

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

SELF FAMILY FOUNDATION

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SUMMARY

The Self Family Foundation, which has assets currently worth \$36 million, has invested in the city of Greenwood and the surrounding rural county for more than 60 years. After focusing mainly on building the area’s institutional infrastructure, in 1996 foundation leaders turned their attention to neighborhood development. This takes the form of a foundation-paid staff person, housed at the Chamber of Commerce, who works to strengthen and expand neighborhood associations within Greenwood’s low-income neighborhoods. Foundation staff also play a variety of roles that provide leadership and support for positive community change.

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

This foundation’s neighborhood work builds on its historical role in Greenwood, a traditional mill town of 23,000 residents in a rural county of 68,000 people. The late James C. Self, the founder of Greenwood Mills (a major textile operation that for decades was Greenwood’s largest employer), had a strong sense of responsibility toward his employees and community. His company built 1,500 houses for employees, clustered in “villages” that each had its own schools, churches, and stores. Self also recruited other major employers to Greenwood, including the Fuji and Capsugel-Pfizer companies.

James C. Self created his foundation in 1942 as a way to build a hospital for the region. The Self Regional Hospital opened in 1951 and continues to be a flagship institution; with 2,200 employees, it is the county’s largest employer. The Self Family Foundation also established the Lander University School of Nursing, the Greenwood Genetics Center, the J. C. Self Research Institute for Human Genetics, and the Greenwood Community Children’s Center, among other local institutions.

In the 1990s, restructuring of the textile industry caused Greenwood Mills to downsize dramatically. The loss of jobs hit Greenwood hard, despite the economic diversity promoted by James C. Self. Eighty percent of Greenwood Mills employees had worked for the company more than 25 years, and many were second- or third-generation mill workers. But while some

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textile companies closed their doors and left town, the Selfs felt a deep commitment to Greenwood and continued to look for ways to invest in its future.

In 1996, foundation trustees embraced the asset-based approach of John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, leaders of the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute in Chicago. Kretzmann spent a lot of time in Greenwood, meeting with trustees and neighborhood groups, and the ABCD model has now guided Self’s approach for almost a decade.

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

The Self Family Foundation believes that long-term change requires empowered citizens who understand that they can be change agents in their communities. The foundation’s role is not to dictate an agenda but to act as a “gapper” or bridge between resident associations and institutions in the broader community. In that sense, the foundation is the “second investor” for projects driven by the residents; it brokers money, influence, and resources and recruits other powerful institutions to the “gapper” role. This approach is consistent with the foundation’s motto, *Helping People Help Themselves*.

The foundation follows the ABCD Institute’s guiding principles for community engagement, which revolve around relationships within the neighborhood and between neighborhood residents and the larger community. Foundation staff attend neighborhood meetings and are accessible to neighborhood groups, which keeps them well informed and well positioned to connect the groups to outside institutions and resources. Similarly, the principle of fostering citizen-centered, “inside-out” organizations drives the foundation’s focus on building strong neighborhood associations.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

Self’s strategy for developing neighborhood leaders and generating political clout is to strengthen existing neighborhood associations, build new ones, and create a Neighborhood Association Council (NAC). For example:

- ❑ The foundation, the hospital, and other funders share the cost of a full-time staff person, based within the nonprofit arm of the Chamber of Commerce, whose job is to make residents able to participate effectively in neighborhood development, especially in low-income areas. A secondary goal of this investment is to build the Chamber’s ability to interact positively with Greenwood’s various communities.

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- ❑ The NAC convenes monthly for neighborhood leadership training and presentations by public-sector officials, such as the police chief, the official in charge of zoning board enforcement, and the city manager. Thirty to 35 people attend each month. The NAC also sponsors special events, such as community forums for political candidates.
- ❑ The foundation sponsors a seven-member team that participates in the ABCD Institute’s 4-year Learning Circle with similar teams from around the country. Team members include a representative from the foundation, the hospital, the United Way affiliate, and the economic development partnership. ABCD trainer Mike Green visits Greenwood periodically to consult with the team.

A complementary strategy is to support the United Way’s community planning process. Foundation staff participated in the process (including chairmanship of an Economic Development Task Force), which produced a 5-year agenda for strengthening health, young children, families, education, and the local economy. The foundation now is leading some efforts to implement the plans. For instance, it has challenged other partners to make matching contributions to a \$3.5-million capital campaign to turn Greenwood’s old Federal Building into an arts complex, part of a larger plan to revitalize the town center.

