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## Hungry for Justice

**Former Gates Foundation head Patty Stonesifer pushes a small social-service group to rethink how it fights poverty while championing racial equity.**

By Eden Stiffman

WASHINGTON



ANDRÉ CHUNG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

BEARING FRUIT: Patty Stonesifer decided to accept the job of CEO at Martha's Table so she could "come close to the heart of the problem" of child poverty.

On a steamy afternoon, Patty Stonesifer sits in the back seat of a white van as it rolls through the District of Columbia's neglected Ward 8. She frequently travels this route with donors these days, introducing them to the neighborhood where Martha's Table, the social-service charity she leads, is constructing its new headquarters. The building will sit perched on a hill, with panoramic views of the city.

The upcoming move is one of many shifts the organization has made in the past four years under Ms. Stonesifer, the former CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The news that she would take on this role made waves in the nonprofit world, but she was drawn to Martha's Table and its community mission in part because of the limits she discovered in running the world's biggest grant maker.

She brings to this job not just first-name familiarity with the Gateses, Jeff Bezos (she's on the Amazon board), and a host of Giving Pledge signers but also a formidable set of skills for a charity leader: an ability to rethink the status quo, a passion for racial equity, a belief in data-driven decision making, and a genuine human touch.

Along the way, she's raised the profile of her organization and others like it, helped rethink how social services are delivered, and won approval from other charity leaders.

Whether traveling in developing countries on behalf of the Gates Foundation or sitting down with children at Martha's Table, Ms. Stonesifer is constantly trying to figure out "how we all think larger about how we change the world to make it more equitable," says her longtime friend Melinda Gates.

### Stark Disparities

Ms. Stonesifer's decision to take on the Martha's Table role was driven by two things: a need to "come close to the heart of the problem" of poverty, as she told *The Chronicle* back in 2013, and the fact that there was so much work to be done.

During her 11 years at Gates, she was not satisfied with the progress made on one particular domestic issue, despite global successes like

tackling malaria in new ways and accelerating the search for an HIV/AIDS vaccine.

"Some things really moved forward, some didn't," she says, "but the thing that was the most stubbornly, stubbornly flat was American child poverty."

Her current organization provides food, clothing, and education services for low-income families in the District, where health and wealth disparities are stark and the socioeconomic landscape is shifting.

Ten years ago, 90 percent of Martha's Table clients walked to its headquarters in Ward 1. That neighborhood gentrified rapidly and today, fewer than 9 percent do so. Less than 20 percent of Ward 1 children live in poverty, and households there earn a median of \$82,000.

"We realized we could do our work better in a place where we stood with families," Ms. Stonesifer says.

Ward 8, the location of its new facility, brings Martha's Table back to the kind of neighborhood where it was founded. More than 50 percent of children in Ward 8 live in poverty, and the median family income is \$31,000.

Kids are getting out of school as her van passes the Anacostia Arts Center, the Skyland WorkForce Center, and the Allen Chapel AME Church — organizations with which she's been building ties. "No one organization can do it all," she says.

As the van approaches Ward 8's only full-service grocery store, it passes a woman standing near her belongings out on the side of the road, apparently after being evicted.

At Gates, the challenge was to think broadly while tying the work to the real world. At Martha's Table, Ms. Stonesifer says, "we are so embedded in the real world that our challenge is to stop a minute, pull back, and think big."

### **A Personal Touch**

Ms. Stonesifer has a gift for looking at issues from all angles, says Ms. Gates, who has known her for decades. "She's going to get close to the problem, but she's always going to be thinking about scale."

The former foundation chief has a gift not only for analytical thinking but for empathy, says Ms. Gates.

The two women are still close, exchanging long emails and taking walks when Ms. Gates is in town.

They met at Microsoft, where Ms. Stonesifer began working in 1987. She quickly moved up the ladder, becoming the highest-ranking woman in the company as senior vice president of interactive media — and Ms. Gates's supervisor.

In that role, Ms. Stonesifer demonstrated a kind of people-first management. Even at the end of a long day, following back-to-back meetings, she made a point of taking a different route through the hallway each day so she could stop and meet people she didn't know in her division, learning a little about what they were working on or about something that was important to them, Ms. Gates recalls.

"That sense of a personal touch and getting to know people and putting them first — this is how you manage people," she says.

