

# A Vision for the Silicon Valley Community Foundation

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## Introduction

Good afternoon and thank you for that wonderful introduction. It has been great to meet so many new friends and I look forward to getting to know each of you better and learning about your passion for making our community a better place. I want to recognize Leonard Ely and add my thanks and appreciation for his many contributions to our community. I also want to recognize my wife, Dr. Jacqueline Copeland-Carson, whose beauty is only exceeded by her brilliance.

About a year ago, I was in Washington, DC, trying to raise money from our government to help citizens in Louisiana who had been affected by Hurricane Katrina when my office called to say that Peter Hero needed

to speak with me as soon as possible. When a good friend of over 15 years calls and says he urgently needs to talk with you, you make the time to call back. When I reached Peter he had, what I thought, a simple request. He wanted to announce at Community Foundation Silicon Valley's 2005 annual meeting, which was being held the next day, that I would be the 2006 speaker.

It only took me a moment to say to yes. I thought to myself, a friend is asking you to speak on a topic you love — the role of community foundations in public policy with references to Katrina; you would have a year to prepare; the event takes place in one of the most beautiful parts of the country and, best of all, at a time of the year that Minnesota would be only days away from its first snowfall. In fact, Minneapolis had snow flurries last week. This would be a cakewalk.

What a difference a year makes. This past Monday was my last official day as president and CEO of The Minneapolis Foundation, 12 years to the day. And, as you know, on November 1<sup>st</sup> I will formally begin my

new role as the first CEO and president of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. In a very real way, I stand before you betwixt and between my past and my future. For a few short days, I am jobless and without portfolio. I have yet to learn the history, traditions, culture and politics of my new home that will, and must, inform my thinking. I have the innocence of a newborn unaware of what should and should not be said. I have the freedom of not knowing what has been tried and failed before and therefore cannot be tried again. I have the power to dream about the future possibilities without constraints or limits.

I say all of this to ask for your forgiveness. I am very likely to say at least one thing that someone, perhaps even everyone, will disagree with. At that moment, please do not hold my words against me. At that moment, remember that I don't know what I don't know and that I am just dreaming aloud about the possibilities of hitting a game winning homerun, or at least hoping not to strike out, as I anxiously await my chance at bat, playing for a new team.

I want to talk about three things today. First, I want to talk about what should be expected of the very best community foundations and, in so doing, at least partially fulfill Peter's initial request to speak about foundations and public policy. I will save my speech on the lessons from Hurricane Katrina for another time but would note that there are some things that only the federal government can do and one of those things is to respond to national disasters. Second, I want to share with you my vision and aspirations for the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Third, I want to talk about the ways in which I will need your help to fulfill the promise of a community foundation that thinks regionally and acts locally.

## Community Foundations at Their Best

Around the world, regardless of their asset size or the problems facing their communities, the very best community foundations share at least one characteristic. These successful community foundations are busy intersections where people of diverse racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, different beliefs and interests and from all sectors of the economy share ideas and pool their resources to address common problems aimed at making the community a better place. These institutions are cross-roads where donors with multiple charitable interests, non-profits with innovative ideas to improve community, businesses, financial and religious institutions, state, county and city governments all converge in one place, the community foundation.

Unlike the standard two street intersection that is common in the US, the intersection of people, place, and sectors at a community foundation looks more like what is known in England as a roundabout. For those of you who may not know, a roundabout is a traffic circle in which multiple

roads all converge. At first glance, a round-about looks chaotic as cars coming from as many as seven directions converge on one circle, weaving in and out of lanes as they position themselves to exit on to another road. It looks as though an accident could, and should happen, at any moment. However, the steady stream of cars and trucks, some easily, others with difficulty, all navigate the circle to successfully emerge on the road and, more importantly, in the direction that they want.

At their best community foundations resemble roundabouts. They are institutions in which diverse people, ideas and institutions share the same space and emerge on a direction to benefit the community. In fact, I have learned that a community foundation's least used tools — convening and public voice — are as important, and probably more important, than the grants it makes. Convening, the art and science of bringing people together to share ideas and build consensus, is of critical importance when trying to raise public awareness which in turn leads to consensus which then can help drive individuals and institutions to action.

It is not enough, however, for community foundations to just be a place where others express their visions. After carefully listening to others and analyzing the available data, the best community foundations find the courage to use their own public voice to align the institution with strategies and efforts that it believes will make the community a better place.

It continues to amaze me that foundations invest millions of dollars on an issue, presumably to learn what does and does not work, only to become mute when either the general public or public institutions are engaged in discussions about what strategies to implement as it relates to the very issues that foundations have been supporting. The best community foundations understand and accept that it is their moral obligation and responsibility to share what they think they have learned. A community foundation must be willing to use its cash and its cache.

No, a community foundation can't use its public voice on every issue just as it can not make a grant to every nonprofit organization. And no, despite what some may say, expressing an informed point of view does not

make an institution partisan, ideological or political. It does mean that the community should expect that the community foundation will not be silent or ambivalent when issues arise on topics that it has devoted time and resources toward supporting where the public policy outcomes have the potential to improve or harm the community's quality of life. Moreover, while it may seem counter-productive, I and others have discovered that by speaking uncomfortable truths to power, community foundations are actually able to engage more people and attract greater financial support for their efforts.

