns out this is deliberate and an expression of valuing those who are in the work together. Grantees notice. As one community liaison said, *“When they [community representatives] come to a meeting of the Memorial Fund, they see the hospitality but I’m not sure if they think that is intentional. But it has a lot of ripple effects. They feel as if they are in a partnership.”*

Similarly, when the Memorial Fund moved its offices several years ago, it chose a building near several highways and with free parking that could accommodate a crowd. It then furnished the space to accommodate two meeting rooms, with state-of-the-art presentation and audio taping equipment. These rooms are offered for community use by nonprofit organizations, local and state agencies as needed. Many, many people with an interest in education in Connecticut have attended a meeting at the Memorial Fund.

The Community Leadership Program goes even further, in that it incorporates hospitality as an explicit leadership support strategy. From its beginning, CLP has offered its program at no charge to participants or their organizations. The program provides all materials, does the logistical work of bringing together non-profit leaders at retreats and monthly meetings, chooses high quality retreat facilities and builds excellent meals into every gathering as an explicit way of letting non-profit leaders know their service is valued. The evaluation of CLP found that participants noticed, understood and were deeply touched by this strategy. One said,

“We are always so responsible for everything – being treated so well is rare and really let me know someone appreciated what we do. But also, not having to be responsible for the planning or follow-through to make things happen is part of what allows me to drop my leadership hat long enough to reflect and learn.”

How this approach makes a difference:

As noted earlier, grantees often describe the Memorial Fund as responsive and flexible. In addition to being a way of ‘meeting people where they are,’ these practices are meant to let people know in a very tangible way that their individual, constituency and/or organizational issues, anxieties, constraints and other responsibilities are valued. One staff member, relating the story of an anxious call from a coordinator whose community collaborative was unable to resolve a conflict about their application for funding remembers how frustrated and worried the coordinator was, unsure of whether the Memorial Fund would accept their application after the deadline. *“I told her to talk to the people involved and let them know you can submit revisions at any time...take your time, once you know what everyone can live with, resubmit the revisions. The fact that she could raise this with me was illustrative of her sense of comfort and safety – really willing to open up to us. Also, it illustrates how we can be flexible – I knew*

management would back me on this – we are open to revisions at any time, our only criterion is that there is a process of more than one person involved.”

Challenges of this approach:

The Memorial Fund has set a high standard for flexibility, responsiveness and hospitality. Challenges are practical – in the sense that there are additional logistical costs to host meetings at a high level of hospitality, and related to perceptions, since flexibility and case-by-case decision making can be considered to favor one group or individual over others. However, it should be noted that most staff at the Memorial Fund believe the realized and potential benefits outweigh the challenges by a great deal – as is true for most of the other approaches noted here.

Valuing Self-Determination

“This idea of not substituting your judgment for a community’s judgment has gotten refined over time...we’ve gotten a whole lot more intentional over the years about co-designing programs – we’re never the master architect, more the ‘servant architect’ and we are leery of models of every kind.”

Being non-directive

The idea of ‘not substituting your own judgment for a community or organizational partner’s judgment’ is a corollary of meeting your partners where they are, and another way of keeping power differentials in check as much as possible. This is accompanied by an awareness that these power differences always exist, but Memorial Fund staff and management can act in ways that might make them less stressful for their grantees.

How this approach makes a difference:

Prior to the Discovery Initiative, an Executive Director in one of the Children First Initiative collaborative groups was having a particularly difficult time in the job. He did not especially seem comfortable with collaboration nor was he particularly skilled in putting collaborative strategies into place. David Nee learned of “a problem” from one of his staff and offered to meet with the fiscal agent and chair of the Children First Initiative – kind of executive to executive – to see what could be worked out. But the staff at the Memorial Fund proposed a different approach – in effect, they lobbied hard for David Nee to hold back and he agreed. Instead, they offered the group several opportunities for technical assistance and, as importantly, they waited for processes in the community to unfold at their own pace.

The Memorial Fund has now been working for a decade to support the improvement of education for young children of Connecticut. The real work and responsibility of the education of the children is of course not ours, but that of the parents, citizens and institutions in the state.

- William Chandler Graustein, Trustee’s Letter, 2001-2003 Annual Report

David Nee remembers, “*Over time, the director, the parents and the collaborative got to understand their mutual roles, and the staff job descriptions. They came to a mutual understanding of the kind of staffing the collaborative wanted and could use...this consumed the greater part of the year...my sense is that not a lot of funders would have had the tolerance (I know I struggled) to let these processes unfold. But – we didn’t waste a year – the governance got really worked out, the ownership is greater, and it wasn’t two white male executives (the fiscal sponsor and I) making the decision. This group is still going strong, and every time I hear the current staff director there say, “I have to check back in with my community,” I’m reminded of what I’ve learned by holding back from interceding.*”

Many years later, a similar situation occurred in one of the Discovery communities. In this instance, members of the Discovery group worked as a team to respond to the Memorial Fund’s invitation to submit a proposal for funding. However, a single individual with positional power on the local Discovery collaborative submitted a different proposal. As David Nee tells the story, this time, everyone at the Memorial Fund knew to lay back and wait for people in the community to recognize their own power in this situation and for the community to resolve the issue without direct outside involvement. David quoted one of those involved as saying, “*this was an opportunity for the collaborative to understand its own capacities...if a 4 or 5 person delegation goes to the person who switched the proposals, things will change.*” And they did. The group’s proposal was submitted; more people within the Discovery group are taking leadership; and the work is proceeding in that community.