"You get to know them and what they're about and how they tick even before you get to those 100 emails that have come in all day when you haven't been at your desk."

### **'I Just Fell in Love'**

Ms. Stonesifer's association with Martha's Table began back in her Microsoft days.

When she was running the company's consumer division, she would visit its then-small Washington, D.C., office. She went to Martha's Table, bringing computers and software for the charity's youth program.

"I just fell in love with the place," she says. "It seemed very attuned to programming that the young people wanted but [was] also bringing the whole community — be it corporations, be it individuals, family leaders — into the solution. I was really turned on by that."

When the Gateses were beginning to think seriously about the part philanthropy would play in their lives and decided to take on the issue of connecting libraries to the internet, they offered Ms. Stonesifer the opportunity to lead that effort.

Then in her early 40s, she had been mulling retirement, thanks to her Microsoft wealth. (She hasn't taken a paycheck since leaving the company in 1996.) Meanwhile, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation would soon become the largest philanthropy in the world. The Gateses tapped her to lead their philanthropic efforts in 1997 and she held the role for more than a decade. That was followed by stints on the Smithsonian Board of Regents and the White House Council for Community Solutions before she joined Martha's Table.

### **Confronting Privilege**

The road to the pinnacle of the philanthropy world at the Gates Foundation, however, was a bumpy one.

As the sixth of nine children in a working-class Catholic family in Indianapolis, Ms. Stonesifer developed a strong ethic of service from her parents. Part of the Indianapolis St. Vincent de Paul food pantry is named after her father, a longtime volunteer.

Like Mr. Gates, she dropped out of college — but with big school loans and an early marriage. She had two kids and began focusing right away on making money to keep her family afloat. Eventually, she returned to the local state school extension and cobbled together enough credits to get a degree.

When she landed at Microsoft, everything changed. (She also met the journalist Michael Kinsley, her husband since 2002.)

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## FUNDRAISING WHEN YOU'RE FRIENDS WITH BILL AND MELINDA GATES



**FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES:** While Patty Stonesifer counts prominent people like Bill and Melinda Gates among her longtime friends, she still spends half of her time meeting with donors.

You might assume that someone who counts Bill and Melinda Gates and Jeff Bezos among her circle of friends wouldn't have to sweat much over fundraising. Yet Patty Stonesifer says she spends about half of her time meeting with donors to broaden support for Martha's Table.

"The key is building trusting donor relationships — and be able to really convey what you are trying to achieve, why it matters so much and how you will achieve it," she says.

Martha's Table's \$20 million capital campaign, completed in 2016, was an impressive feat for a community-based organization, attracting the likes of David Rubenstein and other prominent Washington-area philanthropists. The family behind Horning Brothers, a prominent local property-development firm, gave \$10 million through the company's charitable arm, including land in the District's Ward 8 to support construction of Martha's Table's future headquarters.

The first big fundraising event in Anacostia, the Ward 8 neighborhood where the charity will soon be based, was a success, too. The casual barbecue benefit in the backyard of the neighboring Our Lady of Perpetual Help church raised as much money as a gala might have, but the experience was more egalitarian. A local pastor, the charity's neighbors, and its high-net-worth donors all chipped in.

"That is how you break down barriers and create community," Ms. Stonesifer says, "when people really come together across income levels, across sectors, to create change."

*Correction: A previous version of this article mistakenly said that the pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help church participated in raising money for a Martha's Table gala.*

BY EDEN STIFFMAN

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"I was at the right place at the right time. And certainly I'd worked hard, but I also had a hugely important head start, something I had zero control over," she said at a recent gala. "It was the privilege of growing up white in America."

Ms. Stonesifer has been emphasizing the critical role that racial equity plays in creating more just organizations and communities.

Whether she's speaking to a room full of donors at the local community foundation's annual gala, to a crowd of bright-eyed American University graduates during a commencement speech, or to her colleagues, she has been earnestly talking about the often uncomfortable topic of white privilege and encouraging people — especially white people — to think about how they might be contributing to systemic oppression.

With a résumé like hers, Ms. Stonesifer makes an unlikely champion for the cause. She doesn't shy away from the fact that in its 37 years, Martha's Table has had only white leadership. "At some level," she says, "that's not by accident."

