

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

From “Embedded Funders and Community Change: Profiles”
(Chapin Hall Working Paper, 2006)

PITON FOUNDATION

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SUMMARY

The Piton Foundation is an operating foundation that develops, funds, and manages programs in three interconnected areas: improving public education, creating economic opportunities, and strengthening neighborhoods. Piton’s Strengthening Neighborhoods program supports efforts to develop leaders, organize communities, and build local institutions’ capacity to promote community change and to improve neighborhood residents’ quality of life. A key component of this work involves the collection, dissemination, and use of data to inform community actors and shape community responses.

Strengthening Neighborhoods focuses on all Denver neighborhoods that have a high concentration of poor families, with special attention to four neighborhoods that also are targeted by Piton’s Education and Economic Opportunities program. The four neighborhoods receive about 30 percent of the foundation’s budget (about \$1.9 million per year).

HOW AND WHY DID THE FOUNDATION EMBED ITSELF IN THIS PARTICULAR NEIGHBORHOOD?

The decision to target specific neighborhoods evolved from a fairly traditional grant-making approach that concentrated on improving the lives of children in poverty. Over time, as Piton supported work in neighborhoods (and began to develop relationships in them), formed partnerships with other foundations, and created resident leadership programs, foundation leaders recognized the benefits of community-driven responses to the needs of children and families. Having a neighborhood focus enabled Piton to work at a manageable scale, concentrate resources, and respond to the issues deemed most important by residents. Neighborhood selection was driven in part by Piton’s collection and analysis of data on the relative level of need, but also by the fact that in these four neighborhoods Piton had developed strong relationships with neighborhood actors.

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WHAT BELIEFS AND THEORIES OF CHANGE INFORM THE FOUNDATION’S WORK?

Piton’s goals and strategies align differently in each program area, although there is overlap around strategy development, the value of data for problem analysis, and the use of advocacy and organizing to promote social change. Strengthening Neighborhoods’ theory of change focuses on relationships and capacity building. In order to promote community change and address the needs and circumstances of families in disadvantaged neighborhoods, one must promote opportunities for leadership development and engagement and support people’s capacity to succeed in meeting their own self-determined goals.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

Piton’s approach is iterative, building on the lessons and relationships developed in neighborhoods and in the public, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors. Fundamentally, Piton emphasizes leadership development; facilitation of community organizing; and the collection, analysis, and use of data to inform policy and planning and to promote and guide social action.

Initially, Piton’s interactions were with leaders of nonprofit organizations working in disadvantaged communities. The process of developing community profiles to understand residents’ perspectives, however, revealed that residents did not always view these leaders as well connected with the community and its priorities or able to legitimately represent the community. Piton’s response was to focus increasingly on fostering and supporting *resident* leadership of and engagement in social change. At first this occurred through small neighborhood advisory groups, but the groups had limited impact on broad neighborhood engagement and capacity building. So Piton created a Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, which provided leadership training and skill building for residents of selected neighborhoods.

Piton’s Neighborhood Leadership Initiative laid the groundwork—i.e., partners, relationships, skills, and experience of foundation staff and residents—for the foundation’s recent work on community organizing. This includes support for local organizing intermediaries that work with communities and Piton’s role as the local fiscal agent for the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections initiative. (Partnerships with national foundations have always had an important role in Piton’s work by contributing resources and exploring new areas of work.) In addition, Piton gives grants to community groups for reform efforts and helps them form relationships with government officials and policymakers.



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WHAT INTERNAL PRACTICES, STRUCTURES, AND POLICIES HAS THE FOUNDATION DEVELOPED TO SUPPORT THE WORK?

