

Rusty Stahl, Executive Director, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy

As the baby boomers whose youthful social activism sparked the dramatic growth of the nonprofit sector in the 1980s and '90s approach their mid-fifties, the sector finds itself at a crossroads. Eager to assume more responsibility within their organizations, today's twenty- and thirty-something nonprofit managers frequently are forced to bide their time while their boomer elders continue to call the shots. At the same time, the boomers eventually will retire — with many planning to do so in the next five years — and the leadership gap created in the wake of their departure is likely to be significant.



Rusty Stahl

Recently, Philanthropy News Digest spoke with Rusty Stahl, founding executive director of [Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy](#), a network of young foundation professionals and donors, about how people of different ages, experience, and influence levels can learn from and work with each other to address generational issues in the philanthropic sector and, at the same time, make the practice of philanthropy more effective in terms of both its impact and inclusiveness.

Before becoming the head of EPIP, Stahl was a Jane Addams Fellow at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, the founding organizer of [Central Indiana Jobs with Justice](#), and a program associate at the Ford Foundation's [Governance and Civil Society](#) program. In addition, he currently serves on the boards of [Changemakers](#), a national public foundation that supports innovative social change philanthropy, and [Action Without Borders](#), which runs the global nonprofit Web portal [Idealist.org](#), and is a member of the advisory committee of [The Grantmaking School](#), the first university-based grantmaker education service.

Philanthropy News Digest: How did you get interested in the philanthropic sector, and when did you first realize there was a need to groom young people to be future leaders of the sector?

Rusty Stahl: I always knew that I wanted my career to be about social change. As the child of baby-boomer community activists, I was brought up to value that kind of work. You know, the social movements of my parents' generation created many of the nonprofits we know and admire today, and a lot of that work evolved from volunteer movement activity into full-time nonprofit work. Unfortunately, that path doesn't really exist today, leaving tons of young people hungry for counseling about careers that contribute to the public good. I believe that demand must be met: If we don't give young people who want to work in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors an opportunity to get involved, they're going to look elsewhere for employment.

As for myself, I was fortunate while a student at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., to be exposed to and become familiar with a lot of the national nonprofits based there. But I had no real concept of what philanthropy was or how it was linked to my interests. Then I was accepted to the Jane Addams Fellowship program at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, which moved young people right out of the undergraduate experience and into a liberal arts-based acquaintance with philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. Our professor was Robert L. Payton, a former president of the Exxon Education Foundation and one of the founders of Independent Sector. Payton is a man committed to helping young people understand the values and work of philanthropy, which he defined as voluntary action for the public good. In fact, every week for the twelve years the program ran, he and his wife held the fellowship seminar in their own home library.

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PND: He sounds like the perfect model of a mentor.

RS: It was incredible to get the perspective of someone who's been around the scene for so long. Anyway, in 2000, with a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, he took my class of fellows to the Council on Foundations' annual conference. And one of the things that struck us while we were there was the conspicuous lack of young people in leadership roles at foundations. In fact, Payton seemed to be one of the few people in the foundation community interested in exposing graduate students and other young people to that type of networking event.

PND: Was that the genesis of Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy?

RS: Definitely. The following year, 2001, I was working at the Ford Foundation as a program associate, and at that year's CoF conference I happened to re-connect with some former Addams Fellows and a few other young people working at foundations. To make a long story short, we decided it would be fun to hold a dinner and try to create a space for young people attending the conference. So we worked up and handed out a bunch of flyers and were shocked when forty people showed up for dinner! When I got back to New York I was all excited about doing something to build on that gathering and, with the blessing of the folks at Ford, which encouraged program associates to develop their own projects as long as they were relevant to the work they were already doing, I began to work on developing what became known as Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy.

