

message



Barry Lavery

By Teresa Heinz
Chairman, The Heinz Endowments

Imagine that it has fallen to you to lead a large foundation serving the Pittsburgh region, and the first thing that lands on your desk is a thick, decade-old, file dealing with the purchase of an old brownfield site— one of the last remaining prime development tracts in the city.

As you sift through the history, you quickly understand that this is not just any old former industrial property. It is 178 acres of beautiful riverfront land. You note that, in buying it, your foundation and three others dreamed of inspired development guided as much by philanthropic principles as by the market.

The investment has demanded more patience than many expected. Through the years, grand plans and development schemes have been upended by the worst recession since the Great Depression, a disruptive highway project and a time-consuming site preparation process.

After all the delays, it seems that even the land itself is frustrated—its

vacant stretches calling out for rebirth, for sustenance and, in the name of the longtime residents in the neighborhoods around it, calling for growth to a new identity.

Now imagine another folder dropped on your desk. Stuffed into it are all the grants your foundation and others have made through the years to assist Hazelwood, the struggling community that hugs a stretch of the same brownfield now owned by the foundations. In another era, when the Jones & Laughlin Steel Co. was in business, the residents thrived.

Today, after all the planning meetings and the piecemeal outside efforts, Hazelwood is still weighed down by long-standing problems such as unemployment and violent crime rates much higher than the city average. There have been significant cuts in public transportation and basic services such as a grocery store.

In philanthropy generally, but especially in the work of our foundation, which focuses primarily on southwestern Pennsylvania communities, improving conditions that lead residents to a more positive sense of the places in which they live and work is everything.

In this issue, both of these imaginary grant-making scenarios are made real in “After the Mill,” our cover report on the intertwining of the land development project known as Almono (an acronym for Pittsburgh’s three rivers) with an ambitious place-based initiative now under way by the Endowments in Hazelwood.

The story demonstrates that the power of place-based philanthropy is in the conviction that there are no bad places, only bad conditions. Conditions can be changed, but places are the bedrock of our identity.

Miriam Therese MacGillis, a Dominican nun and co-founder of Genesis Farm, a literacy center in northwestern New Jersey, writes that Americans’ “failure to understand and revere place has unleashed a toxic assault on the conditions and communities of life that are the very umbilical cord to our own human existence.”

My late father-in-law, Jack Heinz, may not have had the same theological underpinning but he did have the same reverence for place when he saw past seedy blocks of 1980s Downtown Pittsburgh to envision a vibrant cultural district. Just a few years later, my late husband, John Heinz, led the Greater Pittsburgh Revitalization

Commitment to place

Initiative, which extended the place-based philanthropic model to two sections of southwestern

Pennsylvania hardest hit by the collapse of the steel industry.

Each place-based experience informs the next, but there is much about the Hazelwood partnership that is unique for the Endowments. All five program areas—Arts & Culture; Children, Youth & Families; Community & Economic Development; Education; and Environment—along with the Communications section, are working as one team on the grant making. Before the first round of funding in October, there was a strong showing from residents in several community events and from stakeholders in a series of planning meetings.

The other two stories in this issue also validate the Endowments’ level of commitment to place: a report on several projects to enhance residents’ engagement in their communities by improving news and information gathering; and a story on Hosanna House, a remarkable human services provider and community convening center that has been a successful place-based anchor for two generations of Wilkinsburg residents.

Each of these stories confirms what foundation leaders here have recognized for many years—that connecting to a place is a hard-fought process and it carries a powerful force. The brilliant novelist and essayist Joan Didion tells us that a place “... belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.”

As often as possible, it should be the goal of philanthropy to enable that process and celebrate the result. *h*