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

In a small town such as Greenwood, money is only a small part of the resources the foundation brings to the table. Relationships are paramount. The foundation’s president, Frank Wideman (who is white), and its program officer, Mamie Nicholson (who is African-American), both have long-standing family roots in the area and are tied into many of its social networks. They are accessible to residents and participate in numerous community meetings and advisory groups, even after their grant to the group or organization has ended. People frequently ask their advice and look to them for leadership.

Wideman and Nicholson, however, talk about “leading by stepping back” (although the question of how far to step back, especially when there appears to be a leadership vacuum or conflict among community interests, is a constant concern). Wideman and Nicholson are careful not to control the agenda or dictate the solution to a problem. They can plant ideas, but others have to own them if they are to have lasting value. This style of working generates relationships characterized by mutuality and trust. Despite the foundation’s powerful role in the community,

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neighborhood residents and business leaders feel free to “push back” when they have a perspective that is different from that of the foundation.

Open communication and transparency are crucial when so much of the work depends on relationships. Wideman and Nicholson talk frequently with each other and their board members, and they make formal reports to the board quarterly. Although board members are not actively involved in the foundation’s day-to-day work, they appreciate the long-term nature of community change and the importance of realistic expectations for near-term outcomes.

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

Since the foundation began its neighborhood development work, the number of neighborhood associations in Greenwood has grown from about a dozen to more than sixty. Although no evaluation has been conducted, foundation staff see indicators of significant change, particularly in the neighborhood’s relationship to city officials. For example, instead of letting trash build up in the neighborhood, residents are more likely to call a city official and make sure the neighborhood gets appropriate services. Residents can call these individuals by name because they have had breakfast with the city manager or they have attended a meeting with other officials. Other important indicators of change include improved parks and gardens due to beautification projects, an increase in Block Watches, and a significant reduction in crime in the areas in which there are strong neighborhood associations. These associations work closely with the police and have been able to close down some local drug houses.

The formation of a citywide council has helped neighborhood groups work with local government on issues of concern. For example, residents identified the city’s housing codes as a barrier to improving the condition of housing in low-income neighborhoods. The NAC and the mayor’s office convened property owners, landlords, renters, and representatives from neighborhood associations to develop tougher codes. Although competing interests made this process challenging, the group did agree on code changes that the city subsequently adopted.

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

Finding philanthropic partners. The philanthropic infrastructure in South Carolina is relatively underdeveloped. Although the foundation frequently partners with local businesses and has helped to create a donor’s forum with about eight members, there are few other

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foundations with resources dedicated to the Greenwood area. This is especially challenging because the foundation's grant-making budget is relatively constrained in 2004-2006, due to some commitments made several years ago. One way that the foundation plans to address this challenge is to work with United Way and other local partners to leverage additional, permanent capital in the form of a community foundation.

Evaluating the foundation's work. The Self Family Foundation has not invested in an evaluation of its neighborhood development work. In a small town such as Greenwood, foundation staff get regular feedback about what is and isn't working from the networks in which they are embedded, as well as from outside consultants. Although they view the value of evaluation as limited at this point, they do acknowledge the lack of an accessible written record of their lessons to share with similar efforts around the country.

Growing new neighborhood leadership. It is difficult to retain existing neighborhood leaders while also bringing in new, often younger ones. Foundation staff and partners recognize that going deeper is the key to moving the community's agendas forward with sufficient energy and momentum, and they are considering new ways to expand and transfer leadership.

Engaging the fourth generation of Sels in the foundation. The foundation's seven-member board includes a seat for each of the four Self family branches and three seats for other community leaders. In many family foundations, the founder's descendants move away and want to invest in their new community, or their interest in the foundation overall diminishes. The Self family addressed this challenge by involving the eleven members of the fourth generation in a Next Generation Adjunct Board, established in 1997. The Adjunct Board meets twice a year and recommends grants worth 5 percent of the foundation's total distribution.

INTERVIEWEES

Frank J. Wideman III, President, The Self Family Foundation

Mamie Nicholson, Program Officer, The Self Family Foundation

Tim Ervolina, Chief Professional Officer, United Way of Greenwood and Abbeville
Counties