

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

BIRMINGHAM FOUNDATION

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SUMMARY

The Birmingham Foundation was established in 1996 with a gift of \$17 million from the sale of the South Side Hospital. Since its inception, the foundation has directed all grant-making—about \$1 million a year—to the hospital’s service area, which encompasses twelve small, primarily low-income neighborhoods that form South Pittsburgh. Birmingham focuses on the most vulnerable populations in the service area, including children, senior citizens, and mentally or physically ill residents, and the foundation strives to meet their comprehensive health and developmental needs.

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

The sale of South Side Hospital, then the largest employer in South Pittsburgh, was a momentous event that left many local residents concerned that the hospital’s assets would leave the community. To alleviate this concern and to fulfill a perceived moral obligation to use revenue from the sale to address residents’ ongoing health needs, foundation leaders made an open-ended commitment to restrict grant-making to the three zip code areas formerly served by the hospital.

Birmingham took several early steps to earn the community’s trust and establish a reputation as a community stakeholder:

- ❑ The foundation established offices on the South Side and hired an executive director who had worked with the community’s health and social service providers for many years.
- ❑ The foundation assembled a board whose members included many people who lived or had worked in South Pittsburgh, including some local business owners. Those representatives brought their relationships and personal investment to the work.
- ❑ The foundation’s director spent her first few months meeting individually with civic, nonprofit, and business leaders to learn about their priorities and local dynamics and to educate South Side leaders about the foundation.

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- ❑ The foundation convened an advisory committee of community stakeholders to help design and commission the area’s first comprehensive assessment of community health needs, including the neighborhood’s social, physical, economic, educational, and civic health. Birmingham aggressively disseminated the ensuing report, entitled *Reweaving the Social Fabric: A Community Health Assessment of South Pittsburgh*, to local nonprofits. The study helped to bring community leaders together and provided valuable data to organizations that could not collect it on their own. The report also helped Birmingham establish its commitment to the South Side.
- ❑ The foundation worked with the University of Pittsburgh to collect and analyze 2000 U.S. Census data on South Pittsburgh and convened community leaders and nonprofits to share the data, identify trends and insights, and discuss how the data could be used.
- ❑ The foundation produced (and continues to update) a directory of service providers and community resources in South Pittsburgh. The process of developing the directory gave foundation staff a chance to network with area nonprofits and provided a platform for making new community connections. The guide now includes schools, parks, churches, block groups, and other civic organizations. Birmingham hosts a large community networking event whenever it releases a revised directory.

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

The Birmingham Foundation is committed not only to being in the community but to being of the community, and to being not just a grant-maker but an equal partner with other community stakeholders in South Pittsburgh’s positive development. Those distinctions drive the foundation to play an active, hands-on role with grantees. Foundation leaders believe in having a meaningful seat at as many community “tables” as possible that touch on their topics of interest. They are constantly looking for ways to bring community stakeholders and providers together, to find common ground, and to support mutual efforts. The foundation’s director appears to be involved in every community meeting and forum—and not just during the opening and closing sessions.

Birmingham staff realize that the financial assistance they provide to a finite number of service providers is less important than the foundation’s unique role as a neutral convener, catalyst, facilitator, resource directory, knowledge base, advocate, and big-picture thinker and planner. Thus Birmingham does not promote a community-change agenda of its own; instead, it positions itself to respond quickly and adeptly to opportunities as they arise and to generate the collective will and momentum needed to advance and sustain the work. The foundation occasionally

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provides grantees with operating support and has a few multi-year grants in its portfolio, but most resources are used to incubate new ideas and initiatives.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

Birmingham invests in five priorities: senior citizens’ health and safety, children and youth, community life, health care quality and access, and capacity building. Within each funding area, the foundation has several initiatives that demonstrate its strategy of convening and collaborating. For example:

- ❑ Birmingham supports several programs for the elderly, including supportive housing services, home visits, and health care services. After community incidents revealed that many seniors live alone in unsafe conditions, the foundation pulled together service providers and other key community groups to discuss solutions. The foundation’s director chaired the meetings and Birmingham provided the meeting space, food, and supplies that enabled the group to develop an agenda and work plan. The group became the South Pittsburgh Coalition of Housing Services, which meets monthly, is facilitated and led by providers, and provides information and referrals on safe housing to senior citizens.
- ❑ Birmingham partnered with providers of child care, after-school, youth development, and violence-reduction services to create and disseminate a summer youth programming guide. Those relationships empowered Birmingham to play a central role after the shooting murder of a high school student. The foundation convened community leaders, police, residents, and service providers under the banner of the Peace Coalition, a new collaboration designed to help the community act against youth violence. The foundation’s director is a leader of the coalition and many Birmingham board members attend the meetings. The coalition has conducted focus groups and surveys to learn about the causes of youth violence in South Pittsburgh; it serves as a hub for resources, information, and service referrals and is developing a strategic plan to reduce violence. Meanwhile, Birmingham is providing money for youth programs to work with the young people from the warring neighborhoods so they can resolve their conflicts.
- ❑ A partnership with the South Side Community Development Corporation (CDC) produced a new community health clinic in South Pittsburgh. The strategy developed by Birmingham and the CDC included not only the clinic but construction of affordable, supportive housing in the clinic’s service area. Foundation board members contributed the engineering and land assessment assistance needed to help the CDC find a good site, and Birmingham provided

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\$250,000 in capital support. The foundation’s active involvement helped the CDC secure the remainder of the financing for the project.

