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## THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

### OPINION

From the issue dated January 24, 2008

## A New Generation, a New Commitment to Change

By Robert Egger

Forty years ago, in the first weeks of June during the presidential election year of 1968, three things happened that changed the United States.

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The first was on the morning of June 6, when America awoke to the news that Sen. Robert Kennedy had died from an assassin's bullet in Los Angeles, just days after winning the California primary.

The devastating news that one more leader, and another Kennedy, had been killed hit America hard and made an already dark year darker still.

But the news fell perhaps hardest on the people living in Resurrection City.

This semi-shantytown had been constructed on the National Mall, in Washington, to house some of the thousands of activists and citizens who had come to Washington from cities and towns across the country to keep faith with Martin Luther King Jr.'s final vision: the Poor People's Campaign for economic justice.

King had been assassinated two months earlier, on April 4, and Resurrection City was already demoralized by the lingering pall of his death when word spread that Robert Kennedy was dead. And as the nation prepared to bury him, a hard, bitter rain began to fall.

In that rain, it was as if the dreams and aspirations of an entire generation began to melt away. Resurrection City became a muddy mess, and slowly, one by one, people began to walk away — first from the campaign, but then, metaphorically, from the dream and vision that Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. died working toward: a unified America.

However, a third thing happened: The seeds of the modern nonprofit movement in America firmly took root.



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Driven by idealistic citizens who were moved by the decade's historic, inspirational, yet often divisive struggles — civil rights, the women's movement, Vietnam, and the tragic roster of murdered visionaries — a new generation of leaders began to emerge who would not let the dream die. And during the next 25 years, the number of nonprofit groups in the United States exploded.

Back then, nobody was trained to lead a nonprofit organization. It was considered more a calling than a career. And while people from varied backgrounds emerged as leaders, perhaps the most unexpected, and undervalued, were the tens of thousands of college-educated, stay-at-home mothers. These were women who had married, managed their family's finances, ran the PTA, and, as their children began to leave home in the 1970s, decided it was now their turn — and by the tens of thousands they asserted themselves both personally and professionally and set out to make a difference in their communities and for our country by starting thousands of nonprofit organizations.

Yet as intelligent, capable, and forward thinking as this generation of women was, they and the organizations springing up ran headlong into two seemingly intransigent forces.

In the 1970s, America was still deeply divided and mired in gender and race bias. Many of these "founding mothers" brought with them an internalized understanding of their "role," and if they didn't, it was imposed on their fledgling organizations by the cultural norms of the larger society. One thing seemed certain: As long as these new organizations limited their work to nurturing, feminized charity work, like feeding poor people, beautifying communities, or elevating the arts, they were humored, and even honored. But "radical" talk of economic empowerment, social justice, or political inclusion was overtly discouraged.

And while some pioneering women, like Marion Wright Edelman at the Children's Defense Fund or Elouise Cobell at the Native American Community Development Corporation, were able to break partially free of these societal confines, the majority of the women who fought to redefine the decision-making process in America faced another great barrier: the foundation system.

Often dominated by men who were charged with dispensing money made by other men, foundations rarely awarded money that fostered independence for grantees, nor did they make grants to organizations that pushed too hard on the dominant social order or to those that engaged in political advocacy.

In these formative years, and even today, grants are primarily made to submissive organizations — those willing to jump through countless hoops, those that would not push back when confronted with short-sighted policies, and those that would make do with much less than

they knew was needed to do the job right.

Rather than organize into a collective political force or explore their growing economic potential, this new generation of nonprofit groups spun off in a thousand different directions. Rather than pick up where King and Kennedy left off, with the goal of economic inclusion and equality, they were forced into — or accepted — the narrow confines of "charity," with its flawed power dynamic that emphasized the redemption of the giver over the liberation of the receiver.

For many of these charities, and for too many of the causes and clients they sought to serve, this became the model. And in the 40 years since, our country has invested trillions of dollars in the right fight, with the best intentions, but in the wrong strategy.

In 2008, as we reflect on this generation's genuine efforts, and we look toward this year's presidential election, it is time to begin anew, to honor amazing advances and acknowledge deeply rooted flaws, and then rededicate ourselves to repositioning nonprofit organizations as an undeniable force in a new American century.

First of all, everybody in the nonprofit world must commit to working together to make our collective voice heard in every community. We must then use that voice to enter the political dialogue, not with the intention of becoming another lobbying group, but to elevate the role of nonprofit organizations so we can fundamentally change the rules of the game. Only then will we be able to truly influence the democratic decision-making process taking place in every city, every state, and, this year, at the presidential level.

Second, nonprofit groups must free themselves from the morass of meaningless metrics and strive for intellectual independence. For too long we have measured our value by how many children we have fed, how many houses we have built, or how many whales we have saved, instead of calculating and then championing the economic impact of productive citizens, strong communities, and a healthy environment that result directly from the work of nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit groups must embrace their role in the American economy, and actively challenge this nation to fully explore the power and potential in this vastly underutilized resource.

And to make that point, nonprofit groups need to rededicate their missions to economic independence, both for the people they serve and for their own operations.

If we are truly committed, as we often suggest, to the dream of Martin Luther King Jr., then we must pick up where he left off — seeking to give people the tools they needed to attain independence for themselves and their families. And if we are equally dedicated to attracting people of color and a new generation of young leaders into

our ranks, then we must understand that they will want and need a decidedly different kind of nonprofit organization to achieve that dream.

They rightly respect and admire the people who founded nonprofit groups in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s and the amazing accomplishments they achieved, but they see that the need for charity in America has not diminished and they don't see problems getting any better. Perhaps most important, they have begun to understand the economic impact that they and their children will bear if we continue on the current path.

Rightly so, this new generation looks to redefine the entire equation, up to and including, as bold as it might sound, capitalism itself. Like America's historic business pioneers, this new generation sees boundless opportunities when they add the monetary wealth of nonprofit organizations to our equally valuable nonfinancial assets. This generation will not be content to use these resources to prolong the endless cycle of sheltering, feeding, and clothing the poor.

Rather, its members seek to work, as well as to employ, loan, and invest, in ways that decrease need and create empowered citizens. Instead of attempting to redistribute wealth through government policies, they want the way they spend their money every day to become their philanthropy, creating, if you will, a "buy-cott" that rewards businesses that decrease the need for charity by paying good wages, providing health care, giving money to community causes, or treating the environment with care.

The dreams of the founders of the modern nonprofit world and its emerging leaders are not so far apart, but their methods must be.

The simple truth — my generation of baby boomers missed its shot at the proverbial brass ring. We dropped it 40 years ago on the muddy field of Resurrection City. But another ring is coming around. Our job, the boomers' great destiny, is to be brave enough to let go of the past and open our heads and our hearts to a changing world, and then to hoist the next generation onto our shoulders, so that this time around, it doesn't pass our country by.

*Robert Egger is president of D.C. Central Kitchen, in Washington, and founder of the V3 Campaign, an effort to get nonprofit views considered in elections at the city, state, and federal level.*



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