

## **Reflections on the Practice of Diversity and Inclusiveness**

Remarks by Spruiell White on being named the 2011 Recipient of the  
8th Annual Handy L. Lindsey, Jr. Award and Lecture on Inclusiveness in Philanthropy  
March 8, 2011

It was near the end of my first year of employment with the Chicago Jobs Council in 1990 when the organization faced an all too familiar crisis for small, nonprofit groups—we had run out of money. There were several pending grants but none that promised relief quick enough to address the impending payroll, rent or other fixed monthly obligations that were coming due.

With trepidation I called a small, local funder from whom we received modest annual support to learn if an emergency grant could be made to see us through three months of operation, until a much larger sustaining grant was awarded. I was not hopeful knowing that the request did not fit any funding category, was out-of-cycle with their grant schedule and would represent an additional award to an already funded grantee in the same budget year. Surprisingly, the grant officer heard me out, understood that the pending, larger grant would represent a pivot point in CJC's development and offered this solution: "If you can get your program officer at the other foundation to call me, indicate that it seems reasonably certain CJC would be awarded the larger grant within the next three months, then I would be willing to approve and quickly expedite your request." Amazed and heartened by his response, I contacted the other grant maker, explained the situation and asked if she would do that. Without much hesitation, she said sure. By the end of the following week, CJC received a \$10,000 check from the first funder and three months later the promised \$300,000 dollar grant from the second one.

I wanted to start my remarks this evening by telling this story because it is the experiential context through which I have come to understand and embrace the value of diversity and inclusiveness in the practice of philanthropy. This story and a few others I would like to share have been the guideposts, touchstones, lessons if you will, that have informed my fifteen years of work in the field.

So in addition to thanking the Committee and CAAIP members for this signal honor of being chosen your 2011 recipient, I would also like to thank Handy Lindsey in whose name the award is given and who was the guy I called back in 1990 when he headed the Field Foundation and saved a then fledgling organization from its likely demise. As well, I would like to thank Kavita Ramdas, the second grant maker in my story, who was then my program officer at the MacArthur Foundation.

For me, the deeply imprinted lessons from the story are these: (1) sometimes in philanthropic practice it is OK to bend the rules when doing so helps advance your strategic interests or priorities. Handy and Kavita were not personal friends of mine and I had only been with CJC for less than a year. What they saved and sustained was a small, volunteer-driven advocacy organization that over a course of four years prior had made important impacts on the development of better employment policies and practices for low-income Chicago residents. (2) What they also knew and acted on was the value of making investment in a promising organization that was experiencing growing pains. (3) The last lesson for me is that Handy and Kavita were there. They were not the only CJC funders at the time but the only ones with whom I felt comfortable enough to make those embarrassing calls.

Candidly, the comfort was based on the superficiality of shared ethnicity. Not just the fact that like me, they were people of color (but that was pretty significant then and today when in spite of increasing diversity in world class cities like Chicago that rich diversity is not fully

reflected in the workplace) but more important because they made special efforts to be accessible and welcoming to all comers in their work. And I think it is because at some point in their past lives they had felt unwelcome and made a promise not to be that way when they arrived at decision-making assignments in their careers. Being able to see someone in philanthropy like you is an encouragement and serves as an incentive for underrepresented groups.

*Diversity is not a burden to be carried or a problem to be solved; it is the best hope we have for our future as a strong, resilient and worthy nation. By building on our diverse assets, organized philanthropy can be the architect for strategic investments that promote the common good--Steve Gunderson, President, Council on Foundations*

Next, I would like to talk about diversity in hiring. I once explained to a manager that my reason for resigning from the organization's Diversity Committee after a few years of service was because: "I didn't come there to be a member of the Diversity Police. If as the organization espoused in its marketing materials that it was an Equal Opportunity Employer, the evidence would be reflected in the composition of its workforce not in the pronouncements and monitoring activities of a voluntary staff committee with no hiring authority!" I was pretty fed up at the time because the committee dutifully lamented the lack of diverse hiring from year-to-year without seeing any significant change in workforce diversity.

What I eventually came to recognize was that most hiring was not about race but rather about relationship and that those with hiring authority had few diverse relationships from which to draw information or knowledge about who might be successfully employed if culturally different from themselves. Worse, while there was strong belief and acceptance of the equal hiring principle, no one with that authority was held accountable for making it happen.

