

Differences do Matter

We don't know all the answers about diversity. But we do know that it's worked for us. Prior to bringing on board members and staff of color, we had little real knowledge about environmental justice and talked about it even less. Now it's a thread that runs through our grant-making. Our environment and agriculture grants are directed toward grassroots groups and people of color fighting for a healthier environment and more control over the decisions that affect their lives.

Diversity spurred the development of our Sustainable Communities Program. The experiences of a diverse and varied board help us think through how to best support local efforts to create jobs, sustain ecological principles and build community power and equity.

Diversity helped us understand that the most effective and humane way to address population issues was to ensure that women have the power to make their own reproductive choices.

Today, diversity is less the thing we struggle to create and more the air we breathe. It has helped us renew our commitment to work for social, environmental, economic and political justice, and to use our power more strategically.



Challenge

The changes we made took more than a decade and a half, and would have taken longer if we had not pushed ourselves to make them happen sooner. We knew that we needed to augment our skills and our view of how all people connect with the environment, with society and with one another.

We don't intend to go back. The problems we face will become only more diverse. So must our problem solvers. The growth of trust and accountability among family members and staff at the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation has helped us redefine who we are, and re-enforced our sense of mission.



Opportunity

Diversity can work for you too. We are not all the way there, but we believe that our journey has been an important one. Contact us. We'd be glad to share what we know, and discuss what we don't.

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The Challenge of Diversity

“Today we know that we are immeasurably better off for having extended the family, and have accomplished far more than we could have ever done. We need diversity not simply to reflect the movements we fund, but to understand them.”

*Edith Muma,
daughter of Jessie Smith Noyes
& Chad Raphael,
great-grandson of Charles F. Noyes*



The Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation
and the Challenge of Diversity

Why Diversity?

More than 50 years after Charles F. Noyes established the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation in memory of his wife, ten of our 16 trustees are from outside the family. Today, our board and staff are male and female, black, white, Latina, Native American and Asian, married and single, and straight and gay. We live in the New York City region and across the country in rural, urban and suburban communities.

Achieving and maintaining such diversity has not been easy. But it has been essential to pursuing our mission as a foundation.

- Diversity strengthens our grantmaking by helping us understand and respond to the full spectrum of groups seeking grants.
- Diversity makes us more accountable to grantees and the communities they serve.
- Diversity helps us broaden our perspective on the economic, political and social problems we are working to resolve.

“There are many who find the use of the term diversity a difficult one to accept. To them it smacks of buzzwords and so-called political correctness. Yet, as we work together we have found that our differences are real and do matter. They have given us a wealth of knowledge that many of us otherwise would never have. We believe that it is important to our work to recognize and respect the differences among us and to struggle with those differences when they threaten to divide us.”

—Rosemary Bray, board member

A Diversity of Problems

In the early 1980s, the family trustees of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation looked at the world's most urgent problems and chose to address those that would be irreversible if not dealt with immediately. They saw that the ability of the planet to sustain life was in danger and that our relationship to nature and to each other would have to change. They redefined the Foundation's mission as protecting and restoring Earth's natural systems, and promoting a just and sustainable society.

Recognizing the complexity of these issues, the family saw that it needed a broader pool of expertise and perspectives. And, like many family foundations, it faced the problem of its own sustainability as the first generation of board members aged. So began the long process of building a professional staff and a more varied board, representative of the communities being served

A Diversity of Problem Solvers



Seated are board members Rosemary Bray McNatt, Ann Wiener and Donna Chavis and Vic De Luca, president. Standing are staff members Wilma Montanez, Kolu Zigbi, Millie Buchanan, Margaret Segall, Christine AuYeung and Patricia Carozzo. Ms. Wiener is the granddaughter of Charles F. Noyes.

Taking on Big Issues

The best measure of our Foundation's health isn't how often we agree, but how effectively we grapple with the most important issues of our time. Today, most of our debates are over strategies for preserving and improving the environment, about what a just society might look like, and about how the market economy can be reconciled with the natural world and with democracy. We can't imagine debating these issues within a narrow slice of society, because the answers will affect and must involve us all.