When David Nee talks about what lesson can be gleaned from this story, he points to his own learning. In the first example from the Children First Initiative (the earlier effort), it took staff discussion for him to agree not to intercede. By time of next example, from Discovery (the later effort), David Nee says he knew that “*helping someone to solve a problem they are perfectly capable of solving is not help*” – or at least, not help that reinforces self-determination and capacity. _

The other kind of story that comes up a lot is about unwillingness to impose models on grantees, but rather, to ask them to develop their own understandings of how they want to improve outcomes for children in their communities. Nancy Leonard, who oversees the policy and communication work at the Memorial Fund, and Carmen Siberon, who oversees the community work, both emphasize this point in their conversations, stories and work – points that are also consistently reinforced by the Trustees and Executive Director.

The Children First Initiative (CFI) began with the goal of improving outcomes for children birth through age eight, but without a particular statement of outcomes beyond that. In an early meeting among representatives from the CFI communities and the evaluation team, the evaluation team began to share some ideas for measuring progress toward school readiness goals. After a bit, it became apparent that not everyone in the room understood why the topic of “school readiness” was being discussed. Finally, one courageous person from one of the CFI communities asked. The evaluators said that

their understanding was that “school readiness” was one of the major goals of CFI. The communities made it clear that they had not yet decided if that was the case or not. Communities were given considerable leeway to test that out for themselves. One consequence was that CFI communities took many years to develop a consensus agenda and to plan and begin to put in place strategies targeted substantially toward that agenda. However, all of the CFI communities continue to be committed to working on improving outcomes for children and all are participating in Discovery. The learning from this experience is also one reason why the design for Discovery included specific objectives for the work.

The Memorial Fund’s willingness to offer structure around outcomes and objectives has changed somewhat over time, as some grantees at the state and community level have expressed an interest in more clarity on these issues. This is a common tension among community/foundation partnerships and in community change work generally --- finding ways to move forward efficiently, without ignoring research and best practice that provide some very clear steps, but also fostering innovation and custom approaches that fit a particular place, circumstances, and groups of people. Many philanthropies struggle to find a balance, and the Memorial Fund has, as well.

Challenges of this approach:

Some staff and community liaisons struggle with the belief in being non-directive even as they practice it. They wonder if being more directive might be a useful strategy to help communities turn a corner on their work. Some staff and community liaisons are concerned that communities hear “non-directive” language as lack of accountability. Some also worry that as economic times toughen, and the Memorial Fund may be in a position of having to say “no” more often, communities will feel somehow betrayed.

Additionally, there is some tension between the Memorial Fund’s valuing of collaboration (and parent leadership and engagement) and the values of responsiveness and not directing how the work in community should be done. One way the Memorial Fund responds to this tension is to seek out and offer substantial capacity building and technical assistance on both approaches that makes the case for their usefulness. However, even where Discovery groups do not incorporate a truly collaborative table or are not engaging parents in their work, there has never been an instance when the Memorial Fund declined to support that group for those reasons. Rather, the Memorial Fund continues working with the community while simultaneously pressing the case and offering support and encouragement to resolve issues that might be limiting parent engagement or collaboration of the kind it promotes.

Valuing the Means as Well as the Ends

“It’s not just about the end point, big emphasis about how we get to the endpoint.”

Collaboration and working within systems as core strategies

The Memorial Fund’s belief in collaboration comes both from very practical and more value-driven sources. Many of the staff and trustees at the Memorial Fund believe that collaboration is the most effective strategy for getting things accomplished for children and families-- things that can’t be accomplished by a single organization, but that require multiple organizations and systems to be involved. Some point to the value of collaboration for providing “political cover” for tough decisions – in that a decision can be attributed to a group rather than an individual. Others point to its usefulness for bringing residents and parents more fully into decisions that affect their lives. Collaborative strategies also tend to be aligned in spirit with relationship building, listening and responsiveness. Finally, as noted in a later section, the Memorial Fund values approaches that encourage people to bridge differences and mitigate power differentials, and eschew approaches that encourage ‘divide and conquer’ tactics or promote victim/oppressor roles.

A key part of Discovery is the formation of a collaborative working relationship that includes parents, community members, service providers and government officials. For most of the participants this is a new way of working. For many parents and community members, for whom the landscape of educational programs, policy and bureaucracy can sometimes seem as vast and inhospitable as the New Mexico desert, participation in Discovery is a new and challenging role.

-William Chandler Graustein, Trustee’s Letter, 2001-2003 Annual Report

How this approach makes a difference:

Management and staff share many stories of how collaboration pays off. For example, at the statewide and regional level, they share this experience.

“We’ve been working on policy all along, even with CFI, and I’ve repeatedly been struck that each organization in Connecticut that works on policy issues has connections at the state level. In the past, many weren’t aware of what the others were planning. For example, at one point, we got proposals from two organizations to do the same piece of work. We asked them – this happened, what do you make of this? ...We asked them to think about what a very effective advocacy force would look like. They asked us how other states approached this... we brought in Lynn Kagan, who did a very detailed analysis of capacities of these advocacy groups, and put that into a matrix of what states had. It became obvious in Connecticut we had some duplication and some gaps...So,

as a group, we said, what can we all do about this? An idea grew to be a coalition and to collaborate on the issues. There was a long developmental history – collaboration is not an easy skill set – hard for communities and doubly hard for organizations – at this point – many of the coalition members are acutely aware of their own strengths and what each brings to the table.”

