

AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE

by Lester A. Picker

The statistics tell the story or, more accurately, at least part of the story. According to Independent Sector, in 1998, whites gave an average of 2.2 percent of their annual income to charity. That same year, blacks gave 1.8 percent of their income. In addition, some 74.5 percent of whites made charitable contributions, compared with 51.9 percent of blacks. And, of the \$7.3 billion that blacks gave to charity, more than half—\$4.8 billion—went to their churches.

Born and raised in modest circumstances in Cleveland, the Fairfaxes were steeped in strong family and religious values. Those values shaped their attitudes toward life, shattering the stereotypical notion of African-American philanthropy.

For more than 60 years, Betty Fairfax has been a schoolteacher and guidance counselor—50 of those years working in the Phoenix Union High School District. She has also been a pioneer in school district desegregation efforts. At age 82, Betty continues to work every day, and not just sit behind a desk. To this day, she still makes home visits to at-risk youth, helping them to make wiser choices about their futures. In her determined way, Betty has impacted profoundly the fabric of social justice in the Phoenix community.

Then there is Jean Fairfax, 80, a woman who is still active in national civil rights issues. After graduating from the University of Michigan, Jean earned a master's degree in comparative religion at Union Theological Seminary, and immediately went to work for the American Friends Service Committee. After settling in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Jean commuted to New York City for decades to serve with distinction on the staff of the Legal Defense Fund (now the Legal Defense and Educational Fund) of the NAACP. Throughout her career, Jean Fairfax has been a force to reckon with in the civil rights movement, serving on the forefront of the struggle for justice during one of the most historic periods in the history of American civil liberties.

“Jean had a long and distinguished career at the Legal Defense Fund,” recalls Elridge McMillan, president of the Southern Education Foundation and himself a leader in the civil rights movement. “She spent an extraordinary amount of time and energy in the South prior to, during, and after the civil rights movement. In her later years, she was instrumental in forming state coalitions of African Americans who were interested in the further desegregation of public higher education institutions. Many of today's prominent African-American leaders were chairs of their respective state coalitions and helped their states fashion livable desegregation plans. Jean was the author of almost all of that. She has had, and continues to have, tremendous influence in the civil rights arena.”

Together, the Fairfax sisters now give approximately \$100,000 a year to charities championing the causes that exemplify their commitment to civil rights, social justice, and equal access. That they are able to donate such large sums is an amazing story in its own right. But their ability also to be strategic in their philanthropy is a model to families interested in making their philanthropy more effective.

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COMMITTED LIVES DEVELOP FROM MODEST BEGINNINGS

Throughout their lives, the Fairfax sisters worked at professions that paid extremely modest wages. The low pay scale for schoolteachers is legendary—and civil rights workers traditionally earn even less. Nor did the sisters inherit wealth from their parents. What they did inherit was a set of core values interwoven with their strong faith.

As youngsters, the Fairfax sisters were active in the Congregational Church, now known as The United Church of Christ. “Back then we talked very much about the need, the obligation that we have as individuals to work for social justice,” Jean recalls of her childhood. “It was part of my religious upbringing. I have a deep concern about what happens to the com-

munity, that is, I don't separate myself from what happens to my people. That's the connectedness I learned from my family.”

Betty and Jean's father worked to get out the black vote, and their mother, a social worker, worked with youth at the margins of society. Their grandmother was a suffragette, and their great-grandfather volunteered and served in the Civil War in the colored troops, historic legacies that the sisters carry with pride. The two fondly recall lessons from the prophets of the Old Testament and from the life of Jesus. “What does God require of us but to do justice and to love mercy?” Jean asks. “As faithful Christians, we were taught not to separate faith from action. If you're going to be faithful to your religious teachings and traditions, I think you have to be involved in society.”

DIFFERENT CAREER PATHS LED TO FAITH IN ACTION

Using values, tempered by family and religion, the Fairfaxes forged careers that are examples of faith in action. Betty has worked as a volunteer on behalf of youth throughout her career. In 1994, she was honored with the Hon Kachina Volunteer Award for her long-standing volunteer work, especially activities involving youth issues. In 2000, she received the prestigious Horace Steele Child Advocacy Award. The Fairfax sisters were jointly honored with the President's Social Responsibility Award from Kent State University for their lifelong efforts in civil rights and education.

Jean served on the governing committee of the World Council of Churches, and on the boards of National Public Radio, the Southern Education Foundation, the Ruth Mott Fund, Union Theological Seminary, and many others. In 1997, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the First National Conference of Black Philanthropy. In 1998, she received the Leadership for Equity and Diversity Award from Women & Philanthropy, a nonprofit affinity group of the Council on Foundations she founded and whose board she once chaired. She has been awarded the Council's highest honor, Distinguished Grantmaker of the Year,





In a move characteristic of the Fairfaxes, Jean took the \$10,000 award money from Women & Philanthropy, matched it with \$10,000 of her own money and established the Betty Fairfax Fund for Educational Equity at the Arizona Community Foundation to honor her sister's 80th birthday. In a show of love, admiration, and respect for the lifelong community efforts of Betty Fairfax, the Phoenix community poured their own money into the fund, bringing the corpus to its current \$150,000 level. This is the type of strategic philanthropy the Fairfaxes practice.

