



## CHAPTER SIX

### PASSING ON THE PHILANTHROPIC TRADITION AND KEEPING DONORS ENGAGED:

#### *The Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration*

#### THE ISSUE

**T**ucked into neighborhoods across New York City, there are over 750 community gardens on city-owned land. With little cash and lots of volunteer muscle, gardeners have converted litter-strewn empty lots into serene places for growing vegetables and flowers. Many are located in low-income communities with little nearby green and open space. Gardens often displace drug dealers and provide children with a safe place to play. And gardens are often informal community centers—hosting cultural events, providing a place for neighbors to come together, and serving as outdoor classrooms for local schools.

Although providing great environmental and safety benefits to neighborhoods, the New York City government considers gardens to be “interim use.” Most operate under tenuous short-term licenses from the City that can be suspended with little notice. In late 1996, the City put half of its 750 community gardens on the auction block for purchase by housing developers to capitalize on the thriving real estate market.

In late 1996, the City auction provoked a strong response from gardeners, open space groups, and Collaboration funders. These groups rallied to save the gardens, and many were moved to take to the streets in protest. Advocates pointed out that gardens occupy less than 10 percent of City-owned vacant land, and urged the City to consider the value of open space to local communities.

*The Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration  
Summary Information*

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| Started:                         | 1993  |
| Ended:                           | 2001  |
| \$ Distributed (as of 11/01/00): | \$664,000   |
| Grant Range:                     | \$1,000 - \$40,000  |
| # of Grants (as of 11/01/00):    | 93  |
| Sponsors:                        | Julie Robbins, Allison Rockefeller, Theo Spencer, Peter Gill Case, Mary Frey Bennett, Lucia Gill Case, Mary Louise Pierson, Deborah Carmichael, George Gumina, Charles Rockefeller, Steven C. Rockefeller, Jr., Tara Rockefeller, Valerie Rockefeller, Geoffery Strawbridge |
| Key Partners:                    | Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Greenacre Foundation, J.M. Kaplan Foundation, Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, New York Community Trust, Trust for Public Lands   |
| Staff:                           | Salvatore LaSpada, Shermane Bilal, and Penny Fujiko Willgerodt  |
| Current Status:                  | In its last round of funding, to initiate an electronic advocacy alert system for city gardens.   |

## CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

The Rockefeller family is committed to passing on the tradition of philanthropy to succeeding generations. To help ensure this passage, the family established the Fifth Generation Roundtable at The Philanthropic Collaborative (TPC) in 1993. Comprised of members of TPC's board of directors, staff, and members of the Fifth generation, the Roundtable sought to offer a hands-on grantmaking experience, opportunities for multiple generations to work together, and a chance for participants to feel a sense of accomplishment with a small amount of money.

Originally, the Roundtable considered simply conducting a series of seminars. “But seminars wouldn’t be compelling,” says TPC staff. “They needed a practical way of learning, and we thought a funder collaboration would be a good method.” TPC explored possible collaboration activities that would offer a learning experience for young donors.

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*Many groups were familiar to me, but some groups, like the Green Guerillas, I would have never gotten so close to. Through them, I see New York as more of a community-based place because I see its grassroots functioning.*

**Allison Rockefeller**  
sponsor

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Rather than impose an issue, a consensus-building model was chosen to select a topic area of common concern. Through this process, they sought an issue that would have broad appeal and mobilize a large number of young donors. The Roundtable developed and circulated a survey to examine the Fifth generation’s programmatic interests.

Environment and education emerged as the strongest thematic areas of common interest. To develop a specific grantmaking program, the Roundtable—coordinated by TPC staff—convened experts, held issue briefings and conducted site visits.

A key factor in the selection of this issue—and to the collaboration’s ultimate success—was finding an area where a small amount of money would make a difference. Explains one of the sponsors, Mary Frey Bennett: “Our grantees all had very small budgets, so \$5,000 really took them a long way.”

Community greening emerged as a focus and the Youth, Community Gardens and Urban Environment Collaboration was formed in 1993. The collaboration set out to fund the community greening projects in New York City—where many family members are based—and it prioritized the support of community-driven efforts, especially those involving young people and their schools in efforts to convert abandoned lots into community gardens and open space learning labs.

One element that was missing in the development process was speaking to other funders in this area. “I don’t think we were aware of who was out there doing similar work,” says Mary Frey Bennett. “We would have benefited from the knowledge and expertise of other funders to learn where we were heading and gain advice on how to proceed.” Although the collaboration ultimately took a leadership role in convening funders around the gardening crisis, developing those relationships earlier would have yielded some advantages.