This conversation set the stage for the development of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, an organization that grew over the next several years, through fits and starts, to become a network of state level advocacy organizations, state agencies and departments, community and parent representatives and funders that have crafted and work toward a single agenda around improving outcomes in the areas of learning, health, safety and economic security for children ages birth through eight. In 2007, this organization (among others) was viewed as a key contributor to the favorable outcome of the 2007 legislative session, during which there were significant increases in funding for early childhood priorities.

There are similar stories at the community level. For example, the Memorial Fund was asked to come to a meeting in one community that was struggling around shared ownership of the Discovery agenda. The Discovery group had taken an action that was difficult for the Board of the collaborative agent to support publicly for reasons having to do with local partisan politics. The staff person, who was an employee of the collaborative agent, was feeling that it might be best if she withdrew from her participation. Per a person at the Memorial Fund,

“they invited us out, and we sat and were able to talk about all of this very openly – one of our community liaisons helped to facilitate, she’s really good at governance structures – how to make this work owned by more than one organization. They worked it out – it would have been a tremendous loss for them to pull out—the staff person felt really great about the resolution. She feels that the work is finally jointly shared and owned, not just her out there on a limb – again, the ability to have a conversation, go in and offer TA and support them made all the difference in the world – they were able to proceed.”

Challenges of this approach:

Many of the key challenges of collaboration are well known among philanthropies and their partners in community and system change work. These include the time it takes to implement genuinely inclusive processes, the compromises and trade-offs that come about in order to meet the differing goals and concerns of the partners, and the effort required to stay together through periods of transition or tension. The Memorial Fund has found that the benefits of collaboration have outweighed these challenges. This is true for them even when the collaborative decisions they have supported are not necessarily those they would have made if they were acting on their own. These then become additional instances of “not substituting your own judgment for the judgment of your partners,” as described earlier.

Parent leadership and engagement as core strategies

“When parents mobilize they create a ground swell – a few years ago, in this community, there were things the parents wanted from the school budget... whole day kindergarten...they organized with the help of their Discovery coordinator, 75 people came to the school budget meeting to sit with signs, they agreed ahead of time which of them would speak – 12 or 15 – the group was multi-racial and they had discussed their actions ahead of time – the action passed unanimously – an addition to the elementary school – to create needed rooms, hire teachers to implement all day kindergarten. This was so well orchestrated and the school board took a stand based on the activism of the parents. The people came with written speeches, enough copies to hand to all members of the board; each speech took a different tack about why the budget items were necessary. You could really see the leadership among the parents and how effective it was.”

A steadfast focus on parent leadership and engagement may be the value and strategy for which the Memorial Fund is most well known. At the heart of this value is the genuine belief that *“sustained change will happen with the active engagement of all parents and in particular those whose children are most at risk.”*²¹ The vision for Discovery, as with CFI, is that parent engagement in community and state efforts to improve outcomes for children will *“build collective voice”* and ensure that efforts on behalf of children reflect the diversity of needs in the communities and state. Parent engagement, and particularly parent leadership, is also expected to create opportunities and help move communities in the direction of more widely distributed power and opportunities for self-determination.

In support of this belief, the Memorial Fund has funded numerous local parent engagement efforts and made parent engagement a key requirement of the work in its 54 Discovery communities. The Memorial Fund was one of the early supporters of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). The Memorial Fund was also a major supporter of the development of ParentSEE and People Empowering People (PEP) in Connecticut. The statewide parent advocacy organization, Connecticut Parent Power, conceived by CFI and Discovery community representatives, exists in part because the Memorial Fund provided the technical assistance and ongoing grant funding necessary to get the organization up and running.

Further, the Memorial Fund has provided capacity building workshops on engaging parents and created the *Parent Voice In Action: A Community Resource Guide*²² to support communities in their efforts to increase parental involvement, engagement and leadership. Drawing from information gathered through the Discovery evaluation

²¹ Discovery website at http://www.discovery.wcgmf.org/category_146.html.

²² Available for download in the Parent Leadership and Engagement section of the Discovery Web site at http://www.discovery.wcgmf.org/category_208.html.

project, the Memorial Fund also created the *Discovery Parent Engagement Datakit*, which provides information and reflective materials for communities about parent engagement on Discovery collaborative tables.²³

How this approach makes a difference:

Connecticut has been a national leader in parent leadership and parent leadership training. It is the home of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), developed by Elaine Zimmerman and her colleagues and supported for many years by Connecticut state government. The driving insight of PLTI was that parents could hone their leadership skills to become highly effective and knowledgeable advocates on issues they cared about, through rigorous training made available in their communities. One measure of the success of PLTI was that, when the evaluation of CFI first began, the evaluators noted that a large number of the people they were meeting around the state involved in children's advocacy or children's issues were PLTI alumni who reported that PLTI generated or strengthened their interest in doing this work. The Memorial Fund's investments in parent engagement and leadership drew from and expanded this insight. As noted above, the Memorial Fund recognized the value of PLTI and was among its earliest supporters. It also helped create and support many other parent engagement and leadership efforts – directly and indirectly through the CFI and Discovery communities' work.