Fortunately, Linetta Gilbert, who had recently come to Ford to work on a new portfolio called Community Philanthropy and Civic Culture, agreed that there was a need to nurture young professionals in the foundation community and gave us a start-up grant through the New World Foundation, where EPIP is housed. I was hired to coordinate the project in 2002, and we now have six chapters around the country governed by volunteer steering committees. As you know, our programs are designed for a network of over six

hundred young foundation professionals, trustees, employees at philanthropic infrastructure groups and graduate students studying philanthropy.

PND: Were any other foundations involved in EPIP's formation?

RS: Not quite in the same way as Ford. Mott gave us a grant to create a Professional Development Fund, to which EPIP members — particularly people of color — can apply for partial support to get to conferences they would not otherwise be able to attend. And the New York Community Trust supports our New York City chapter and its mentoring program. About a dozen foundations are providing institutional membership dues, which are critical for our growth. The Carnegie Corporation of New York has provided funding for our curriculum development, including a workshop series we're creating called "Philanthropology."

PND: What does "Philanthropology" mean?

RS: The term's been used by different thinkers over time, but we use it to mean a critical study of organized philanthropy. The aim of our Philanthropology series is to bring reflective study to foundation practitioners — to take people out of the frantic "What are we going to fund and how" mode and create a space for them to engage in honest dialogue and learning.

To that end, the series is structured into four workshop modules that are held at our various chapters as well as other venues. The essential workshop, Understanding Philanthropy, is meant to provide an overview of the foundation sector and how it fits within the context of overall charitable giving and civil society. Dr. James Allen Smith, who's a historian at Georgetown University's Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership and a former president of the Howard Gilman Foundation, is helping us develop that workshop.

A second workshop, "Paradoxes in Philanthropy," focuses on some of the contradictions and tensions inherent in foundation work and encourages participants to see them as germane to the process of bridging community needs and donor interests. In other words, it might not be easy to knock down the barriers between donors and community-based groups, but it's up to all of us in the foundation world to find a way to work through them.

The third workshop in the series is called "Transforming Philanthropy," which we're doing through the Dialogue Project, a partnership between EPIP and Resource Generation, a Cambridge-based organization that gives wealthy young progressives a chance to network and learn from each other. The workshop provides young foundation professionals and individual donors with an opportunity to learn from each other and better understand their various roles in the philanthropic equation. In the future, we hope to build more partnerships on top of that, such as a young fundraisers meeting with nonprofit leaders and donors meeting with foundation professionals. Our goal, always, is to improve understanding between funders and non-funders and to show how all roles are important to getting the work of philanthropy done, despite the inherent power

differences in some of those relationships. We're not necessarily aiming to alter the way people use their leadership positions in coming years; our goal is to help shape the ethical development of the next generation of fundraisers, donors, and grantmakers. We think that creating a space for people to talk about how issues like class and race play out in the philanthropic sector when they're at the beginning of their careers will be transformational for future nonprofit leaders, and therefore for the sector.

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PND: You mentioned the importance of having a good mentor. What, if anything, does EPIP do to facilitate effective mentoring?

RS: Traditionally, newcomers to the foundation world don't receive a formal orientation or professional education; the sector operates more on an apprentice model. We're trying to enhance the process by matching young professionals with mentors who match their interests and need for professional guidance. To that end,

we have a six-month mentoring program in New York supported by the New York Community Trust that matches our members with seasoned program officers and foundation leaders in semi-structured relationships. While the mentors are only required to meet with their mentees once a month, they're free to meet or talk with their mentees as much as they want. The New York Regional Association of Grantmakers recently featured the program in its newsletter, and we're looking to partner with them on it in the future — particularly to get more diverse people to serve as mentors and mentees. But we're always looking for mentors and mentees, and anyone who's interested can download an application from the New York section of our Web site.

PND: What benefits have the mentors and mentees gotten from your program?