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*We brought the power of the group to bear in a very large city and our voice was heard. I think it would be naïve to suggest that it had enormous impact, but I think it was noted, and that's as good as it gets in New York.*

**Allison Rockefeller**

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Another limitation was the ability to engage a broad number of young family members to the issue. While the survey helped choose a focus where there was considerable interest, community gardening was limited due to geography and the necessarily narrow programmatic focus. Ultimately, a handful of the generation benefited from the hands-on experience, and a few more from funding the process.

## PROGRAM EVOLUTION

Although initially established to fund youth garden programs, sponsors adjusted their approach when over 100 gardens around New York City were threatened with eviction in late 1996. In the face of the gardening crisis, the collaboration shifted a significant portion of its funding away from direct support of gardens to advocacy.

“Our funding evolved in response to the needs of the community. We were open and responsive to changing the way the group worked,” says Mary Frey Bennett.

Advocates wanted the City to turn over the properties to the gardeners who had improved the land. They argued that these improvements played a crucial role in building stronger, safer communities, and thus, higher property values. But the City was not interested in listening and continued to plan for an auction, which would place the gardens in the hands of the highest bidder, regardless of potential use.

The Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration’s young sponsors were mobilized by this threat to the longevity of the gardens. Beyond funding, several donors began directly engaging in advocacy. Sponsors teamed up with grassroots organizations to shape messages and used their high-level contacts throughout the City to meet with city officials. “The family does not like to throw around its name,” explains one TPC staff member, “but they realized that in this instance, it helped to get into City Hall, to see Council members. The intent was not to flaunt the Rockefeller name, but to help get in the door.”

Collaboration sponsors met directly with the New York City Housing Partnership, City Council members, and representatives of the mayor's office. Sponsors worked closely with grassroots organizations to prepare for these meetings. "Community organizations did most of the work," says TPC staff. "It's not that we said, 'we know how to do advocacy,' but rather, 'tell us how to do it, prep us, give us talking points.' It was a real partnership."

For many donors, the advocacy process was a real education. "It was shocking to see how the meetings and discussions went nowhere," says Mary Frey Bennett, "We got a taste of how much gardeners and greening groups had worked and gotten nothing."

Although the Rockefeller family name helped to open doors, it is unclear how much of a real difference the meetings made in the final outcome. "In some ways they elevated the issue," said Andy Stone of the Trust for Public Land, "but didn't have much impact...but nobody did."

In June 1999, the City sold the land to two nonprofit organizations that will provide permanent protection. In the end, the threatened gardens were saved. However, the overall policy is still in place, and most gardens continue to live a precarious existence, knowing their land could be taken from them at any juncture.

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*It didn't make sense to provide direct support — hoses, seeds, etc. — if the gardens weren't going to be there. Instead we used our small funds to ensure their long-term viability.*

Mary Frey Bennett,  
sponsor

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Bethany Wall, staff member of the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, also felt that the advocacy of funders was not all that successful, but it was more a reflection of the City's administration than the work of the nonprofits and donors. "It was a good effort to open doors and there is strength in numbers." She also argues that any opportunity to communicate to the City that there was commitment, clout, and support at levels they should care about was an important and constructive part of the process.

There were, however, collaboration sponsors who were uncomfortable with advocacy, and unhappy with the new direction of the grantmaking. "I think some donors didn't realize the extent to which the gardens were threatened," says Allison Rockefeller. "I think communication wasn't good enough about the crisis and the advocacy role that we could play. When things like this happen, they need to be communicated very specifically to all donors and sponsors."

## FINDING AND WORKING WITH PARTNERS

In the face of the garden crisis, the collaboration started convening funders and gardening groups. In a hope to bring all parties together to strategize, the collaboration hosted the first meeting of the Joint Open Space Preservation Funders Collaboration in March of 1997. Rather than just gathering funders together,

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*Usually there is a lengthy turn around time in getting funding, but these funders were committed and informed. They kept well-informed so they could give advice and be ready to provide what only they could provide—large amounts of money.*

Andy Stone  
*Trust for Public Land*

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nonprofits and funders came together in a series of meetings to strategize and help everyone remain informed on the up-to-the-minute status of the crisis. “A new model of doing philanthropy was practiced,” says TPC staff. “Grantees and grant-makers sat around the table, not in positions of power, but in positions of empowerment and collaboration.”