The Memorial Fund's diverse and continuing investments in parent leadership and engagement have also affected their own approach to this work. One of the central lessons from CFI was that parent leadership does not come easily to systems whose decisions affect the well-being of children and families, and that intentional and sustained work is required to keep this goal at the forefront of people's work. Another was that parent leadership is not a hierarchy – that parent leadership is not necessarily about parents learning to operate within existing systems or taking assigned roles at others' tables (including CFI or Discovery collaborative tables), but about multiple ways of exercising their power in the spheres in which they have influence – as parents, activists, neighbors, workers and community members, and as voters. Technical assistance guidelines, investments and other supports from the Memorial Fund about parent engagement and leadership increasingly align with these insights. The Matrix of Parent Opportunities and Community Responsibilities tool (the honeycomb) (http://www.wcgmf.org/pdf/publication_5.pdf) developed for the Memorial Fund by its technical assistance broker (Laura Downs), is one important example.

Challenges of this approach:

The major challenge of this approach is the time and intentionality needed to support genuine leadership and engagement of community residents, including parents, in structured processes of community change, particularly ones not designed by residents themselves. The joint emphasis on collaboration and parent leadership in CFI, and later in Discovery, meant changing norms and cultures of systems to shift power

²³ Id.

towards the users of those systems (often referred to as a consumer focus) and simultaneously, to ask community residents to invest their time as volunteers in planning and discussions that are time-consuming, and not always consistent with the sense of urgency that parents bring to the table.

As the ideas about parent engagement and leadership have become more expansive, some of the challenges have lessened. Early on, there were some different ideas about whether parent engagement or leadership was about the roles of parents on the CFI or Discovery collaborative, or a broader set of opportunities for leadership in their homes, among their peers or within the community (for example, by serving on School Boards or Head Start advisory groups). The evaluators noted, and mentioned to the Memorial Fund's management and program staff, that different messages about parent leadership and engagement were being communicated to grantees and other partners in various materials and settings. For example, the evaluators noted that some materials and discussions suggested that parent leadership in CFI was mostly about parents holding positions in formal structures, primarily the CFI collaborations.

In addition, there was some inconsistency in whether or not parent leadership was a hierarchical idea -- in which parents began as non-leaders and moved up through various externally defined roles to become leaders. There were also some different ideas about whether or not the overriding goal was for parents to work in collaboration with system stakeholders, or whether organized parents should or could develop and lead their own entities. As noted above, there is now an explicit set of multiple ways that parent engagement and leadership are understood and communicated, for instance, in the matrix of parent opportunities and community responsibilities (the so-called "honeycomb") developed for the Discovery Initiative (http://discovery.wcgmf.org/pdf/publication_5.pdf). This graphic lists roles for parents under several categories – civic engagement, involvement with their own child's early school success, leadership on issues that they and other parents care about, and so on. Additional clarity is demonstrated in the text on the graphic, including:

"The Memorial Fund views parent engagement as an ongoing process where parents execute multiple roles and have a myriad of responsibilities to their children, families and community. Sustained change cannot happen without the active engagement of all parents and in particular those parents who are most at-risk. Parent engagement is not an isolated strategy or tactic, it is not a linear process and one size does not fit all..."

Another challenge of the central role of parent leadership and engagement for the Memorial Fund is the difficulty of "proving" that parent engagement and/or collaboration are essential elements of improving outcomes for young children, to the extent that others question their centrality to the Memorial Fund's work. The Memorial Fund has made a substantial investment in parent engagement and leadership. Observers and people within the Memorial Fund sometimes have wondered if focusing on these elements is "*worth the candle*" in terms of contribution to the intended outcomes of the work. This is, of course, true for many other aspects of the work, but it is particularly

relevant given the very high visibility of parent engagement and leadership as a core piece of the work, the efforts and struggles to achieve it, and the resources supporting its implementation at a high level of quality.

A driving assumption is that parent and other community activism, particularly civic activism, is a necessary component of what it will take to improve children's early success in school – to promote high quality early childhood development programming, to have enough affordable slots for those who need them, to improve the ability of schools to support children in early grades, and to promote, demand or ensure other necessary system and community changes. This assumption applies to Discovery communities, Connecticut more generally and the United States as a whole. Because outcomes are still not where we all would like them to be, we don't yet know if this particular way of improving them will work and we don't know what the value added of investments in parent engagement and leadership will be. However, at the Memorial Fund, the value is at least as influential as the driving assumption – making parent engagement and leadership an end in itself as well as a means to a hoped for end.

Consistently working to reduce power imbalances

“When you invite people and you have resources, there is always going to be power in that. But we are very careful to mean that it really is always an invitation, if it makes sense for them...not, here's some money if you do what we want.”

