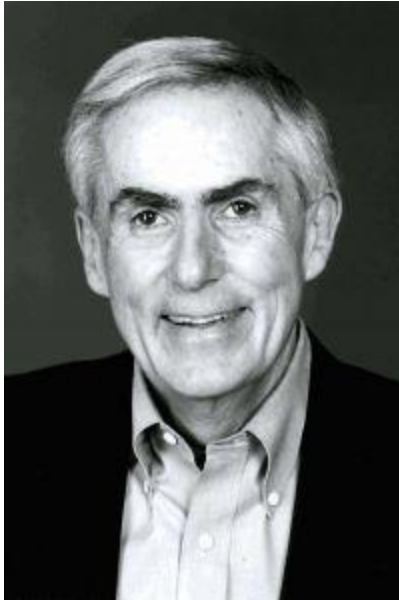


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A Foundation Leader With Innovation and Risk-Taking in His DNA



Owen Lopez will retire at the end of the year from his job as executive director of the McCune Charitable Foundation, in Santa Fe, N.M.

By Pablo Eisenberg

After almost 19 years in the philanthropic trenches of New Mexico, Owen Lopez, who just turned 70, will retire gracefully at the end of the year from his job as executive director of the McCune Charitable Foundation, in Santa Fe.

His was a remarkable tenure. He came to his job with no experience as a grant maker; he had been working as a lawyer for the 25 years before he was appointed to the McCune job. Yet he managed to become probably the most influential foundation official in New Mexico and, possibly, throughout the Southwest.

From the very beginning, his approach was unusual for a foundation executive. He began his work at McCune by asking people both inside and outside the community what nonprofit organizations really needed from foundations. He responded enthusiastically to what he was told: Find outstanding people who were doing good things and had great leadership abilities, give them and their organizations the money they need, and then get out of their way.

He clearly understood that such a course meant embracing practices other foundations disdained.

He wholeheartedly embraced the idea of offering general operating support to nonprofits, and such unrestricted grants became the staple of McCune's grant making. He also supported advocacy and public-policy efforts to bring about change. Innovation and risk-taking have been part of his philanthropic DNA.

Under his direction, the foundation has been protean in its interests, reaching out to all corners of the state, supporting local, regional, and statewide groups alike. Few topics of concern have been outside its scope. Education, the environment, economic development, food security, the arts, water preservation, rural development, and health and human-service programs—all have received the attention and support from McCune. Despite its limited assets—currently \$110-million—and \$5.5 million in annual grants, the foundation nevertheless has awarded hundreds of grants, large and small, that have made a difference throughout the state.

Mr. Lopez's vision of philanthropy extended well beyond making grants. He quickly realized that he and his colleagues had the legitimacy and power to bring together people, leaders and groups who would otherwise not join in a common effort. He became a master at gathering everyone in the community, even going so far as to build a small conference center adjacent to the foundation's offices to facilitate such meetings. He helped catalyze a local council to monitor the activities of the school district, redevelopment efforts in downtown Albuquerque, a capital venture fund, and an effort to persuade national foundations to invest in the state.

Success has also bred criticism from some quarters. Some detractors have not appreciated his open and candid style, his willingness to speak his mind publicly. Others decry his priorities and the "loosey goosey" quality of the foundation. A few point to the time a few years ago when he distributed more in grants than the trustees had sanctioned, a move that earned him a reprimand from the McCune board. Some of the criticism comes from jealousy, even though many colleagues have followed the principles and priorities he has espoused.

Through his leadership, Mr. Lopez has improved grant making throughout New Mexico. While other institutions used to give out money based on friends and personal connections, he would not play that game. As Carlota Baca, former director of the New Mexico Association of Grantmakers, said, though "some foundations continue to give a lot of money to dumb things, mostly because of personal connections, Lopez rejected that practice and professionalized the giving away of funds." In one instance, he gave money to the Santa Fe Community Foundation so it could learn how to improve its grant making.

Quiet and unassuming, even self-deprecating at times, Mr. Lopez nevertheless has been a dynamic force in Santa Fe and in New Mexico thanks to his philanthropic leadership and outspoken positions on major public issues. Unlike many nonprofit leaders, he has not been afraid to go on the record with his views.

But what separates Owen Lopez most distinctly from so many of his peers is that he has had great fun during his days at the foundation. He will have no somber, self-righteous remembrances of his experiences as a philanthropist. As he once told me, “what is so unfortunate about our nonprofit world is that few of us seem to be enjoying ourselves. We need to lighten up and get a sense of humor.”

Well said by a leader who has been both a successful grant maker and a source of enjoyment to many of us.

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