Groups attending included those with a long history in the New York City “greening movement,” as well as groups that were mobilized by the current events. A diverse mix of foundations, individual funders, community groups, and national nonprofits were involved.

There was a complex dynamic around the table, as this disparate set tried to develop a shared voice, but all agreed that coming together was important. “Until we got together, how could we form a cohesive unit to make a public statement?” asks Mary Frey Bennett.

The Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration, although relatively new to the issue, took on a leadership role in convening. Because the collaboration was made up of individual funders—as opposed to foundations—it brought a new voice to the table. Bethany Wall of the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation explains: “There are somewhat different perspectives on philanthropy from individual funders. It’s good to have new players. It forces you to re-think or re-describe the approach you’ve taken and hear new ideas.”

A special pooled fund to respond collectively to the crisis developed the Joint Open Space Preservation Funders Collaboration, comprised of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, J.M. Kaplan Fund, Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, New York Community Trust and The Philanthropic Collaborative. The notion was that,

although each funder might have a particular approach or area of interest—advocacy, open space, gardens in schools, etc.—there was a common interest in the overall question of saving the gardens. “We were all invested,” points out Bethany Wall. “And felt, shouldn’t we pull together to see how we can protect this investment?”

The collaboration contributed to the pool as part of its advocacy funding and TPC acted as a fiscal agent and host for the Joint Open Space Preservation Fund. Organizations overcame differences and developed a joint project to submit to this pooled fund. It was unusual to have nonprofits come to consensus and submit a joint request from which not everybody would receive money. “Yet all the participants were interested and remained involved in an effort for greater good,” says Bethany Wall. “Everyone had so much at risk.”

“TPC had the capacity to turn money around quickly, which was a wonderful advantage,” says one sponsor. In addition, although the pooled fund was a re-grant program—an often unpopular form of grantmaking—it was set up to require consensus for all grants. This made it more appealing to many foundations.

Nonetheless, the pooled monies didn’t represent a new, long-term source of funding. “Whatever funders need to do to get clarity and make grants is fine with me,” says Steve Frillman of Green Guerillas. It was, however, cumbersome for grantees to report to both the pool and each individual funder. “For one grant, we had to report several times,” says Frillman. “Keeping track of the pool was a little bit stressful. It was logistically easier to get individual grants.”

Additionally, there was some frustration about the final deal with the City that exacerbated existing divisions among groups—regardless of the work done during the collective meetings. Some groups felt there wasn’t complete honesty in regard to revealing deals that were being made with the City. However, it would be unrealistic to assume that any set of meetings, particularly a process established in the midst of a crisis, could alleviate all tensions.

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*To the extent it's possible, try to have the people who want to learn something or accomplish something do the work themselves. It's a much more rewarding experience than it is to just re-create a mini-foundation and give out grants that the staff has determined will be useful.*

Julie Robbins  
sponsor

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The success is that the gardens were saved. The Joint Open Space Preservation Fund members raised over \$8 million to purchase selected gardens and to provide endowments for the maintenance of each through the Trust for Public Lands.

The pool ended as the garden crisis moved off the radar screen. However, the structure of the fund remains intact at TPC in case a crisis recurs.

## OPERATIONS AND STAFF

From the outset, young family members and non-family sponsors with an especially active interest in the collaboration—self-selected “sponsors”—were guided and supported by staff, and conducted extensive site visits, raised funds from other generations, drafted requests for proposals, reviewed proposals, and selected grants. “Most of us had never read grants or done site visits,” said family member and sponsor George Gumina. “It was a wonderful educational opportunity.”

Collaboration sponsors also hoped to engage young donors from outside the family. Potential non-family contributors were formally introduced to the collaboration at Council on Foundation conferences when young family members made a presentation, or, informally, in conversations with sponsors through their affiliations with similar groups and organizations. The collaboration successfully recruited only one other young donor, Mary Frey Bennett of the Michigan-based Frey Foundation. Although not a part of the Rockefeller family, she was welcomed and integrated into the process smoothly. “The family is so big,” says Mary Frey Bennett. “Many of the people involved are cousins or spouses of cousins, so you don’t feel you’ve been thrown into the midst of family issues.”

For each round of grantmaking, sponsors were given an opportunity to review grant proposals. Each proposal had two reviewers. In a face-to-face meeting, proposals were selected, followed by a site visit. Sponsors met a second time to make final decisions. Those who could not attend meetings sent comments and opinions, which were carefully considered by those making the final selections.