Issues of power within communities and among communities and state level policy makers have been part of the Memorial Fund's discussions since very early in its formation. The Memorial Fund recognizes the power its assets and standing in the community give it among its partners. At the same time, the organization values self-determination. An emphasis on listening as a “founding” strategy of the Memorial Fund is one demonstration of that value. Another is the emphasis on building sustained relationships in which people have time to prove to themselves that the Memorial Fund stands behind its rhetoric. Each of these behaviors is evidence of an understanding by the Memorial Fund that power differentials and their consequences matter in philanthropic work.²⁴

Staff notes that the Lead Trustee and management explicitly try to keep staff aware of the power imbalances in their work. They discuss openly the organizational power that people from foundations represent and how that can be managed at both an organizational and individual level.

One staff person said that she picked up very early in her tenure that this *“kind of sits with all the other issues...being aware of your own power, and how you use it – it*

²⁴ See *Collaboration in Foundation Grantor-Grantee Relationships* by Kent Fairfield and Kennard Wing in *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, Vol.19, no.1, Fall 2008 and *Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building* by Sally Leiderman, Maggie Potapchuk, Donna Bivens and Barbara Major, 2005 (www.capd.org) for summaries of literature and more discussion about power differentials among communities, grantees and philanthropies.

became clear in my interactions with Bill – even though we are in the position of having some kinds of power -- we are able to give out resources – that does not mean you have the right to tell other people how to do things.”

Staff also considers the language they use to engage people across differences of power. For example,

“It’s always an invitation – ‘if you want to do this, or ‘what would it take to support you to do this’... we understand this is on top of your other work.”

The Memorial Fund is also aware that the extent of their power varies in different settings. For example, one pointed out that

“The perceived sense of power is different in different relationships – communities get talked about more—in terms of how can we be true to our values in those relationships. We are a small player relative to the state. There the power relationships are reversed, more the tail wagging the dog. So it’s more accurate to say with respect to communities, the question is always – what are our core values and how can we be true to them, and with respect to the state – what are our values and how can we act on them in relationships where others have more power.”

Like other philanthropies, the Memorial Fund is right now in the process of working out the extent to which, and how, it will be more explicit about the role of racism, classism, power and privilege in its own work, and how it might effectively support its partners in identifying and addressing these issues in their spheres.

The belief in bending over backwards to avoid exercising undue power is often tested. It is one of the beliefs, like not quitting on anybody, that can run counter to management and staff’s interests in accountability and it can feel like it limits their ability to use all of the more traditional philanthropic carrots and sticks at their disposal. At the same time, as one staff person said,

“I definitely think the commitment to partnership – staying away from I hold the goal, you do as I say attitude – we aren’t 100 percent free of that, but maybe an 8 on a 10 point scale. I think our willingness to work with grantees in a way that they are comfortable talking about what’s not working, where they are getting stuck, without fear of any sort of retribution is real. I do think there are cases we can point to, especially with community grantmaking, where we did not go away, remained patient when things didn’t seem to be moving along – and then something happens, starts moving after no movement whatsoever, and because we are still at the table, had relationships, hadn’t thrown our power around – maybe somebody at the local level is hired, or a position changes and it gets the ball rolling.”

How this approach makes a difference:

As noted above, the fact that management and staff are encouraged to talk about the power relationships between a philanthropy and its grantees has helped create the culture at the foundation that supports all of the other values in action. For example, it is one of the factors that have helped organizations and communities in Connecticut be more open about their struggles and occasionally challenge the Memorial Fund's ideas or guidelines. Over time, it is also creating openness at the Memorial Fund to respond to communities' requests for more explicit support around issues of class and race that affect outcomes for children.

Challenges of this approach:

The internal challenge for the Memorial Fund has been to work through its own learning and build its confidence in addressing issues of power, particularly in terms of institutional or structural racism and privilege. Management and staff have a range of backgrounds and experiences with racism, both personally and professionally. Management and staff express different levels of confidence in their own abilities to take on these issues more explicitly in all of their areas of work. The Lead Trustee has expressed an interest in finding ways of dealing with these issues that does not reinforce "us vs. them" or victim/oppressor status, but rather, ways in which people see greater possibilities by working across differences or traditional divides. This is also one of the reasons why the Memorial Fund has traditionally valued collaboration rather than more confrontational change strategies (like boycotts or "demand" organizing). He notes that,

"when you are seen deeply but still accepted as powerful, that can cause a tremendous positive desire to change – confrontation has short term benefits, as a way of getting someone's attention, but doesn't focus on the deeper work – particularly when there is a power dynamic – it sometimes leads to victim/oppressor roles, doesn't lead as directly to – I need to change my behavior because it leads to greater possibilities if I do – which is more likely to be transformational."

One challenge is to find resources and approaches for internal use aligned with these values.

Another challenge has been to meet requests of communities or others for high quality and effective technical assistance that addresses race and class at the level and for the issues that have surfaced. Communities have sometimes been ahead of the Memorial Fund on this front, for example, in recognizing and wanting to address racial inequities in the assignment of very young children to special education based on how their behavior is judged in child care programs, and in developing a continuum of parent leadership training that attends to different levels of literacy or English literacy.

The stories above reflect various ways in which the values of the Memorial Fund inform their operating beliefs, and ways in which those beliefs influence their decisions,

strategies and grantmaking. The remaining sections of this report place these actions within a broader context of philanthropic options, and offer some implications and reflections for those who are engaged in similar efforts.

