February 2019

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR & PRESIDENT

The Overbrook Foundation is a family foundation which recently celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding by Helen and Frank Altschul. Over that seven-decade lifespan, the Foundation has continually revisited and renewed its purpose. Today, its Board of Directors is made up of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, their spouses and partners and one non-family director. The Foundation remains committed to its mission to support organizations advancing human rights and conserving the natural environment. Directors and Staff believe this mission is more critically important today than at any time in the life of Overbrook.

As we begin the new year, we would like to take a few moments to briefly consider events that affected us and our grantees in 2018 and then look forward to the possibilities that may be opening for the Foundation's progressive agenda.

Important referenda on gerrymandering reform, automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, money in politics, and ethics succeeded in ballot measures across the states. In the 116th Session of Congress, the House is now poised for serious engagement with climate change and other human rights concerns. Major reports issued near the end of the year (including the Fourth National Climate Assessment conducted by 13 departments and agencies of the U.S. Executive Branch) vividly put the world on notice that in only a very few years, perhaps less than a decade, stopping the worst effects of climate change will become impossible unless extreme measures are taken almost immediately.

Only a massive commitment to addressing climate change could possibly mitigate more extreme outcomes, ranging from flooding caused by rising seas and more violent storms to extreme drought and massive forest fires. As horrific as these “natural” disasters will be, the likelihood of massive disruption to business supply chains and economic output around the world and diminished food production caused by changing weather patterns including flooding and droughts is as frightening. Perhaps most pernicious will be the resultant forced migration of millions and subsequent political instability as people are pushed inland by rising seas and forced to abandon their homes for lack of water for drinking and agriculture. Expanding areas of the world are rapidly becoming simply uninhabitable.

Fortunately, we believe the Foundation is positioned to play a small role in confronting this emerging disaster. We believe there are two critical elements in promoting action on climate change. The first is to ensure that the populations most affected by climate change – in particular, younger voters and economically disadvantaged voters – stay engaged with the political process. The Foundation will continue its support to organizations working in their communities to engage traditionally disengaged voters in the voting and democratic process.
The second opportunity is to expand work on the policy front, to ensure that robust, multi-dimensional thinking on climate policy continues, so that the intellectual foundation for action is laid and available whenever there are opportunities for action. Additionally, the Foundation continues to assess and learn about other emerging needs and opportunities. As one example, the Foundation has been focused on the work of existing and newer grantees engaged in youth-led organizing.

Directors believe that the Foundation must maintain its focus on these critical issues and our existing programs. As part of its most recent strategic plan, the Board agreed that in an effort to maximize the effectiveness of the Foundation’s grantmaking, the Foundation would enhance its relationships with grantee partners and the movements in which Overbrook funds more broadly and strengthen the philanthropic field in Overbrook’s targeted program areas. The Board also affirmed its interest in tracking the overlap between environmental and human rights programming and exploring the inherent benefits of intersectional grantmaking. Whenever this overlap is occurring organically among its grantees or potential grantees, Overbrook will seek to advance its mission by supporting and furthering the work at the intersection.

While the Foundation continues to discourage letters of inquiry, Overbrook remains very interested in learning about organizations and projects that could be candidates for future Foundation grantmaking and collaboration. Staff will continue to invite proposals on a limited basis as opportunities believed to clearly match Foundation priorities are identified.

The Foundation’s Board and Staff are committed to the continued support of its Human Rights and Environment Program grantees whose work boldly advances social justice and environmental sustainability in this moment when their work and communities are facing such great threats.

Sincerely,

Arthur G. Altschul, Jr.  Stephen A. Foster
Chair of the Board of Directors  President and CEO

If you are interested in more information on past Foundation priorities, please see our past letters from the Chair and President below.