

## Case Study of a Community Foundation's Work with a Family Philanthropy

### Different Styles of Grantmaking

*Note: This case study was designed for a conversation by a group of community foundation staff. All participants read the two-page case study and discuss the questions.*

*As is true for many tales of working with philanthropic families, this one is neither a "poster child" nor one with a conclusive ending. However, it highlights some of the common tensions experienced by families who try to work together and contains some lessons learned about what not to do.*

This family includes a father, mother and two children who, at the time the family came to the community foundation, were both in high school. The champion for creating a family giving experience was Dad, who was passionate from the beginning about involving the kids, providing them an education in philanthropy, including doing site visits and making decisions together as a family.

The problems began at the first meeting when the community foundation was introduced to the children. The donor services staff presented information about the work and structure of the community foundation and specifically how donor advised funds operated. It was a speech rather than a conversation, and the kids were fairly quickly disengaged.

The next meeting was more engaging, but the outcome was not as expected. Both donor services and program staff participated and tried to help the family achieve its goal of identifying one issue area where the family could make a gift together. However, the parents already had determined the areas in which they were personally interested in advising grants, and no idea surfaced on which the whole family could agree. The family quickly moved to a model in which each family member would separately advise grants based on their personal interests to organizations identified by program staff.

A second point of disagreement arose over the decision-making process. Dad felt very strongly that it was important to look beyond written paperwork and do site visits before making a funding decision. Neither the kids nor Mom were interested in this approach, thus creating a point of real contention between Dad and the rest of the family.

Within the first couple of years, it became clear that the decision to advise grants based only on written material created other challenges. The next generation got in the habit of jumping from one organization to another with their grants and never took the opportunity to learn more about the grantees and the impact of their grants.

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Since they were young and deeply involved in school and activities, it was not surprising that their involvement was limited. However, the downside was that they were not particularly inspired or fulfilled by their philanthropic work. At the other extreme, Dad was pushing the community foundation to provide customized progress reports on some groups which had received fairly small gifts. The community foundation staff felt that this was not always realistic or appropriate.

Dad's behavior in the family meetings didn't help. He still clung to the idea of having family meetings to finalize grant decisions, and said that he wanted it to be a collective effort but in fact would trump what everyone else said. In the first year the community foundation did research for a child on animal welfare organizations. Dad did not like the child's choice and made a unilateral decision to reduce the grant amount from \$25,000 to \$5,000. This incident reduced the level of trust in the process, a problem that has been challenging to overcome subsequently.

To date, there have been two particularly positive results of the family's work together with the community foundation. Mom and Dad have begun to listen with more respect to the ideas that the kids have come up with and have followed up by contributing to these organizations and issues personally. In addition, both Mom and the kids have begun to ask Dad some good and challenging questions about his grantmaking, which has resulted in Dad rethinking some of his assumptions, priorities and relationships with grantees.

The kids are now in late high school and college and are regularly advising on \$25,000 of grants each year as the fund continues to grow and they continue to learn from the community foundation and each other.

1. What are some of the lessons learned from this case study?
2. What could the community foundation have done differently to help this family get off to a better start?
3. Going forward, how might the community foundation staff continue to help this family?