SECTION IV: PHILANTHROPIC CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS

The previous sections of this document have focused on the Memorial Fund's values in action by reference to its own work. In this section, we look outside, to describe briefly where those values, beliefs and actions fit among various ways that people do philanthropy. The fit is described under three groupings: the philanthropic 'what'; the philanthropic 'how', and the philanthropic 'so what'

The Philanthropic 'What'

A substantial portion of the Memorial Fund's investments can be described under the general umbrella of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs)²⁵ CCIs are one of many ways that foundations have tried to make investments to improve the well-being of children and families. The term became popular in the 1980's and 90's as foundations tried to address some of the limitations of more categorical or single focus grantmaking. CCIs tend to describe grantmaking directed to a particular geographic area (often called place-based). In the children's arena, such initiatives recognize that children's outcomes are related to many issues that philanthropy often treated as separate concerns – health, education, family well-being, etc. At that time, there was also an increasing understanding that collaboration and other "linking" strategies are useful in social change work that spans multiple actors, issues and systems.

Foundations that created CCIs often expected to fund the work for longer than was usually their practice (five to twenty years, for example, compared to the more typical one to three years for categorical grantmaking). CCIs were thus both a reactive response to more isolated or scattered forms of grantmaking and an experimental and aspirational hope that staying with an issue or place over a long enough period of time with sufficient intensity could create real change in the lives of residents.

As cited by Frusciante:

"Comprehensive community building approaches seek to address the needs of children and family through multifaceted and integrated programming. CCIs focus on bringing multiple stakeholders including residents, to the table to collaborate and build support for integrating systems and directing dollars into effective reform strategies for the focus at hand. Although every CCI is unique, "the common goal of every CCI is nothing short of a fundamental transformation of the physical and economic conditions, social relationships, and institutional capacities of the local neighborhood" (Traynor, 2002, p. 11, cited in Frusciante).

In addition, per Frusciante,

²⁵ Information in this section is drawn in large part from "Focusing on sustainability: A search for the roots and reaches of comprehensive community building for early care and education" (November 2008 working draft), a literature review produced by Angela Frusciante, PhD, Knowledge Development Officer at the Memorial Fund.

“CCI designs often include either explicit or implicit desires for, and assumptions around, resident engagement as a means for ‘shifting responsibility for community change to local leadership as well as for promoting connections among residents with similar interests and needs’.”

As noted earlier, the Children First and Discovery Initiatives can both be considered comprehensive community initiatives. Like other CCIs, they are place-based and encourage comprehensive approaches to change. Like other CCIs, they strongly encourage collaboration at multiple levels and across systems, and they promote resident leadership – in their case, with an emphasis on parent engagement or parent leadership -- in many ways and at all levels. As is true for other community/foundation partnerships working on CCIs, these ideas are supported by grants, capacity building, leadership development and the use of communication and data as strategies for change. Like other CCIs, the work is sustained over time and there is an expectation of cumulative progress toward improved well-being.

The stories of the Memorial Fund’s values in action suggest the value of comprehensive community initiatives that are long-term, place-based and incorporate serious attention to relationships as one key feature. For example, the stories suggest that:

- These kinds of philanthropic connections offer opportunities to build more genuine relationships of trust and candor, which can lead to much more willingness to admit problems and mistakes and opportunities to work together to fix them;
- They also provide time and the level of knowledge it takes to co-create a strategy for change that fits a community’s, a system’s or an organization’s culture, strengths and tolerance for change;
- They also sometimes allow the work to outlast those who try to block change – or, similarly, give people time to have their work adopted or institutionalized by people who can keep it going.

At the same time, the stories of values and operating beliefs in action suggest some intriguing questions – particularly given the ideas of never quitting on anybody, and the deep interest in self-determination and more equal power relationships. For example:

- How can philanthropies approach a particular place and an initial group of people in that place, in ways that foster self-determination and co-creation of work? How can they know at the beginning who in that community has legitimacy among, for example, the most voiceless constituencies?
- Similarly, what are the methods to change the “ownership” of the work once people and groups in the community and the foundation know more about each other? _
- Who decides when enough is enough?

The Philanthropic ‘How’

The work of the Memorial Fund also falls within the general category of theory of change and outcome driven philanthropic efforts. To understand this better, it is possible to think about a range of ways that philanthropies approach their work. At one end might be investments in valued processes such as grassroots leadership or organizing, coalition building, school reform or personal transformation. A foundation might fund these assuming that they will lead to important results, but without itself determining the results to be achieved. At the other end might be efforts to do whatever it takes to get to a particular outcome – with an end defined but not processes to get there. On that continuum, the Memorial Fund’s values, beliefs and the actions they promote would place them in the middle – with some push and pull towards either end.

The same might be said of the Memorial Fund’s use of and challenges with theories of change. A theory of change describes how a foundation or other group expects change to happen. It often describes how particular strategies to be implemented are expected to contribute to particular outcomes. Theories of change as planning tools also became more popular in the 1990’s.

“The basic description of a theory of change approach to evaluation was defined by Carol Weiss (1995). Essentially, Weiss proposes that a theory of change approach requires that the designers of an initiative articulate the premises, assumptions, and hypotheses that might explain the how, when, and why of the processes of change. As part of this approach, program designers with other key stakeholders are asked to identify key programmatic elements and to indicate how these interventions might lead to anticipated short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes...” (Guitierrez and Tasse, 2007, pages 49-50).²⁶

Its emphasis on collaboration and parent engagement and leadership clearly place the Memorial Fund with other foundations that emphasize process along with outcomes, acknowledged in their theory of change. In addition, the Memorial Fund, like many other philanthropies, sees itself as a supporter, partner and one of many agents of change, but not the lead driver or definer of that change. Its approach to its policy work is perhaps the clearest example of its place along that dimension.

