January 2015

CHAIR & PRESIDENT MESSAGE

As in years past, we write to comment on developments over the past year and to let our grantees and interested readers know of our plans for 2015.

2014 was devoted to the continued building of our major focus areas in Human Rights and the Environment and to exploring opportunities for reshaping the Foundation’s grantmaking programs as we began a comprehensive strategic review of both program areas. 2015 will be the year in which we complete this strategic review while continuing to use our grantmaking to further those programmatic priorities that remain central to the Foundation. Priorities that have been endorsed by the Board of Directors in recent years include movement building across both program areas and support for reform efforts to reduce the influence of money in politics. Similarly, the Foundation’s longstanding commitments to reproductive rights and justice, LGBT rights, supporting the domestic human rights community, human rights defenders, conservation of biodiversity in Latin America and promoting sustainable consumption practices in the U.S. will continue to receive support in 2015 while the Board considers how these priorities might be further refined, more tightly focused and strengthened.

In recognition of their efforts in building the Foundation’s key program areas, two Foundation staff members were promoted this year to Program Officer. Samantha Harvey now represents the Environment Program as Program Officer and Sarah Abelow is now a Human Rights Program Officer. Both Samantha and Sarah will work closely with other Staff and the Board in each of the focus areas discussed below.

Money in Politics Events in 2014 reinforced Overbrook’s determination to join reform efforts around money in politics. On April 2nd, the Supreme Court issued a ruling in McCutcheon v. FEC that struck down the aggregate limits on the amount an individual may contribute during a two-year period to all federal candidates, parties and political action committees combined, opening the flood gates of money in US elections even wider than had the earlier decision in Citizens United v. FEC. The Center for Responsive Politics estimates that approximately $3.7 billion was spent on Congressional elections in 2014; once again setting a record and once again demonstrating the disproportionate impact that “big” and “dark” money now plays in our electoral process.

The move to combat the corrosive impact of money in politics also grew in 2014 with an expansion in the number and breadth of organizations addressing the many facets of the problem. Overbrook’s approach is to focus its limited resources using a matrix of questions to identify potential grantees. Is the project innovative and could it lead to new strategies for engaging a broader public on this issue more deeply? Would support for this work attract new constituencies and help build a broader movement for reform? Is this an effort to develop field-wide resources? Does the effort move beyond identifying problems and offer solutions? Could Overbrook funding make a substantive difference in advancing the supported work? Which currently supported Overbrook media and media reform grantees are working at the intersection of media and money in politics? It is by asking these questions that the Foundation identified
projects such as United Republic Education Fund, the Collaborative Communications Initiative housed at ReThink Media and the work of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law as central to its grantmaking. These questions will continue to drive our thinking moving forward.

**Movement Building** In addition to combatting the influence of big money in the American political system that stifles the progress of all Overbrook grantees and the public interest, Overbrook grantees are increasingly looking to movements to build the power necessary to ensure the human rights and environmental sustainability of all communities. The importance of movement building continued to be evidenced in 2014 as grassroots-led Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (BEA4Impact or BEA initiative), participated in shaping some of the cross-sector collaborations resulting in the unprecedented success of the People’s Climate March in September. Then in November, BEA held its second full-group meeting since launching in July 2013, including new representatives from grassroots groups, large and mid-sized NGO allies, and funder allies. New participants from labor and social justice movements were also included, following the BEA leadership’s desire to expand the group and make connections among related (but often siloed) issues. Progress both externally and internally for BEA is moving toward the kinds of cross-movement processes the initiative is increasingly striving to facilitate and support.

Support for BEA is the natural outgrowth of the Foundation’s multi-year critical examination of why the U.S. Environmental Community writ large is under-performing and how it could better align itself in order to succeed in the future. While it is somewhat audacious to believe that this problem could be “fixed,” the Board and Staff nevertheless have moved forward believing that without some kind of intervention, the U.S. Environmental Movement would eventually fail and that everyone would suffer the consequences.

The BEA is less a project than a re-envisioning of this conglomeration of some 16,000-plus environmental organizations that together could reach great impact as a powerful and engaged movement. It is built from the ground up by disparate colleagues who share the common goal of a new and improved environmental movement: one that is smarter, more inclusive, looks like the country it represents and shares a vision for success. While getting to success may be a heavy lift and will take time, the BEA is now clearly off the ground and moving towards its vision of a unified, winning environmental movement.

As the Foundation moves forward with its strategic planning, Staff is examining the lessons already learned in launching BEA and considering how to apply them across its grantmaking initiatives. With Board approval, Movement Building has been made a third major initiative of the Environment Program. In 2015, background research to further define “movement building” for the Foundation and to develop strategies to more effectively incorporate a movement lens into all the Foundation’s grantmaking efforts will be completed.

**The Strategic Planning Process** The Foundation has reached the halfway point in its strategic review process. In 2014 Board and Staff considered: The changing landscape in which Overbrook operates— identifying how these changes impact the consideration of both existing and new objectives for the Environment and Human Rights programs; Lessons learned—
reviewing what Overbrook Staff and Board have learned over the last five years since the 2010 strategic review; Strategies – considering strategies that might best respond to the changing landscape, lessons learned and emerging opportunities around Overbrook’s grantmaking.

In 2015, the Foundation will add to the substantive reviews completed in recent years on its human rights defenders work, support of reproductive justice and domestic human rights by undertaking reviews of its initiatives in biodiversity conservation in Latin America and sustainable consumption practices in the U.S. It will also examine its role in advancing LGBT rights as the campaign for marriage equality for same-sex couples nationwide rapidly approaches completion. Inquiries about possible roles for Foundation grantmaking for anti-trafficking programs and criminal justice/mass incarceration reform are also scheduled in 2015. The need to consider reform of the criminal justice system and address mass incarceration as a possible Foundation program focus is made more urgent by events in 2014 such as the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO and Eric Garner in Staten Island at the hands of the police. Activism inspired by these events is creating a strong challenge to the ongoing dehumanization and criminalization of communities of color, particularly African American communities, and connecting to other struggles for human rights and justice that intersect with current program areas and areas under exploration.

Finally, the Foundation’s Directors began a discussion in 2014 of how the Foundation’s investment portfolio reflects the Foundation’s commitment to advancing human rights and the environment. In June, the Foundation hosted a meeting to discuss the Divest-Invest Philanthropy Movement and the challenges facing non-profits who seek to use a socially responsible investment lens. In 2015, the Foundation will continue these discussions and will work closely with its investment advisors to determine how best to carry its mission into its investment policy while continuing to meet prudent investor guidelines.

All of these efforts will lead to discussions by Staff with Overbrook’s grantees and Board Directors about how best to shape its grantmaking programs moving forward. We anticipate announcing those decisions after the Board’s final meeting of the year in November.

As the Foundation works through its strategic review process, it 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 a part of Overbrook’s strategic review, we welcome suggestions for how best to recalibrate its commitments to human rights and the environment. Staff will invite proposals on a limited basis as opportunities believed to clearly match Foundation priorities are identified.

Sincerely,

Aaron Labaree
Chair of the Board of Directors

Stephen A. Foster
President and CEO