In addition to these efforts, Birmingham acts as a magnet for new initiatives and ideas. These include a planning grant and collaboration with South Pittsburgh faith-based service providers, which unified five local congregations that provide health ministry to the community and outreach to the elderly and troubled teens; participation on the United Way’s Impact Council to develop and support a local leadership training project; and active involvement in the South Consortium Meetings and the South Side Planning Forum, which bring together representatives of community-based organizations to network and address community development issues and concerns. Birmingham’s director serves as president of Grantmakers of Western Pennsylvania, which grounds the foundation in a regional perspective and facilitates relationships with other local funders.

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

To facilitate its role as a community catalyst and incubator, Birmingham accepts unsolicited proposals and operates three grant cycles throughout the year. This level of openness requires a greater time commitment from the board and staff but makes the foundation very accessible to community members. About three-quarters of the foundation’s grants are for 1 year only, and the average grant size is approximately \$50,000.

Birmingham has intentionally assembled board members who are personally invested in the development of the South Side and highly engaged with the foundation’s work. Board members participate on either a finance or grants committee. Members of the grants committee review every proposal and visit all potential grantees along with the foundation’s director. In addition, the board helps grantees devise and measure outcomes, create sustainable business plans, and review quarterly progress.

Birmingham’s structure allows the director to spend most of her time working with grantees and collaborating with the community rather than tending to internal operations. The director is the only nonadministrative staff person employed by the board. Although that puts a large burden on the director to be “everything and everywhere at once,” it also frees her to focus on building relationships and facilitating collaborations. Perhaps as a result, as a community partner explains, “communicating with Birmingham is not a special occasion.... We actually feel like

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partners of the Foundation, because nothing produces candor like consistent face-to-face interaction.”

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

Foundation leaders believe their greatest accomplishment is the fact that community members see Birmingham as “their” foundation and expect it to play a leadership role—not just because it has money but because it is a credible, trustworthy, action-oriented organization.

Birmingham’s good reputation translates into several benefits for the community. First, the foundation’s ability to bring community actors together has created a culture of collaboration on the South Side that has minimized turf issues. Second, the foundation’s public presence has encouraged nonprofits to have a more significant service presence on the South Side. Third, rather than dissuading other funders, Birmingham’s commitment to South Pittsburgh has encouraged other foundations to look more closely at the community to see how they might support Birmingham’s efforts. Fourth, Birmingham’s investment in community organizations acts as a screen for other funders, ensuring that the highest-quality nonprofits receive the financial support they deserve.

Birmingham’s research and funding has helped to permanently build the capacity of South Pittsburgh. Projects such as the resource directory, the community health needs assessment, the analysis of 2000 Census data, and the youth summer program directory expanded the knowledge base for the entire community. In addition, the foundation’s role in creating the community clinic, the Peace Coalition, and several other community forums and collaborations has helped to revitalize the South Side.

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

Sustaining new initiatives. Birmingham’s approach is to incubate ideas, organizations, partnerships, and coalitions, and to provide the initial seed funding and leadership to get innovations off the ground. However, the foundation does not have enough money to help every organization achieve a comfortable level of sustainability before discontinuing funding. Birmingham staff struggle to find time to stay engaged with the many coalitions and collaborations they jump-start, but the foundation hesitates to invest in more staff because it would add bureaucracy and divert resources from the community. The foundation tries to

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minimize this challenge by talking with grantees about sustainability even before they receive funding and by helping grantees identify other funding sources.

Balancing a broad versus deep and a proactive versus reactive approach. Birmingham is different from many other embedded funders in that the foundation does not have a particular community-change agenda and has shied away from creating its own large-scale, comprehensive initiatives. Instead, the foundation provides seed money in a variety of areas; is aggressive about connecting grantees to each other and leading and about participating in community forums and collaborations; and responds to opportunities as they arise. This approach has facilitated some positive community change, but Birmingham struggles with whether it should focus in a deeper, more proactive way on one or two particular issues facing South Pittsburgh (e.g., housing, education, or health care). Given that Birmingham is viewed as “the” foundation of South Pittsburgh and has, after almost 10 years in the community, developed so much credibility and trust, foundation leaders feel a responsibility to determine how to make financial and nonfinancial assets yield the greatest possible impact.

INTERVIEWEES

Mary Phan-Gruber, Executive Director

Terry Wirginis, Board Vice Chair/Grant Committee member

Eileen Smith, Board/Grant Committee member

Hugh Brennan, Director of Brashear Association

Christine Gaus, Director of Services for Brashear Association

Cyndie Carioli, Coordinator for Mercy Health Community Programs

Carey Harris, Board/Grant Committee member

