Message from the Chair & President

January 2014

We begin each year writing to update our grantees and those interested in the work of The Overbrook Foundation. We are pleased to report that in 2014 Overbrook will continue building on two initiatives formally approved by the Board of Directors at the end of 2013: establishing a portfolio of grantees in the Human Rights Program working to reform the role of money in politics and focusing on new strategies for movement building in the Environment program. As readers of our previous letters know, the Foundation has, since 2008, been dealing with the adverse impact of the economic downturn on the Foundation’s investment portfolio and our ability to maintain a robust portfolio of Human Rights and Environment Program grants. We are pleased to report that recent and continuing growth of the investment portfolio will allow us to pursue these new initiatives while maintaining our established program priorities in Human Rights and the Environment.

Money in Politics For many years, certainly since the early 2000s, the Foundation has found its grantees involved in a steep, uphill climb as they attempt to advance their advocacy and public policy agendas. The imbalance of power between generally smaller and more poorly resourced progressive advocates and the well-financed forces opposing their agendas has always been quite challenging. However, in January 2010 with the Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court decision, the odds against progressive organizations successfully advocating for issues on human rights and environment got much worse.

Citizens United unleashed vast sums of money into federal elections. The resulting torrents of money may serve to dominate the electoral process so that more than 99% of Americans without substantial financial means will become irrelevant to the electoral process. As disturbing, state and local level elections are also being flooded with money. This becomes even more concerning when one considers that in 39 states trial court and intermediate appellate court judges are elected and that these races are also being flooded with special interest funding as well. Beyond elections, the undue influence of well-funded lobbyists at the state and federal level represents another barrier to advancing progressive agendas through the legislative process and within the executive branches of government.
Building on grants awarded in 2011 and 2012, the Foundation will continue building its initiative on reforming the role of Money in Politics. It will work to incorporate those media reform efforts it presently supports that address the need for reform of money in politics into the new initiative and it will expand the resources available for organizations, new to Overbrook, working on these efforts.

Reigniting the Environment Movement As the Foundation progressed over the last decade in its efforts to advance biodiversity conservation in Latin America and foster sustainable consumption practices in the U.S., it was impossible to ignore troubling signs within the larger environment movement that were negatively impacting the Foundation’s efforts. A series of problems that increasingly hobble the progress of the environmental movement are now evident. These include an inability across the movement to connect people power with financial power, a distracting competition among groups that could make much greater impact if working in collaboration, and a lack of readiness to jointly identify key legislative opportunities, stand in solidarity, and effectively leverage them as a united group.

The Building Equity and Alignment Initiative (BEA) is a grassroots-led entity launched with initial support from The Overbrook Foundation (and then others) in July 2013, organizing around a shared future vision for a more inclusive, connective, winning environmental movement. This vision is one in which organizations and networks authentically collaborate in an ever-growing web of equitable relationships, one in which the movement has broadened to include social justice, economic justice and other progressive values, where silos no longer exist, and a win for one is a win for all.

Four avenues for reaching that future, as envisioned by a growing group of grassroots participants who are leading the BEA initiative, include: expanding the pool of resources available to the environment and overlapping progressive issues; shifting that growing pool of available resources to more equitably service the grassroots organizing sector; breaking down historic barriers between big green, grassroots and funding sectors, building authentic relationships toward greater alignment and solidarity; and shifting the prevailing culture within philanthropy away from a top-down, funder-driven approach, and toward a base-building, bottom-up, collaborative approach.

In 2014 we anticipate raising significant new financial resources in addition to the those funds already committed to this work by Overbrook and existing funding partners. Those resources will allow BEA to make measurable progress in the resource mapping, outreach and
communications efforts that its participants have identified as key elements for moving forward with this effort to reignite and unify the environmental community.

Planning for the Future Overbrook’s last strategic plan was completed in 2011. Since its adoption the pace of change, both positive and negative, in the human rights and environment arenas has been astonishing. Thus, the Board and staff agree that we need to begin framing the likely opportunities and challenges that we will face over the next decade as we consider where our support can most strategically be directed. An important part of that effort will be examining the current landscape in which human rights and environment activism operate. We will look to our friends in philanthropy and the not-for-profit universe to help us in that inquiry.

Overbrook continues its mission as a progressive family foundation to support organizations advancing human rights and conserving the natural environment. The Foundation continues to discourage letters of inquiry although we remain interested in learning about organizations and projects that, at some future point, could be candidates for Foundation grantmaking. As we move toward undertaking our next strategic planning work we welcome your suggestions for how Overbrook could recalibrate its commitments to human rights and the environment. As always, Foundation staff will invite proposals on a limited basis as opportunities that clearly match Foundation priorities are identified.

Sincerely,

Aaron Labaree                      Stephen A. Foster
Chair of the Board of Directors      President and CEO