RS: As a mentee myself, I've gotten a lot out of it. My mentor was Nancy Cunningham, former executive director of the Funders for Lesbian and Gay Issues, based here in New York. Because our jobs were similar in terms of responsibilities, I could ask her management and organizational development questions directly related to my work, which would have been uncomfortable and maybe impossible for me to do if my mentor had been someone at my organization. Other mentees in the program have found it useful for looking at career trajectory issues, workplace conflict issues, and as a different way to assess their own effectiveness within their organizations. Mentors have gained a lot from the program, too; some have been foundation presidents and program officers who viewed the program as an opportunity to organize their knowledge of the field, gain the fresh perspective of young people, and to learn about the operation of different types of foundations. For example, we've had mentors from family foundations who have been matched with younger individuals working at corporate foundations, and in those cases both mentor and mentee have gotten a good inside look at a different foundation structure and operational culture.

PND: What about your advocacy work?

RS: Our advocacy agenda is still in the R&D stage, but it falls into two parts. One is about transforming the philanthropic sector; much of this work will grow out of our partnership with Resource Generation and other groups.

The other part, which we call "Generating Change," is about generational issues in the nonprofit sector. That goes back to the question I had when I was in college and trying to find my path into philanthropic work: How do you help young people see the nonprofit world, to see a career promoting social change as a possibility? Right now, that kind of career is practically invisible. We all see and are aware of the for-profit job marketplace and of professions like law and medicine. In contrast, society does not place nearly as much emphasis on the nonprofit sector, and the nonprofit sector itself has not done a very good job of explaining itself to young people or to our educational system. Public schools tend to focus less these days on civic education, much less showing how philanthropy is a critical part of our democratic system. EPIP's role is to encourage foundation leaders to address these "pipeline" and generational issues in the nonprofit sector, so that grantmakers are providing funds that, in turn, help their grantees to create clearer pathways for young people into their causes and organizations.

PND: Your Web site mentions that social justice philanthropy is a core part of EPIP's mission. Can you tell us a little more about that focus?

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RS: We talk about *effective* social justice philanthropy. We think folks infatuated with effectiveness need to ask the "for what" question, as in "effectiveness for what"? By the same token, many folks concerned with social justice could benefit from putting more thought into efficacy. We really want to raise the profile of both challenges among our members.

But to answer your question, I think social justice philanthropy is about who, what, and how. Who sits in foundation boardrooms interpreting mission and framing issues and developing funding strategies? Who on staff makes the funding recommendations? How do all these players get recruited, and from what pools of talent? Are any grantees or community members in these positions? What type of social interventions are being funded? Are new and small groups getting access as well as established players? Are grants nice and easy, or are they bold and challenging? Is empowerment, advocacy, and organizing funded alongside social services, education, and culture? How are funds distributed? How transparent is the process? Is there any form of peer review through a grantee-based advisory committee? Do groups that do good work but have fewer resources to devote to polishing a proposal have an equal chance of getting funded? What is the appropriate balance of responsive and proactive grantmaking? Who sets the agenda for the funded groups? I think these are the type of questions that social justice philanthropy tries to answer.

More concretely, there's a whole subsector of the foundation and fundraising world that considers itself social justice philanthropy. Here in New York, the North Star Fund and

the New York Women's Fund both have activists and grantees on the funding committees actually making grant recommendations. The conflict of interest in having grantees on the board is managed and dealt with — it's not something to be scared of, and both organizations benefit from having grantee input at the highest levels. I think one can make the case that this strategy enhances the effectiveness of grantmaking because it puts people who intimately understand the work being funded at the highest level of decision making. There are a number of private foundations trying to do similar things. On the other hand, while working at the Ford Foundation, I saw how an independent foundation without that type of structure can provide critical infrastructure for human rights at home and around the world. And I don't see why mainstream family foundations cannot find the social justice component within their own work — there's a place where social services and social justice overlap, and we all ought to be exploring that space.

PND: What are some of the issues involved in transitioning to the next generation of foundation professionals, and what is EPIP doing to address them?

RS: I think the foundation community needs to come to terms with its workforce as a semi-profession — to accept that it's okay and valuable. From there, foundations need to expand their staff professional development programs, internships, apprenticeships, etc. I hope individual donors of a certain scale will recognize more and more the value of having experienced staff to support their strategic giving, and of participating in the associations of our field. At the same time, I hope our associations live up to that promise.