However, even having a theory of change has been somewhat uncomfortable for Memorial Fund management and staff. Consistent with its values, the Memorial Fund does not see itself as the “architect” of improved outcomes for children; it is not comfortable “imposing” a particular theory of change on its partners. Until very recently, the theory of change was mostly an internal document. The Memorial Fund has not required its partners to develop their own theories of change, or to contribute

²⁶From “Leading With Theory: Using a Theory of Change Approach for Leadership Development Evaluations” in *The Handbook of Leadership Development Evaluation*, edited by Kelly M. Hannum, Jennifer W. Martineau, and Claire Reinelt, Jossey-Bass, 2007.

substantially to an initiative wide one. At the same time, because it is the major funder for most of what it does, particularly in communities, communities are eager to know more about the Memorial's expectations, assumptions and hypotheses, and some would welcome a fuller articulation.

The stories in the previous section illustrate many of the strengths and tensions of blending theory of change and outcome driven approaches with an interest in allowing communities and other grantees to lead their own work to improve children's outcomes.

They suggest that:

- Communities and other grantees need and benefit from some time to test out whether or not a foundation really means what it says – and what the consequences are of going in a different direction or pushing back on the theory of change or intended outcomes;
- While communities and other grantees generally welcome the idea of having a major role in designing their own work, they don't always want to have to "re-invent the wheel," particularly in areas that are new to them. In fact, most welcome appropriate and grounded technical support or other guidance (such as the kindergarten transition institutes offered in Discovery). And there are ways to offer these supports consistent with core values and operating beliefs. For example, they can be framed as options (such as in the parent engagement honeycomb), as process supports (such as the Results Based Accountability framework for choosing outcomes and strategies to achieve them) and they can be provided online or otherwise made accessible so that communities or other grantees can choose to use them when it makes most sense to them.²⁷
- Communities and other grantees will also respect a foundation for establishing its own criteria or "bottom-line" requirements for partnerships, with or without proof that the requirement will contribute to the outcomes. It helps if the foundation shares why it holds that position and applies it consistently throughout its work.

The stories and their implications also raise some questions for those doing similar work. For example:

- What world views are represented in the theory of change? That is, whose experiences of how change happens, under what conditions, are articulated and therefore able to be discussed and challenged, and which world views are assumed without articulation or reflection?²⁸

²⁷See Discovery evaluation reports, "Community Use of Capacity-Building Supports as of Mid-2007" (April 2008) and "Electronic Communications in the Discovery Initiative" (August 2008), available on the Discovery Web site at <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/>.

²⁸See *Flipping the Script*, by Maggie Potapchuk, Sally Leiderman, Donna Bivens, and Barbara Major, 2005 (for example, page 86) for more discussion of this point.

- Similarly, if a foundation is genuinely co-creating its work with its grantees and working to mitigate power differentials, should there be mutually determined criteria for inclusion of elements in the theory of change? For example, evidence that a strategy creates improved outcomes for every racial/ethnic group of interest, or that a particular combination of strategies has been sustained over time and contributed to the intended outcomes? Or that an innovation has been suggested by a particular group but never tried, or that leadership is shifted to groups who have never had leadership on this issue? Would that process open up the possibility of radically different ways of solving intractable social problems?

The Philanthropic ‘So What’

As is true for most philanthropies, the actions of the Memorial Fund are for a purpose. However, more than some foundations, the Memorial Fund consciously strives to avoid being heavy-handed in the use of its power while still promoting its goals. Thus, the Memorial Fund is interested in contributing to the well-being of children, using methods that amplify parents’ voices and broadening the number of people and groups who are actively engaged together in that work.

The use of power to help transform existing power relationships themselves, not just the consequences of those power relationships, is a current concern in philanthropy. For example, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) convened a meeting in August 2009 to discuss ways to evaluate work aimed at reducing racial inequities or other similar goals. A major topic was how to identify transformational rather than transactional intermediate outcomes – that is, interim results of philanthropic investments that predict fundamental and sustained change in power arrangements.²⁹ While the Memorial Fund would likely not describe its work as a place where these outcomes might be identified, in fact, its values in action suggest that it could be.

For example, communities active in the Children First Initiative and then in Discovery now have 15 years experience in offering parents a variety of ways to connect with early childhood programs, school systems, each other and others in the community and statewide to improve outcomes for young children. In the course of this work, several different approaches have been used to promote or support varying kinds of parent leadership. These include different types of parent trainings, of varying duration, for people at different levels of experience with civic processes. They have included support for parent-led work, staffed and unstaffed, ranging from specific, one-time projects to multi-year parent-led organizations. They have also included work with organizations to encourage them to engage differently with parents and requiring that parents be a part of CFI or Discovery collaborative tables. Some of these approaches are quite explicit about sharing or shifting power; and some could have that effect though it may not be the articulated intent. A deeper look at this work and its results

²⁹ See *Making Progress: Movement Toward Racial Justice Volume 3, July 2010* Produced by the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Justice

over time may suggest some transactional outcomes, in terms of fostering a climate within a grantee organization or community that hears and acts on a new set of voices, or in which ownership of solutions is more widely dispersed.