Sponsors also raised money from other family members, family-related foundations, and non-family funders. Using the TPC guidelines for fundraising from family members, collaboration sponsors raised 100 percent of the funds through an annual appeal letter. Sponsors drafted and signed the fundraising letter, which included an update of the past year’s activities, the learning that took place among the young donors, and notes on future plans. Staff involvement in



fundraising was limited to the printing and mailing of the letters and tallying and recording of contributions. The letters have been so successful that funds have increased annually.

Coordinating the activity of such a large group presented a challenge. Ensuring that sponsors were active, and not just recipients of staff updates, required a method to adequately notify them of meetings, luncheons, and site visits. The staff ultimately developed a process of fax and email communication to keep everyone informed.

The site visits were considered a highlight of this work. Like many young persons of wealth, sponsors had little direct exposure to the poorest and most isolated neighborhoods of New York City. “There was a lot of value in bringing our family members into those communities just for exposure to people from other communities in the city,” says TPC staff.

But it was often difficult to get people to make visits. “That’s the issue we always come back to. How can we get more young donors involved? Get them to visit,” explains sponsor Allison Rockefeller. “The power is in the visits. If you are in a vacant lot and there is a section of it that is a flourishing, wonderful garden with a teacher—a young guy that loves the notion of doing it, heading the project with young faces surrounding him—you never forget it.”

This sponsor-driven, hands-on learning experience was tremendously empowering for new donors. However, it was a time-intensive undertaking. “Sponsors put in a lot of sweat equity,” says one TPC staff member, “but they don’t need to be involved copying, collating and writing memos. The best way to use sponsors is for policy direction and ideas. Not in doing office work.” Funders are not paid professional staff, and have other vying commitments—jobs, school, children, and other volunteer activities. While the collaboration, ideally, was sponsor-driven, in reality the operational force became staff efforts.

Staff was relied upon to inform family members and other donors about what was happening. Because of the collaboration’s dual goals, it fell on staff to both actively monitor issues and guide funders through the grantmaking process. TPC staff Sal LaSpada and Sherman Bilal provided the leadership and the “glue” that kept the group going. “Sal was the greatest,” says sponsor George Gumina, “He was like our pied piper.” Staff tracked the issues closely, networked with other grantmakers, went to all the meetings and visited all the sites.

There was a considerable learning curve on the gardening issue that initially engaged sponsors. When that leveled out, participation dropped. "It started to become raising money and doling it out, and that wasn't as interesting," said sponsor Julie Robbins. With a narrow geographic focus and intense demands on

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*It's hard to say whether any individual thing that the collaboration did was effective, but it was a part of the larger picture. I'm not sure we could have done it without all the pieces. It all painted the picture that community gardeners have a huge amount of support. It isn't just disenfranchised people in Bedford-Stuyvesant, but influential nonprofits and influential funders, that care.*

Steve Frillman  
*Green Guerillas*

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donor time, high levels of interest and participation have not been sustained over time. Each year, momentum decreased and the number of participants shrunk.

Others felt that the shift from direct support to advocacy meant losing participants. "Some were more interested than others, some felt it was a bad idea, or didn't want to get involved," says Julie Robbins. "It seemed to peter out except for those interested in advocacy."

## ENDING THE COLLABORATION

Thus far, the Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration has had excellent success: young donors came away with new skills, schools fortified their gardens programs, alliances were built between nonprofits and foundations, and gardens were saved. The collaboration ultimately contributed to the long-term preservation of over 130 gardens across the City.

The collaboration continued to fund the issue, but with a much lower level of participation. At a September 1998 retreat, the Fifth Generation Roundtable decided to complete the collaboration at the end of 2000. The primary reasons for the decision were "donor fatigue" and a desire to broaden participation and provide learning opportunities to a wider set of young donors. While the collaboration had great impact in the field and on participating donors, the hands-on approach is unsustainable as a long-term endeavor. The Roundtable circulated another survey and possible program areas are under consideration.

Although the collaboration only disbursed approximately \$150,000 in annual funding, the loss of their leadership role in this area will create a void for nonprofits working in this area. In addition, the same fundamental policies are in place that threatened the gardens in the first place, leaving the gardens vulnerable. Thus, many of the donors and sponsors intend to continue their individual giving in this area. They have also raised the consciousness of other generations in the family about this issue, as well as talking about gardens with their communities of colleagues and contacts.