Yes, without question or exception, this work is hard to do and few community foundations are able to achieve this measure of excellence. However, we should expect no less of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation than that it will strive to, and become, one of the best community foundations in the world.

At their least effective, community foundations are charitable banks that focus exclusively on raising assets and meeting the needs of the

individual donors to the exclusion of working for ways and opportunities to bring those donors together in common cause. Without question, assets are important and it is difficult to make a grant if you don't first obtain the gift. And, unleashing the charitable passion of each donor is an important part of every community foundation's mission. However, asset accumulation is only a means to a greater end. It is how a community foundation brings together its diverse community, in all respects; around a shared community vision that is the true measure of success for these institutions.

### **A Vision for Silicon Valley Community Foundation**

Since my appointment was announced on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, I have been repeatedly asked: What is your vision for the Silicon Valley Community Foundation? My vision for this new institution is relatively straightforward and simple.

- I want the Foundation to engage as many people as we can throughout the San Mateo and Santa Clara counties to help us identify the most important regional issues.
- I want the Foundation to support, encourage, and partner with those nonprofit organizations and institutions that are advancing the best ideas to address those regional themes in the context of their local communities.
- Over time, I want the Foundation to take the most successful local solutions and share them across the region and passionately advocate for their systematic adoption so that everyone will benefit.
- Finally, I want the Foundation to be at the forefront of developing a new standard for civic engagement. This new standard would result in the words caring, sharing and interdependent being used as frequently, and in the same breath, as when describing our region as innovative, prosperous and independent. This new civic engagement will require all of us to go beyond just writing a check but also

devoting our more valuable resources of time and talent toward addressing the most difficult problems in our community. CFSV's SV2 is an example of this new standard. A new standard of civic engagement would help us to recognize that just as in business, the context, the players and the opportunities are constantly changing. The same is true when trying to address the evolving challenges of ensuring affordable housing, accessible health care, adequate public education, a sustainable environment and a vibrant arts community. My hope is that this new civic engagement will enable us to understand that what worked yesterday may not work tomorrow and the solution that eluded us today may be found tomorrow.

## A Call for Help

I will be forever grateful to the Foundation's board for giving me the opportunity to make their vision of a community foundation that provides visionary community leadership, world-class donor services and effective grantmaking targeted on the most challenging problems a reality.

Now to make this vision a reality, we will need your help. First and foremost, we need to ask for your patience. When I begin work on November 1<sup>st</sup> I will be the first official employee as well as the only employee of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. My immediate task will be to bring together two successful community foundations that today have no central headquarters, no established organizational structure, incompatible internal systems and different organizational cultures.

While both the board and staff will move expeditiously to build this new institution, my priority will be on building the ship right rather than trying to build it fast. Building the ship right will mean recruiting an exemplary crew with a shared vision, establishing high quality procedures

and processes for all aspects of our work and earning the community's trust. Even after the ship has been built, we will need to test ourselves in calm seas before we can test our resolve in the storms we must invariably sail through, and not around, if we are to improve the quality of life for all in our region. One year, and possibly two, is not a long preparation period in the context of perpetuity.

Both in building the ship and after we set sail, we will, regrettably, make some mistakes, large and small. I would ask that you not judge our future success based on whether we stumble from time to time. Certainly, in Silicon Valley, of all places, we recognize and value trying new things and learning from our mistakes.

Second, I ask that you think of the new foundation as the union of the merger – its offspring. Community Foundation Silicon Valley and Peninsula Community Foundation have provided the genetic material for who and what we are, however, we will be shaped by a future different than the past and will likely respond differently than either parent. As any parent will

readily tell you, while your kids may have some of the physical characteristics of one or both parents they also will have features that resemble the grandparents, great aunts and uncles and distant cousins. I am quite sure that you will see more than a little of Leonard Ely as we endeavor to strengthen civic engagement across the region.

Even more important, notwithstanding any similarities in appearance or personalities, your kids will seldom act like you want them to or make the choices you would like for them to make. When this happens, it only means that the parents have succeeded in raising their children to be independent, free thinking adults ready and able to make their own mark on the world. It is my promise and commitment to all of you that the Silicon Valley Community Foundation will always remember and celebrate the traditions and victories of both parents while we strive to make them proud and accepting of our choices.

Finally, I want to ask each of you to personally commit to learning more about the challenges facing the valley of the hearts delight. Whether

as residents, neighbors, voters, taxpayers or parents what happens in one part our community eventually affects all of us. I invite you to take the journey with us as we learn the ways in which our communities are intertwined as we work with others to chart a common destiny.

### Concluding Thoughts

We have a lot of work to do and a long journey ahead of us. I welcome your thoughts and ideas and encourage you to contribute your time, talents and money toward helping to make our region a better place for all of us. As I read on a bumper sticker recently, "We all do better when we all do better." My dream for the Silicon Valley Community Foundation is that we will be the catalyst to help us all do better.