

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Ford's Push on Disability Rights Should Be a Model for Philanthropy

By Steve Bartlett and Tony Coelho

The Ford Foundation made history last year when it announced it was focusing its grant making on equality. Now one of the nation's wealthiest and oldest foundations is making history in a new way: It acknowledged in big, bold fashion that inclusion means focusing on disability as well as race, gender, and class. Indeed, according to the U.S. Census, people with disabilities are the poorest of the poor in America.

In his annual letter, released today, Darren Walker, the foundation's president, declared that it "does not have a person with visible disabilities on our leadership team, takes no affirmative effort to hire people with disabilities, does not consider them in our strategy, or even provide those with physical disabilities with adequate access to our website, events, social media, or building. Our 50-year-old headquarters is not currently compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act — landmark legislation that celebrated its 26th anniversary this summer. It should go without saying: All of this is at odds with our mission."

In an era lacking in accountability, Mr. Walker's forthrightness is amazing, courageous, and deserves high praise. And as the foundation's commitment to equality influenced other grant makers to make

changes in their missions, let's hope this move helps spur other philanthropy leaders to act.

Mr. Walker identifies specific steps the Ford Foundation will take, such as making physical and digital changes so everything the foundation does

at its headquarters and beyond is fully accessible. It plans to make changes in how it recruits staff and board members, and to ask potential grantees and companies it does business with to disclose their commitments to people with disabilities. These are major moves that will make everything the foundation touches more welcoming and respectful of the 59 million Americans who have a disability.

The Ford Foundation has equality and social justice in its DNA. So how could it, like so many others, have missed until now the more than 1 billion people around the globe who

have a disability, many of whom face systematic discrimination? Given that disability can happen to anyone at any time — because of an accident, a disease, or the natural process of aging — how could anyone not see the connections between disability and so many of our social interactions?



Put simply, it is easy for established organizations to ask if they are “doing things right” instead of asking whether they are “doing the right things.” People with disabilities faced extremely low expectations in the era when Ford and other major foundations like Rockefeller, Pew, Carnegie, Cummings, Kresge, and Kellogg were created.

President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law on July 21, 1990, with famed disability-rights leader Justin Dart and more than 100 members of Congress at his side. Democrats and Republicans worked together to ensure that people with disabilities would never have to worry about losing their basic civil rights. Before then, people with disabilities were regularly sent away to institutions or imprisoned in their own homes because so many other places were inaccessible. Too often, they were out of sight and out of mind.

In recent years, people with disabilities and their advocates have adhered to an important principle: nothing about us without us. That is, nobody should craft policies and practices for people with disabilities unless they are working with people with disabilities to shape them. As Malcolm Gladwell pointed out in his book *David and Goliath*, people with disabilities can be the most innovative people on earth because their situations regularly require them to find new solutions to problems large and small.

Today, students with disabilities have the legal right to be included in mainstream classrooms. This includes students with “invisible,” brain-based learning and attention issues, which often go unidentified and unaddressed in our nation’s schools. People with disabilities and their families have high expectations. The majority of students with learning disabilities, for example, plan to attend college, but only 41 percent graduate.

That makes little sense when you think about the accomplishments of people with disabilities. Stephen Hawking is unlocking the secrets of the universe while using a motorized wheelchair and assistive technology. Richard Branson, a creative genius, job creator, and billionaire, speaks regularly about his learning disabilities. Students with autism often gravitate toward careers in science and technology, while people with developmental disabilities are excelling in jobs at hospitals, hotels, elder-care facilities, and distribution centers. Companies that have worked to give

equal chances to people with disabilities, including Starbucks, Google, JPMorgan Chase, Walgreens, and Uber, have found them to be among their most talented workers.

But people with disabilities want more. Studies show that 70 percent of the 22 million working-age American with disabilities want to work, yet only one-third are employed. Challenges remain in the education system, despite the legal victories that allow 6.4 million students with disabilities to be in the classroom. Some 13 percent of all American students have disabilities, yet only 61 percent of people with disabilities graduate from high school. Among those children, more than one in 10 is diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, according to research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those students and their parents need access to resources such as Understood.org, a site founded by nonprofits, grant makers, and others to help youngsters and families affected by these disorders.

While information like this is essential, philanthropy can do more to help. This is especially true for people with disabilities who are also minorities and thus often face a dual bias. Too many of those youngsters are trapped in a school-to-prison pipeline. According to “Disability & Criminal Justice Reform: Keys to Success,” a report by RespectAbility (an advocacy group on whose board we sit), 750,000 Americans with disabilities are behind bars. Taking action early to help such young people get the attention they need is crucial.

So we hope Darren Walker’s words will be a call to action for all of philanthropy. His decision to include in his essay an admonition from the African-American author James Baldwin was apt: “Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” We offer another of Baldwin’s quotes and hope all in philanthropy will want to hear it: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

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