"What I marvel at about Jean, is that her philanthropy doesn't come as an afterthought," reflects Felicia Lynch, former president and chief executive officer of Women & Philanthropy. "She plans at the beginning of the year what she wants to give and how she is going to get there. She took that \$10,000 award and multiplied it 14 or 15 times. She and Betty both do that. They are truly models for us all."

LIFESTYLE CHOICES ALLOW FOR ENDOWING CHANGE

The Fairfaxes believe that it is impossible to make a distinction between the spiritual aspects of African-American philanthropy and its embodiment in causes traditionally devoted to the struggle for justice. It is for that reason that African Americans give both to their churches, to institutions involved in the struggle for justice and equity, such as the NAACP, the United Negro College Fund, historically black colleges, and to myriad ad hoc social causes that arise on a regular basis. In African-American churches, it is not unusual to see two collections at a Sunday service—one for the church and one for a young person ready to head off for college but short of full tuition.

In the mid-eighties, as Jean completed 20 years with the Legal Defense Fund and neared retirement, she and her sister decided to close the geographical divide separating them and live together in Phoenix. Their decision is yet another example of conscious lifestyle choices that have allowed them to put more money to work helping their community. The Fairfaxes' disciplined lifestyle, coupled with a booming stock market, blessed each with a substantial net worth. They also marveled at how their conception of black philanthropy developed along similar lines. They strongly believe that one of the keys to the future of black philanthropy is the willingness of those with financial means to create endowments in education, social justice, and equity.

"Black Americans are a giving people, but much of that giving over the years has been spontaneous and has not been strategic," Jean reflects. "Due to my experiences with organizations of grantmakers, I began to understand the importance of strategic philanthropy, which is philanthropy that makes a difference. We are very much committed to building endowments because they create funds in perpetu-

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The first program the Fairfaxes endowed was placed with the Southern Education Foundation—a \$125,000 gift that has since grown to more than \$500,000. "It was one of Betty's many noble moves," Elridge McMillan remembers. "She challenged one of her public school 8th grade graduating classes in Phoenix to complete high school and enter a 4-year baccalaureate institution, promising that she and Jean would guarantee each of the 92 of them \$1,000 per year toward their education for as long as it took for them to get it. For the many students who chose public institutions,

that \$1,000 scholarship was what was needed to complete their financial package. All of the students were low income and a good number were Hispanic."

With that initiative winding down, the Southern Education Foundation will now put the endowment to other good uses that will affect the progress of minority young people in institutions of higher education.

In a similar move, the Fairfaxes gave Kent State University, Betty's alma mater, \$100,000 to provide full-tuition scholarships to African-American students from the greater Cleveland area who commit to a career in urban education. As with their other endowments, the money has now grown considerably. All of the endowments created by the Fairfax sisters started with funds from their various annuities. Today, the total value of the endowments they have created since 1987 is more than \$1 million. Some of their endowments support educational scholarships for minority students, others depart from the norm.

One such fund—established at the Arizona Community Foundation—supports issues of educational equity, including litigation to ensure that young people with disabilities have access to the resources to which they are entitled under federal law. Another fund, established in their hometown at the Cleveland Foundation, supports programs that help students enrolled in community colleges to go on to obtain a bachelor's degree.

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Family Reunions and Philanthropy. This innovative program encourages black families that have reunions—some of them huge affairs of 500 to 1,000 family members—to use the celebration as a vehicle and an opportunity for discussing philanthropy as a family enterprise. The initiative helps African-American families create charitable funds, which offers a perfect opportunity to combine their spiritual and cultural roots to serve their communities.

FAITH FOSTERS PHILANTHROPY

Despite their strong faith and family values, the Fairfaxes do not proselytize through their charitable activities. Says Jean: “I guess the thing that I’m concerned about is that too many people discuss religion and faith in such narrow terms, almost as if they ask ‘What did Jesus tell me that I ought to do?’ I don’t think you should approach philanthropy like that.”

To the Fairfaxes, faith is a broad set of experiences that encompasses one’s religious, ethical, and moral values and a commitment to serve others through action. Elridge McMillan, who has known the sisters for decades, agrees with their assessment. “Jean and Betty’s professional careers demonstrate their commitment and faith. All of their professional jobs have been people- and equity-oriented, trying to help those with the least in society. They further causes that reflect their religious values. They demonstrate faith in everything they do. They don’t talk it. They’re not fire and brimstone types. Both of these women come from deep roots that manifest faith in their whole beings. They’re true examples of consummate philanthropists.”