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The transition you're talking about is also clearly linked to the generational issues in the nonprofit sector. The baby-boom generation is getting close to retirement, and that fact is starting to bubble up as something of a generational conflict. Younger people want room to advance, while older, more experienced workers are thinking both that their younger colleagues haven't earned their stripes and

that their own pensions aren't big enough to retire on. Many of the nonprofit leaders who will be forced to retire in the next five years lost a lot of their pensions in the dot-com bust and subsequent stock market decline. The sector needs to help those people find ways to share their knowledge and experience with the next generation and, at the same time, to help them find a way to retire.

PND: Are you suggesting some kind of employment-in-retirement scenario?

RS: That's one of the things that needs to be thought about, because you'll never make room for new people to come into the sector if the folks nearing the end of their career cannot or won't leave. There's a real opportunity here for learning across the generations — to deal with today's issues and prevent them from becoming tomorrow's problems. Some foundations have initiated positive approaches to this problem. For instance, the Annie E. Casey Foundation surveyed their grantees about their leadership on this issue and learned that a large percentage of their grantees had founding or long-time executive

directors who were considering retirement in the next five years. In response to that finding, Casey set up a program to provide free transition consultation to any grantee facing the imminent loss of a long-term executive. Other stories like this are starting to come get more attention.

PND: Will the influx of a new generation of foundation and nonprofit leaders accelerate changes already happening in the field?

RS: I imagine it will. I think a new generation of leaders will bring new styles, sensitivities, structures, and learning styles with them. I think we'll see more holistic approaches to effective social change, looking across communities-of-interest, issue silos, etc. I also hope a new generation of leaders brings more boldness, innovation, and a balance between process and impact to the field.

PND: What are some of the strengths you see in the up and coming generation of foundation leaders?

RS: I don't want to brag about my generation, but I think we're great! There's a commitment in many of our members to be more proactive in addressing or re-addressing issues of race and class. Of course, they're building on decades of work put in by previous generations, but I think today's twenty- and thirty-somethings are more comfortable working across different social boundaries.

I also think the next generation of foundation and nonprofit leaders is more interested in different models of leadership and divisions of labor, such as co-executive directorships and other forms of collective leadership. Our generation seems to have a true commitment to rethinking the existing power dynamics in the field.

PND: What are your goals for EPIP over the next three to five years, and how will you know if you've succeeded?

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RS: I'll start with the most important goal. I hope our Philanthropology workshop series will bridge theory and practice in the foundation field, and will help imbue new foundation professionals with an understanding of the history of foundations in the United States and the traditional power dynamics that have characterized the field. We'd be successful if 50 percent of the people coming through the program left with a better understanding of both that, in turn, helped them improve their grantmaking practices.

Secondly, I hope our work to transform philanthropy will result in a critical mass of young people assuming different, more proactive roles with respect to fundraising, grantmaking, and giving their own money. I think we'll be successful in that if we can deepen and expand the conversations between different groups of people, which, in turn, will translate into better funding opportunities and more effective nonprofit management practices.

Lastly, I would like to see our Generating Change campaign become an important thread in the ongoing conversation of the nonprofit sector, and hope that we'll see the issue of generational leadership transfer in our sector become a staple of industry conferences and newsletters during 2006-2010. We have a window of opportunity here, and we will succeed if hundreds of large and small foundations alike realize it and take action. I'd also like to see safeguards put in place so that future generations don't have to sacrifice retirement at a decent age in order to work in the nonprofit sector.

PND: Sounds like a good idea to me. Well, thanks so much for speaking with us today, Rusty.

RS: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

Emily Robbins, PND's managing editor, spoke with Rusty Stahl earlier this month. For more information on the Newsmakers series, contact Mitch Nauffts, PND Editorial Director, at mfn@fdncenter.org.

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