The nonprofit and corporate worlds, she suggests, have helped perpetuate the problem. "I've become so aware of how deeply embedded these issues of bias and inequity are in the very institutions that are supposed to be propelling us forward. Not because people are bigots, but because people have not examined where the assumptions of race and white privilege and history have left a mark."

Ms. Stonesifer has brought in outside trainers to guide discussions about racial justice for her charity's board and staff members. Despite the fact that the issues of poverty and race are so closely intertwined, the board had not had explicit discussions on that topic until the last year and a half, said Ellis Carr, board treasurer. Almost half of the charity's 16 board members are people of color.

"The trainings have really helped elevate a sense of awareness on a topic that a lot of people haven't necessarily spent a lot of time thinking about," said Mr. Carr, a board member since 2009 and chief executive officer of Capital Impact Partners, a community-development financial institution.

He believes the trainings are helping to develop a level of trust among the board and staff, which will be necessary for the more substantive work to follow: figuring out how to integrate racial-justice principles into Martha Table's work. The new information will shape, among other things, hiring decisions and how the charity chooses partners and vendors to achieve its mission.

Ms. Stonesifer is having these conversations in a way that's authentic, Mr. Carr says. "She shares her insights and really helps people understand that this is something she's working through and that it's totally OK for all of us to work through at our own pace, but it's important that we do start the process."

Shortly after taking the job, Ms. Stonesifer connected with George Jones, CEO of the local social-service charity Bread for the City. He recalls being both pleased and impressed by her interest in his organization's focus on racial equity.

"Quite frankly," says Mr. Jones, an African-American, "for some audiences it tends to resonate better" when a white person champions racial justice. "Having her have that conversation and dialogue with the larger community is really important."

### **A Voice That Carries**

Community leaders say Ms. Stonesifer's high profile has helped elevate the social challenges they address day to day, too. People care what she thinks.

"Her name is a familiar one in all the spaces where we're trying to advocate for change and pursue justice," says Mr. Jones. "She's using her position in ways that are selfless and authentic and genuine. More power to her for using the loftier connections she has in some circles."

In late May, six Giving Pledge signatories, including one from China, visited Martha's Table and two other local social-service charities — Mary's Center and the Latin American Youth Center — to learn about the work of community-based organizations and how they collaborate.

Lori Kaplan, president of the Latin American Youth Center, says Ms. Stonesifer brings a voice that resonates beyond Washington. "It's great to have that voice in our local marketplace to talk about all the challenges and what it takes to run these kinds of organizations," Ms. Kaplan says.

### **Avoiding Indignity**

Inspired by conversations with Mr. Jones, in mid-2015 Martha's Table ripped away the referral system used by many charities in the city that require people go from service provider to service provider, often undergoing multiple lengthy interviews to prove that they are poor.

Today, the organization uses sampling, occasionally verifying whether the clients do in fact have legitimate need.

"We can learn that without making people go through the indignity, not to mention the inefficiency, of referring over and over again," Ms. Stonesifer says.

And until 2015, Martha's Table volunteers used to pack and distribute bags of groceries. But staff members noticed that, once outside the charity's walls, the clients who picked up the bags began immediately exchanging food items with each other.

Ms. Stonesifer was able to persuade the Philip L. Graham Fund to put \$1 million into helping a new idea get off the ground: turning hubs for charitable food distribution into something more like shopping. That idea would eventually become the Joyful Food Market, a partnership with Capital Area Food Bank.

The 29 pop-up markets in schools and community centers are helping to reduce hunger and food insecurity while also encouraging healthy eating habits. Music blares as chefs demonstrate how to cook different kinds of produce, and families taste samples. By fall 2018, organizers hope to have 49 markets, with a presence in every elementary school in the District's Southeast quadrant.

For some social-service charities, old habits are hard to change. But Martha's Table is finding that creating a high bar for serving clients with respect pays off for everyone.

Letting clients choose what they want to cook reduces food waste, increases the value of the organization's dollar, and improves health.

"Justice actually works as a way of improving the caliber of your organization and its offerings," Ms. Stonesifer says. "If the way you're doing something is inefficient or creates unnecessary hurdles, it benefits everyone to break it down."

*Correction: A previous version of this article said Ellis Carr was chief financial officer of Capital Impact instead of chief executive officer. It also called Bread for the City a food pantry. Besides supplying food, it also provides clothing, social services, legal representation, and medical care to people in need.*

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