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**THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY**  
**THE NEWSPAPER OF THE NONPROFIT WORLD**

# *The Unsung Heroes of Philanthropy*

**By Pablo Eisenberg**

Douglas McCandlish Lawson, associate director of national programs at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the foundation inspired by Monsignor Geno Baroni and sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, died on March 30 at the age of 58. His legacy of achievement stands out among foundation program officers and their efforts to make the world a better place.

He did not enjoy celebrity status. Unlike the icons of philanthropy, such as John Gardner and Paul Ylvisaker, Doug Lawson was never considered a member of the nonprofit hall of fame. Yet, in his quiet, unassuming way, he left a mark on philanthropy that will be as profound and lasting as those of his more illustrious counterparts. His work was the heartbeat of the best of philanthropic practice.

For 28 years he worked diligently and with passion to carry out the Campaign for Human Development's commitment to empower poor people and their grass-roots organizations and to bring about social justice. He did his job exceptionally well because he cared deeply about people and listened to their agenda for social change.

Like many creative, yet sensitive, program officers, he did not impose his own ideas or solutions upon those he served, preferring instead to draw on the experience and desires of his grantees. For him, "strategic philanthropy" was a concept that emphasized the needs and satisfaction of nonprofit groups and the public, not those of the donors.

With such a passion for his work, Doug nevertheless had an extraordinarily rich personal life. He traveled extensively in the United States and around the world. He loved water, becoming an accomplished swimmer, snorkeler, and white-water rafter. His drawings reflected both an artistic talent and a deep appreciation of nature. His family and friends were the foundation of his full life. His keen sense of humor served to keep his perspective in balance.

It was this balance that made him such a fine program officer. Philanthropy, while important to him, was not all consuming. His circles and contacts were broad enough for him to know that people liked him for reasons other than the money he could dispense. He was confident enough to know that he could make mistakes. And, perhaps most significant of all, he was a good listener who actually heard what people told him.

It is a pity that Doug Lawson, like many other excellent program officers, never had the opportunity to become the director of an important foundation. He would have been a good one.

Unfortunately, America's nonprofit groups often fail to reward those who have earned the right of leadership. Foundations -- as well as many charities -- seem to prefer to go outside their institutions for new leadership, even when such leadership is to be found inside, or to choose college presidents and celebrity figures instead of seasoned program officers and other qualified nonprofit executives.

The current ranks of leadership in the foundation and nonprofit world, unfortunately, are exceedingly thin. If we are to develop the leadership that the public expects and deserves, then boards of directors will have to change their practices to select only those who have the vision, experience, integrity, and courage to be effective nonprofit directors.

Doug Lawson, who epitomized the best of his profession, was among the bright, hard-working, committed, and creative program officers who encourage and enable good nonprofit organizations to do their jobs well. They are the unsung heroes of philanthropy. We often take them for granted, rarely give them sufficient credit, and too infrequently express our appreciation for their work and assistance. Many of our achievements are their success stories.

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