SECTION V. REFLECTIONS

What do the earlier stories and the context above suggest about the ways in which the Memorial Fund's work is the same or different from other practitioners or philanthropies? What might we take from these similarities and distinctions around the practice of philanthropy?

The Memorial Fund shares with many other foundations a focus on collaboration, resident leadership, comprehensive approaches to place-based work and continued investment over many years. Many other foundations, perhaps most, also work from an articulated set of values and beliefs which deeply influence their actions. Further, we note that the particular values and beliefs of the Memorial Fund are not unique to them.

What is rare, in our observation, is the combined set of values and beliefs and the consistency and fidelity with which they are applied. For example, many foundations invest in community leadership, and some invest in leadership at multiple levels as one of their preeminent change strategies (the Annie E. Casey and the Northwest Area Foundations, for example). Many foundations are deeply concerned about processes and the means of the work they fund, as well as its ends (the Akonadi and the Paul J. Aicher Foundations, for example). Some of those foundations put a premium of relationships and practices that acknowledge the values of their partners, help to build their capacities and do not impose models or substitute their own judgment for the judgment of their grantees (the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, for example). There are also a small number of foundations that value story as both a learning tool and process to support change (the Russell Family Foundation, for example). It is interesting to note that these latter three foundations – the Akonadi, Mary Reynolds Babcock and Russell Family Foundations – are all also explicit about reducing and mitigating structural racism and privilege, both in their own organizational culture and actions, and as important factors in the work they fund. And, as noted in the prior section, this is something that is becoming more explicit at the Memorial Fund as well.

There are also some strategies common to other foundations that the Memorial Fund historically has chosen not to employ or support. The Memorial Fund communicates more often through dialogue or to share what it is learning than to promote its own agenda or awareness of its own work. It tends to continue support to organizations and communities as an expression of an ongoing learning partnership rather than as a consequence of achievement of a documented set of results or outcomes. When choices are made, the values associated with relationships appear to receive the most weight, as was described earlier.

At the same time, most of the Memorial Fund's grantmaking would fall under the category of "initiative grantmaking" rather than "reactive grantmaking." That is, it invites communities and groups to partner within a framework that it generally develops. While these frameworks build on listening and considerable input from others in Connecticut, this is still different from putting out an open request for proposals with only a geographic focus.

In addition, the Memorial Fund generally works within systems and through collaboration. More confrontational strategies, such as boycotts or litigation, have not been promoted through capacity building or in other ways. As one person noted, *“cooperation, negotiation are more practical for us,”* or, as noted by another, *“anytime you get into a situation that has to be settled in court, that in itself is a loss.”*

Foundations have many kinds of resources at their disposal. These include grants, program related investments and other ways of dispersing their funds, convening ‘muscle,’ the ability to amplify the voices of others or shine a bright light on an issue, and ideas, expertise and learning based on their cumulative experience. They also have multiple choices about how to organize or apply any of these resources.

As noted above, many of the specific values or individual practice choices made by the Memorial Fund are not unique or even necessarily rare among philanthropies. Some are shared by a few other philanthropies, some by many and a few by most. In the experience of the authors, it is the fidelity with which Trustees, management and program staff of the Memorial Fund all align their individual behaviors with these values, and thus, the consistency of the organization’s values in action, that makes the Memorial Fund distinctive. As described in Section III of this document, management and staff articulate a very similar understanding of their values and beliefs. They know what they are supposed to do because of them. Further, they are aware of many of the trade-offs among these values, and are thoughtful about how to negotiate them. They also are clear that there are other choices they could be making and, therefore, very aware of the opportunity costs of what they choose not to do.

Prudence Brown and Leila Fiester, in *“Hard Lessons about Philanthropy & Community Change from the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative (NII)”*³⁰ offer a set of lessons based on a comprehensive community initiative. Different observers assess the success or lack of success of this initiative differently, but there is general agreement that the work was challenging and the difficult relationships among the multiple partners made it harder. In thinking about implications for philanthropy from this experience, Brown and Fiester note:

“The community change field has advanced since 1994...People know more about how communities function; they have incorporated theories of change and attention to results more thoroughly into their initiatives; ...Funders are more likely now than in the past to look for opportunities to build on existing community strengths and momentum rather than starting something entirely new and to adapt their approach to fit the demands and possibilities for change on the ground...Nonetheless, community change – that is, the development of neighborhood leaders, organizations and networks so they can support residents and link them to resources and opportunities, inside and outside the community – isn’t for every foundation....What characteristics position a foundation to do this work well? At the most basic level, we see two core competencies as necessary

³⁰ William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, March 2007.

(though not sufficient)...1) the ability to establish productive relationships with diverse people and organizations with which a foundation must work...and 2) the ability to take a learning stance throughout the entire enterprise.”

To that we would add, an articulated set of values plus behaviors that align with those values that promote: listening, being responsive, giving people room to tap into their own strengths, offering radical hospitality and having the patience to allow time to be your ally. These values and the behaviors to exemplify them have become the hallmark of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund. As illustrated here, they have also contributed to the successes of its work so far.