There is a difference between religious giving and faith-based giving. Statistics show that African-American giving is primarily religious. “Many African Americans give to the United Negro College Fund or to their church,” says Felicia Lynch, adding:

But if asked to make a donation to the Anti-Defamation League or to an organization that crosses religious lines, I don’t think many would. If we would actually be true to our values and live our faith, we’d understand that we’re only as safe and good and happy and healthy as our brothers and sisters, regardless of their race or gender, and then our giving would be more effective. And that’s what is so clear about Jean, what’s so cool about Jean—she was doing this 30 years ago. I mean you could really make a case for doing nothing but black funding back then because issues in the black community were so horrific. Or only doing women’s issues. And that’s what’s so unusual about the Fairfaxes. They were crossing both lines and being very clear up front that they would not make a choice between gender and race and class. That’s what makes them such terrific models.

Many of Jean Fairfax’s beliefs were influenced by her work with the Quakers’ American Friends Service Committee. Others derive from her formal training at Union Theological seminary, where she studied the commonalities across religions. She also researched the effects of contemporary Islam on Africa, while at Harvard. “Practically every religion has



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some element of charitable works—it is very strong in Islam, for example, where there’s a concern for the community and a religious obligation to be charitable.”

STARTING EARLY MAKES LATER PHILANTHROPY POSSIBLE

After a lifetime of service to others, Betty and Jean Fairfax welcome the chance to share their perspectives on philanthropy, often doing so through speaking engagements throughout the nation—particularly to other African Americans. First and foremost in their minds is the importance of planning for philanthropy while still young.

“I think it’s very important for a person in their forties and early fifties to think about creating— actually, to do more than think about it, to create—charitable funds and begin to put the money away so it can grow,” notes Jean Fairfax. “They may not be withdrawing from the monies right away, but they still need to start early.”

Felicia Lynch agrees with her mentor’s assessment. “The lesson for me from running Women & Philanthropy was that I need to get to younger women, sooner. It’s beginning to happen, in little pieces around the country. But if we get to younger women sooner and talk to them about doing this, it could make a real difference.”

Jean and Betty both believe that other older people can make lifestyle choices that will boost their philanthropy. Like many of their senior citizen colleagues, the sisters’ entire asset base stems from annuities and a few investments that they accumulated during their careers. Rather than live lavishly, they elected to give the majority of their annual income to charity. Their choice to reduce expenses by living together simply allows more of those assets to flow to the causes they support.

The Fairfaxes also believe that endowments are critical to the future of African-American philanthropy. “Yes, we believe in endowments,” Jean says enthusiastically. “It’s very hard to convince people about the importance of endowments, but one of the things we are doing now is not only encouraging African Americans to be more philanthropic, but to establish charitable funds and to endow charitable funds. If African Americans are committed to combating the institutions of injustice and inequity in our society and to creating justice, our philanthropy ought to be supporting that. So, even if it’s very modest, even if we don’t have a lot of money, charitable funds and endowments are one way of doing that.”

By being so focused and strategic about their own philanthropy, the Fairfaxes also serve as models for others. Felicia Lynch has watched the Fairfaxes’ disciplined approach to philanthropy and has seen its positive effects. “Looking at the Fairfaxes makes me ashamed of all those folks who consider themselves liberals, moderates, or concerned citizens, because they don’t do it. We can do better than this. We all could do more. The fact is that black folks don’t give as strategically as they might. Jean is right, unfocused giving is really not the way to go.”



A LIFETIME OF GIVING REWARDS ALL

Looking back on a life of service to others, the Fairfax sisters embody the noblest traditions in philanthropy, giving of their time, talent, and treasure. “They have an unbelievable track record,” notes Elridge McMillan. “They have strong characters and a relentless determination to pursue causes that are just and right. They just don’t give up and won’t let others give up.”

“I’m just doing what I ought to do,” Jean says modestly. “In a way you don’t separate these things. What you do as a volunteer, what you do with your money, what you do professionally, they’re all one piece.”

With their evolution to the upper echelon of givers, the Fairfaxes have crossed a line that troubles many philanthropists. The kind of focused, organized philanthropy they now practice is different from the personal, one-on-one charity they grew up with. Often, they no longer have the direct feedback of the smiling face, and do not get to touch the hand that receives what they have given.

“That’s okay with me,” Jean says, “because if you’re really concerned about what happens to humanity as a whole, and particularly what happens to persons who live at the margins of society, you don’t want them to feel personally indebted. In many religious traditions, it’s the anonymous donor, the anonymous gift that’s the highest gift. I just feel good about what we’re doing as a family.”

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