2014 Nicholas P. Bollman Award Winner
Patricia Jenny, Vice President of Grants
The New York Community Trust

The Power and Art of Grantmaking

Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
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at Jenny’s career path has taken her from protecting the remains of past communities to protecting the futures of existing communities. A history major at Brown University, Jenny went to work for the Massachusetts Historical Commission after graduation, helping communities protect archeological and historical resources. “In Massachusetts, there are historic and archeological resources everywhere. Most publicly financed projects must identify all archaeological and historical resources and make not disturbing them a priority,” she says. “We literally went around the state and worked with different towns, officials, and residents who were active in preserving historic heritage.” The job introduced her to the world of community development in a general sense and spurred her desire to delve more deeply into the field academically and professionally.

Pat chose to pursue city and regional planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she concentrated on housing and community development policy. After working in Washington, D.C., she relocated to San Francisco and became a consultant in Berkeley, doing contract research for the federal government and the state of California. By the time she moved to New York City, she was completely hooked on policy issues and knew she wanted a job in either city government or philanthropy. “I ended up deciding between a job at the New York City Transit Authority and The New York Community Trust. I chose The Trust and started my grantmaking career.” Jenny is now Vice President for Grants at The New York Community Trust (The Trust).

In her 30 years as a grantmaker, she’s seen a lot of changes but believes that “the principles of good grantmaking don’t change.”

“When I started, most foundations were institutions that had been established over the last 50 or more years with permanent endowments or part of the fast-growing field of community foundations, like The Trust. More recently, many individuals who have accumulated wealth in technology or finance at a relatively young age have opted to pursue their philanthropic goals differently. They are not necessarily tied to the idea of a permanent endowment—and instead want to spend-down their philanthropic assets in their or their children’s lifetimes, and maintain a direct role in identifying and ensuring outcomes.”

Applying business principles to grantmaking and nonprofit operations is another shift Jenny has witnessed during her career, with mixed results. “In the early ‘80s, there were a number of people who believed nonprofits should adopt business practices and generate revenue through affiliated
enterprises. My feeling is that although all nonprofits should be managed efficiently and effectively, business principles aren’t necessarily the best way to resolve some of society’s thorniest issues, many of which generate from poverty. Partnerships between the public and philanthropic sectors, however, do present opportunities for addressing some of society’s vexing problems of inequality, environmental protection, or public health.”

The Real Power of Grantmaking

Jenny believes that much of the real power of grantmaking lies in collaboration. “You can identify an issue and understand that a number of foundations with different approaches can all contribute to tackling the issue,” she says. “They don’t have to step out of their normal way of doing business, but they can pool funds and make a difference and learn from each other. There is great power in that, and it allows the full diversity of philanthropic institutions to participate in attacking a particular issue.”

Her skill at inspiring collaboration was highlighted in her nomination for the 2014 Nicholas P. Bollman Award, which honors the memory of Funders’ Network co-founder and longtime friend Nick Bollman by recognizing leaders in the field who advance thoughtful and progressive solutions to a variety of contemporary problems.

“Her interdisciplinary thinking and focus on collaboration across sectors and geographies is at the heart of Jenny’s work,” reads her nomination.

“Jenny inspires other funders to join with her in collaborative grantmaking,” it continues, citing Jenny’s founding roles in the New York City Workforce Funders (housed at The Trust), Local Sustainability Matching Fund, and One Region Funders’ Group (both staffed by the Funders’ Network). “Her early embrace of an interdisciplinary, regional approach to creating healthy places puts her among the thought leaders in philanthropy.”

Indeed, The Trust has a long history of collaboratives, such as the Fund for New Citizens, founded at The Trust in 1987 as a joint foundation effort to help immigrants in New York City. Collaboration, Jenny says, can also help foundations address sensitive or complex issues.

For instance, in 1989, The Trust formed a funder group, the New York City AIDS Fund, in response to the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. At that time, AIDS was heavily stigmatized,
misinformation about the disease was rampant, and many of its sufferers and their advocates were ostracized. “The Trust was one of the first foundations to make grants to address the AIDS epidemic,” Jenny says. “A lot of foundations were squeamish about that so they could make a grant to The Trust instead.” The Fund, now winding down, has awarded approximately $19 million in grants to 180 nonprofits located throughout New York City’s five boroughs.

One of today’s complex subjects is jobs, something The Trust and its Workforce Development Fund, a 12-year-old collaborative of 40 foundations and corporate philanthropies, is navigating. “The 2008 recession and loss of jobs were huge,” Jenny says. “As the jobs come back economy-wide, they are being created at the very top—for those who are highly skilled and highly compensated—and they’re being created at the bottom—jobs with very little pay and no benefits. You can’t live on them. This is an area The Trust is really focusing on. How do we create better jobs and, in the words of Bill Clinton, make work pay, while at the same time preparing the least skilled job seekers for jobs that can support a family?”

Jenny identifies another complex issue getting attention: expanding public health interventions for diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension that go beyond medical care to encompass active living, diet, and lifestyle, and environmental and community concerns. She sees it as another area ripe for collaboration. “We are investigating a place-based healthy community initiative in the South Bronx and have found a number of other funders going down the same path for the same neighborhood.”

She’s looking forward to meeting the challenge. “I have the most fun doing cross-program initiatives,” she says.

**Get Out and Talk to Everyone**

Part of Jenny’s current work at The Trust is managing a $40 million grants program and a grantmaking staff of ten, including seasoned professionals and those newer to the field. “New grantmakers know a lot about a subject,” she says, “and now they have to learn the art of grantmaking. New grantmakers need to understand they really are in a privileged position as ‘bankers’ for the nonprofits. The funded organizations are the ones on the front lines doing the actual work, obviously, but funders direct the resources and can also become good advisors.”
She recommends that new grantmakers “get out and talk to everyone. Get out and talk to nonprofits, get out and talk to government, get out and talk to fellow foundation colleagues, and you’ll end up being the most informed person out there.”

There’s also a tension to grantmaking that Jenny is careful to point out. “There is an art to learning to respect a grantee—answer their emails, return their phone calls, provide as much information as you can—while maintaining the kind of distance that allows you to make objective decisions on a competitive basis. The best grantmakers in New York City, that’s what they do day after day—make one judgment call after another. The skill of grantmaking is really an art, not a science—making the choices about the best organizations out there to get done what needs to get done.”

She also recommends grantmakers make sure they stay grounded in reality. “You have to learn you’re everybody’s best friend and it doesn’t really mean anything. You’re not really their friend. In fact, I advise that grantmakers get involved in something where they have to go raise money. I think that’s really important. It keeps you humble. It’s very important to understand how hard it is to ask for money. You can really lose your perspective on that.”

Being awarded the 2014 Bollman Award brings Jenny almost full circle with the Funders’ Network (TFN). She worked with Nick Bollman when they co-chaired the Neighborhood Funders Group in its early all-volunteer days. Later, she championed and supported TFN, serving on its board from 2002-2008. “I personally have always enjoyed affinity groups,” she says. She currently serves on the steering committee for the Health & Environmental Funders Network and on the board of Environmental Grantmakers Association.

Her work today continues to resonate within the TFN framework, “We are revising our environmental grants guidelines with the intention of addressing global climate change, habitat, and environmental health issues through a strategy grounded in smart growth and Funders’ Network principles,” she says. “Our whole purpose is to create more livable communities.”

By Amy Rutledge
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