

## EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

### WALKER FAMILY FOUNDATION

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#### SUMMARY

The Walker Family Foundation was created in 1979 when Bill Walker sold his family’s chain of dollar stores and used 10 percent of the profits to endow a philanthropy (now worth approximately \$10 million). The foundation has always been tied to the city of Jackson. In the early 1990s, however, leaders decided to target resources to revitalizing North Midtown, a small neighborhood with 2,500 residents, mostly African Americans, that at the time was considered the city’s poorest community. In 1994, Walker chartered the North Midtown Community Development Corporation (CDC). The foundation now funnels all of its money into the neighborhood through the CDC and plays an active role in the CDC’s management and operations. Over the last decade, Walker has invested about \$5 million in development of the CDC and the community.

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

During its early years, the Walker Family Foundation’s grant-making lacked a formal strategy. After the founder learned that more young black men were in prison than had graduated from college, however, he decided to try to rectify the imbalance on a local level. The foundation created Camp Beacon, a 1-month summer experience for high-achieving but disadvantaged African-American youth from the Jackson public schools. Functioning as an operating foundation, Walker ran the camp for several years. Although Camp Beacon was a positive place for the campers, foundation leaders weren’t sure it could make a long-term difference because participants spent the other 11 months of the year in impoverished and unsafe communities.

Walker converted Camp Beacon into Project Beacon, a partnership with two Midtown public schools that hired experts to enhance the schools’ academic and youth development programming. Foundation leaders believed it was crucial to reach parents as well as students and saw schools as the most promising medium for such outreach. However, Project Beacon struggled from the start as the schools and foundation tangled over control and direction of the initiative. The partnership soon fell apart.

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The Beacon experience taught Walker several lessons that led to a community focus. First, foundation leaders decided they had to do the work themselves instead of relying on other agencies to share their vision and strategies. Second, they learned that community relationships are vital to change efforts, which led them to embrace a grass-roots approach. Third, they recognized that if the foundation wanted to produce college graduates instead of inmates, it had to approach the challenge in a comprehensive, holistic manner.

Those insights spurred Walker to charter the North Midtown Community Development Corporation. The CDC, under the initial leadership of Walker’s former director, was designed to anchor the community and provide a platform for community redevelopment. In that sense, the CDC was an extension of the foundation that could act more creatively and take greater risks.

The foundation chose North Midtown because of the neighborhood’s serious problems and its central location. North Midtown is bordered by a college, a hospital, and a booming commercial corridor. Consequently, foundation leaders believed that the city’s powerful elites had a vested interest in supporting efforts to revitalize North Midtown. In addition, the neighborhood was a defined geographic area that many middle-class residents had to drive through to get to work, which gave the initiative added visibility. Finally, Walker’s support for Camp/Project Beacon had already established trust and credibility with some of the families living in North Midtown.

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

Walker’s leaders believe that the foundation should be personally involved in community-change work. They also express a lack of concern about organizational boundaries or strictly defined roles and responsibilities. Indeed, the foundation has served as an operating foundation, a traditional grant-maker, and a hybrid by chartering, running, funding, and managing the North Midtown CDC.

### **WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?**

Walker promotes changes owned and led by the community. Thus it hired an executive director for the CDC who lives in North Midtown; recruited thirty part- and full-time CDC employees, half of whom are North Midtown residents; developed a board that comprises local residents, property owners, and other local stakeholders; and hired a community organizer to go door to door learning about community needs. At the same time, Walker uses its connections to link the CDC with power structures, perspectives, and expertise outside North Midtown.

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Using its credibility and commitment to North Midtown to attract other funders, including the city and state, and nonprofit service providers, Walker nurtured North Midtown CDC into a \$1.5 million agency. As a former nonprofit director explained, “We felt secure investing our energies in Midtown because on one hand the foundation was lending its reputation and financial support to the community in a long-term way, while at the same time the CDC truly represented the community. [Staff] never ‘went home’ because they were already there.” Adds another nonprofit executive, “You can have the shell of a CDC or a real CDC that does real work. Walker made the North Midtown CDC real.”

Walker established an agenda for the CDC—building social capital, improving the quality of life, eradicating substandard housing, and promoting educational and economic opportunities for Midtown residents—through a large-scale convening and planning process that included resident- and community stakeholder-led subcommittees. The foundation repeats the community discussion process periodically to reflect on and evaluate the work in North Midtown and to ensure fidelity to residents’ most pressing concerns. In addition, the foundation and CDC jointly facilitate community meetings and events as a way to build trust and create a welcoming environment.