Several important elements of Piton’s structure contribute to the foundation’s capacities and approach:

- ❑ Piton restructured in 1992 as an operating foundation, shifting both its attention and its staff capacity to hands-on work with and in communities. Piton still provides grants (although not for unsolicited requests), but its principal focus is operational.
- ❑ Piton is not an endowed foundation. Instead of basing expenditures on a percentage of assets drawn down from endowment income, foundation staff produce an annual budget based on work plans developed in each program area. They submit the budget for approval to the parent corporation, Gary Williams Energy Company. The corporation may allocate funds beyond the requested budget to satisfy a compelling reason or opportunity.
- ❑ The board and staff are small, and senior managers of the corporation are intimately involved with and committed to the foundation’s work. Every week, foundation staff meet with the corporation’s founder, chief executive officer, and chief financial officer. Decision making is highly streamlined.
- ❑ The hybrid nature of the foundation (incorporating elements of private, corporate, operating, and community foundations) provides for both control and flexibility, including the ability to tap into corporate resources for political work that the foundation cannot do directly.

The characteristics and proclivities of Piton staff and trustees also contribute significantly to the work, including: level of commitment and buy-in to the foundation’s social-change agenda; variance in professional backgrounds and skill sets (only one staff member comes from a philanthropic background); and capacity to interact and build relationships within the public and private sectors, with community residents, and with other foundations.

WHAT CHANGES IN THE COMMUNITY DOES THE FOUNDATION POINT TO AS SIGNIFICANT?

The major accomplishments of Piton’s Strengthening Neighborhoods program have been around neighborhood leadership development, community engagement and organizing, and social action on such issues as school reform, housing, and juvenile justice. Outcomes include:

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- ❑ Creation of a community court that promotes a “restorative justice” approach to youth crime and delinquency
- ❑ Action by the Environmental Protection Agency to amend regulations for lead and arsenic toxicity levels, which made federal funding possible for neighborhood cleanup
- ❑ Action by Denver Public Schools to improve school safety, provide after-school and bilingual programming, establish teacher home-visiting programs, and cultivate parental involvement in decision making
- ❑ Action by local government to open a neighborhood police substation, implement a comprehensive traffic plan, improve street-scapes, install new curbs at a dangerous intersection, and address other infrastructure issues
- ❑ Organizing at the policy level, including formation of a coalition of local foundations and community-organizing groups that advocates for changes in health care, housing, labor, and environmental policies
- ❑ Development of cadres of neighborhood leaders who are involved in community development and action, either as staff or volunteers

WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES? HOW DID THE FOUNDATION CONFRONT THEM?

Community engagement and partnership. It takes a lot of time, spread over a long period, to build the necessary alliances with community and organizational partners. Community partnership requires patience, a willingness to try new things, and an openness to trial and error. It takes many types of relationships, along with opportunities and mechanisms for interacting with large numbers of people, to engage community partners effectively. And it takes trust to gain the community access that will provide those relationships. Foundation-community relations are complicated by inherent power dynamics, and it can be difficult to acknowledge and work through the inequities without becoming stymied by them—to be both responsive and responsible and to be “in service” rather than “subservient.”

Staffing. Community work is labor-intensive and challenging, all the more so when the foundation has a relatively small staff. In addition to having substantive knowledge that they can apply and share, staff must be able to form personal and professional relationships with neighborhood residents. They must be able to accept the exposure and risk that come from such



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relationships. They must be able to listen without pushing their own agenda and to understand the impact of poverty on residents of distressed neighborhoods. Most staff do not come to the job with these skills comfortably in place, and some are better than others at acquiring them.

INTERVIEWEES

Terri Bailey, Senior Research Officer, The Piton Foundation

Mary Gittings Cronin, President and Executive Director, The Piton Foundation

Ron Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Gary Williams Energy Company and Trustee, The Piton Foundation

Sam Gary, founder and Chair, The Piton Foundation and Gary Williams Energy Company

Dave Younggren, Chief Financial Officer, Gary Williams Energy Company and Trustee, The Piton Foundation

Phuonglan Nguyen, community resident and co-coordinator, Community Learning Network

Candace RedShirt, community resident and Community Technical Assistance Coordinator, Making Connections

Debra Johnson, community resident and Community Justice Advocate to the Cole Community Court

Linda Wurst, community resident and organizing committee member, Metro Organizations for People

Mike Kromrey, Director, Metro Organizations for People (grantee)

Cec Ortiz, Director, Denver Division of Workforce Development