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'Freedom From Fear' Awards Show Grant Making at Its Best



Carlos Roa, Gaby Pacheco, Felipe Matos, and Juan Rodriguez are among the Freedom From Fear award winners. The four students walked 1,500 miles from Miami to Washington to advocate for youths who are undocumented immigrants.

By Pablo Eisenberg

The common perception of foundations is that they solicit or seek proposals for support and then select the best ones. To a great extent, that is true, but often far more is involved.

At their best, foundations do more than give: They champion causes and ideas and join the debate over major problems and issues in our society, start grant-making programs focused on key issues, publicize outstanding nonprofit achievements, and become involved in advocacy campaigns advanced by the organizations they support.

Program officers are usually the key to such high-performing institutions. While chief executive officers set the tone for their foundations' approach, or at least provide a permissive ambience that allows creative activity by staff members, it is the accomplished program officer who has the vision, strategy, and understanding of the causes supported by the foundation that are so essential to the success of innovative projects. It is they who develop the relationships a foundation needs to make a difference.

So it was not surprising to hear that two of the nation's most outstanding program officers created the "Freedom From Fear" awards, given to 15 people this month for extraordinary acts of courage on behalf of immigrants and refugees.

Geraldine Mannion, who oversees the Carnegie Corporation of New York's grant-making efforts to promote democracy, and Taryn Higashi, executive director of Unbound Philanthropy and former program officer of the Ford Foundation, created the awards using money they received in honor of their work.

In 2009 they were the joint winners of the Scrivner Award presented by the Council on Foundations for exceptional, creative contributions to philanthropy.

They used their \$10,000 prize to help raise an additional \$200,000 from foundations, including a matching grant of \$100,000 from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, to establish the awards, administered by Public Interest Projects, a New York group that works on projects to promote social justice.

Each of this year's 15 recipients will receive \$5,000. In praising the award winners, Ms. Mannion said, "It's worth celebrating how many courageous people are working to keep us strong as a nation of immigrants."

Added Ms. Higashi: "Immigration is a very controversial issue right now. We wanted to recognize some of the incredible unsung heroes who are standing up in their communities—sometimes at great personal risk—to make this a more just and humane society for immigrants."

Nominations for the awards were solicited almost entirely through social networks—and a few by word of mouth—probably one of the first such efforts undertaken to bestow a major nonprofit award. Some 380 nominations were sent from 42 states, many of them relatively unknown people who have worked quietly within their communities. The stories that Public Interest Projects shared about the people who won are impressive. Among them:

Xiomara Benitez Blanco. Ms. Blanco was sexually harassed and blackmailed by an immigration services officer who threatened her with deportation. She nevertheless filed a complaint, cooperated with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and other agencies, and testified against her persecutor, who received a one-year jail sentence. The case threw a spotlight on the threats immigrants face by corrupt agents.

Jack Harris. A former police chief of Phoenix, Mr. Harris spoke out publicly at great personal risk about the importance of protecting the rights of community residents, including immigrants. He strongly objected to the law the state passed last year to require police officers to inquire routinely about the immigration status of people they saw or stopped on the streets. He said that such actions would dilute the mission of crime-fighting and lead to racial profiling. His voice has been a powerful antidote to those who want to persecute immigrants in the state.

Aby Raju. Mr. Raju was among the hundreds of guest workers hired by a U.S. company and held in an isolated labor camp. Along with 250 other workers, he escaped and traveled on foot from New Orleans to Washington. In the nation's capital, he and his compatriots started a 29-day hunger strike and testified in Congress against abusive labor traffickers. His four-year fight has exposed the dirty underbelly of the guest-worker program.

The standout performance of Ms. Mannion and Ms. Higashi over many years follows in the tradition of outstanding program officers who made a real difference in communities throughout the country and in national public policy over the decades: people like Edward Meade Jr. and Paul Ylvisaker at the Ford Foundation; Eli Evans at the Carnegie Corporation; Craig McGarvey at the James Irvine Foundation; and William Schambra at the Bradley Foundation. They were game changers with the vision and creativity to make things happen. Unfortunately, they have been a rarity in a field choked with lackluster leadership at the top executive level and boards insensitive to the potential of their program staff members.

A major part of the problem continues to be the lack of incentives—other than pay—necessary to attract and retain exceptional program officers.

The atmosphere of most foundations is inhospitable to risk-taking and creative program staff members. For the most part, foundation CEO's don't encourage their staff members to be aggressive in thinking, exploring, and writing about the nonprofit world and the state of philanthropy, nor do they usually grant their program officers the authority to provide seed money for special projects, innovative organizations, or start-up programs.

Ambitious, hard-charging program officers can be demoralized by the often sluggish pace of the grant-making process and foundations' reluctance to take decisive action on urgent challenges.

What's more, program officers don't have much chance to advance in their organizations. Rarely do they have an opportunity to become the CEO of even a midsize foundation. Foundation boards, and the search firms they hire, are only looking for academic and credentialed individuals with a socially

acceptable reputation who are safe and not too threatening. Rarely do they try to groom talent from within their own foundations.

Unless grant makers change their ways, we will continue to have a serious shortage of experienced and distinguished program officers, a development that can only undermine the quality of our philanthropic institutions. We cannot afford to lose any more of our Geraldine Mannions and Taryn Higashis.

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