

Writing a Letter to the Family

I always encourage the founding couple to take the time and make the effort to write a lengthy statement, almost like a letter to the family. I advise them to state their reasons for starting the family foundation, and their specific goals and objectives, and describe the results they would like to see for their community and for the family. They should also make clear the types of philanthropic interests that are of no interest to them. I suggest that they go through several drafts and at least a week to give them adequate time to reflect, consider, and make changes. If the children are willing to honor the wishes of their parents, and most are, the children have clear guidance as to what their parents really wanted. They receive a magnificent benefit from their parents – a gift, really – which is that they can thoughtfully carry out the wishes of their parents. That is more than a gift, it is a blessing, because the children feel good about doing it. The children also meet interesting people, learn, experience and enrich their lives. Only after doing the work for several years will they fully appreciate the magnitude of the “gift” from their parents.

I had a client whose father established a family fund at The Cleveland Foundation. Of his two sons, one became interested in carrying out his father's wishes, and the other was not interested. The one who is interested lives in California and comes to Cleveland at least two or three times every year to ensure that the goals his father set are being pursued and accomplished. His affection for his father and his loyalty are deeply touching to all of us who understand what he is doing.

Intent can create a connection that lasts the rest of your life. In philanthropy, you will meet wonderful people, you will do beautiful things, and you will gain great satisfaction. For this man, the happiest time of his life is to see the results of his father's wishes working well.