CDC activities and programs include:

- ❑ Bi-monthly resident meetings
- ❑ A block captain program
- ❑ Monthly meetings of organizations working in Midtown to discuss community issues
- ❑ Participation on the Midtown public schools’ advisory committee
- ❑ An annual National Night Out (attended by 400 residents in 2004) that celebrates the community
- ❑ Resident-driven community cleanup days
- ❑ An after-school program for sixty pre-K to middle-school students, including a computer and reading lab
- ❑ “The Crew,” an effort to help young males who dropped out of school complete their GED studies, develop life skills, and give back to the community



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- ❑ A partnership with the state Department of Human Services to jointly run a job readiness, placement, and retention program for TANF participants (the only such partnership between the state and a community)
- ❑ A business incubator program that will provide financial support and business expertise to entrepreneurial residents of Midtown
- ❑ A bingo operation in Southwest Jackson that has raised enough revenue to cover the CDC’s administrative costs
- ❑ An agreement with city police that assigned an officer to North Midtown

In the area of housing, the foundation and CDC have tried to gain control over as much property as possible and to persuade landlords to create safe, affordable, and aesthetically pleasing housing stock. Walker helped the CDC partner with Habitat for Humanity to build over 180 new homes; brokered a relationship with the city of Jackson to purchase and manage vacant lots in the community; helped the CDC apply for and receive a multi-year Americorps grant to refurbish existing homes; and strategized about ways to develop mixed-income housing.

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

The foundation follows a yearly grant cycle, but North Midtown CDC is exempt from the normal application process. Instead, the foundation’s director works with CDC leaders to identify needs, agree on an appropriate grant level, and strategize about resource use.

The foundation’s director—its only full-time staff member—spends little time reviewing grant proposals and identifying new funding initiatives. Instead, she devotes most of her time to working directly with the CDC and helping to manage its operations. One consequence is that the foundation’s board cannot expect the foundation to have a hand in too many different initiatives or to take public credit for high-impact funding. Board members are satisfied by knowing that Walker’s intimate involvement with the CDC is a significant force behind North Midtown’s positive development.

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

The foundation’s most obvious accomplishment is the fact that the North Midtown CDC is an active, vibrant voice for and leader of the community. Walker has grown the CDC into the most

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significant force for positive development in North Midtown and an entity that is truly owned and led by community residents. Accomplishments include the construction and refurbishment of over 200 homes; beautification of the community’s streets, public spaces, roads, and park; educational and economic development services that enabled 75 percent of “Crew” participants to pass the GED test and produced similar results for participants in the welfare-to-work program; and a sense of safety among community members.

A good indication of the community’s progress came in 1996 when foundation leaders convinced the city of Jackson that the Olympic torch, which was coming through the city on the way to Atlanta, should pass through North Midtown. A few years before, such an event would have been unthinkable because of the level of violence and blight in North Midtown. Because of the foundation and CDC’s efforts, however, neighborhood and city residents felt secure enough to witness the historic event together in North Midtown.

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

**Partnering effectively with school systems.** Ever since Project Beacon dissolved, Walker has wanted to re-engage with schools in North Midtown. The schools have resisted a partnership, however, and foundation staff struggle to cut through the layers of bureaucracy and distrust that stand in the way. To overcome the impasse, Walker has invited school officials to CDC board meetings and community events, and a CDC representative serves on the school advisory committee. These efforts have had limited success, however.

**Developing an appropriate exit strategy.** Walker’s close relationship with the CDC requires a careful balancing act. The foundation seeks to provide direction, expertise, and financial support while helping the CDC take control of its own operations and become financially independent. The foundation has begun to scale back its level of investment in the CDC, and by 2008 it expects the CDC to apply for funding like other nonprofit grantees. Some staff are worried about this strategy and question whether the CDC is strong enough to function completely on its own. The questions about exit and sustainability are clouded by the fact that foundation staff and board members have been involved in the day-to-day operations of the CDC and the redevelopment of North Midtown for many years, and it is difficult to separate their personal feelings from what is best for the organization’s development and its work.

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### INTERVIEWEES

**Marcie Skelton**, Director of the Walker Foundation

**M. C. Burks**, Executive Director of the North Midtown Community Development Corporation

**Don Taylor**, Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services

**Nina Redding**, former Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity

**Phil Eide**, Deputy Director of the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta and former Executive Director of Jackson Metro Housing Partnership

**Gloria Walker**, Trustee and Chairman of the Walker Foundation Board

**Pat Williams**, Project Coordinator of the Community Development Division of the Office of Housing and Community Development, City of Jackson

**John Jenkins**, former Director of the Walker Foundation