I also realized that my impatience with committee processes aside; there is value in deploying a number of tactics and approaches in addressing the issue of diversity and inclusiveness. Here, the lesson is to choose a method that is most compatible with your own sensibilities, manner and approach. If not the diversity committee at your place of employment maybe a better option would be the diversity task force at the Donors Forum, CAAIP membership, The Council of Foundations, Independent Sector or the numerous local, regional and national forums and gatherings that offer opportunities to become engaged and provide thoughtful advice about ways to improve policy and practice within institutions and across sectors. This, in reality, is the only way for real progress to develop in our field. Individuals have to commit themselves to take active, voluntary initiative in the areas where it is most logical and comfortable for them to do so.

In my journey toward philanthropy, I have benefitted enormously from several individuals who took such initiative on my behalf. Don't get me wrong. It's not like a bunch of influential people in the field got together in 1990 to decide who would be the best consensus candidate for the next open spot in a foundation. Instead, they were individuals like Handy and Kavita, Kay Wilson, Bill Lowry, Janice Bennett, Unmi Song, Greg Darneider, Henry English, Amina Dickerson, John Foster Bey--all who over the years responded favorably to my calls, not always for money but frequently with good advice or referral to another resource. Individuals who invited me to attend meetings within their networks, or who took special pains when I visited their offices to introduce me to other foundation colleagues--in retrospect, they helped lay the path for my eventual acceptance as a successful candidate for employment in the field.

A particular person stands out in my recollection as an exemplar of the power of such individual effort. In mid-1993 I was invited by Pat Dowell (working then in the planning department) to serve on the city's inaugural Empowerment Zone Commission, a wildly diverse

body of advisors charged by then Mayor Daley to develop the city's comprehensive plan to compete for one of six \$100 million dollar grants to be awarded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Many in the audience may remember this Clinton-era program and others who served on that first Commission, notably Marta White and Wanda White, who made indelible marks on philanthropy and community organizing in this city and who sadly have left us too soon.

Chicago's Empowerment Zone Plan, which the Commission wrangled over for nearly six months included 200,000 residents in three non-contiguous areas on the City's West, near Southwest, and South Sides. Prior to submitting the plan to the City Council and Mayor for approval, the Commission struggled over its recommendation about governance and the balance of power between community residents, city officials and business representatives. A compromise was slowly being forged among members when we were told that our deliberations must end and that the unfinished plan would be forwarded to the Mayor and City Council. Many of us were outraged by the action and I wrote a passionate letter of protest, which neither reversed the decision nor halted the pace with which the Mayor and City Council went on to approve a final plan that included a governance structure that granted majority voting right status to city representatives.

Within a week of sending off my furious missive I received a call from a woman who asked if I would be willing to meet with her boss about the letter. I agreed and soon thereafter was talking with the Vice President of a major Chicago foundation about what I perceived as the city's heavy-handed tactics in the alleged "bottoms-up" planning process sponsored by the Clinton-Gore administration. By way of introduction she explained that she had been impressed with my complaint and wondered if I would have any objection to her sending my letter on to one of her friends in the White House. I did not object but nothing ever came of it as I suspected.

What did happen eight months later was an offer of employment from Rebecca Riley at the MacArthur Foundation to join her Community Initiatives program, where I would work alongside Susan Motley for a number of years—Susan the person who graciously exposed me to her world of work and social networks and who passed on a letter to her boss written by an angry guy long before any offer of employment was on the table. As a footnote, the person who wielded the mayor's act of closure on the commission's unfinished debate about governance, in her role then as director of the city's planning department, has fully redeemed herself in my opinion with the overture she made to a young, Black female attorney and her husband, Barak. So please Ms. Jarrett, forgive the comments I made about you in that letter 17 years ago when I questioned the efficacy of your leadership and commitment to the empowerment struggles of Chicago's poor.

Along with the accumulated experience of working in the field and being available to learn from others, another important ingredient in becoming an effective agent of diversity and inclusiveness is to constantly follow the evolution of new thinking. Years ago I made a copy of an interview with Emmett Carson when he headed the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and retrieved it as I began preparing for tonight's discussion with you. I was particularly moved by his answer to the interviewer's question whether increased philanthropic effectiveness would result when there were more diverse constituencies and stakeholders involved in foundation decision-making? In response he said:

*“ . . . If the people around the table are more homogenous in their experiences and perspectives, whatever the apparent diversity of their backgrounds, the philanthropic process remains limited and invites still less than perfect outcomes. The eyes that read and assess the proposals foundations consider are key—not just in their physical properties, but also in their experiential and perceptual characteristics. You need people at the table who can actually say I know those people. I know the history of that community. Foundation leaders concerned with effectiveness ought to assure themselves that they’ve got diverse eyes and perspectives—not merely the appearance of diversity, not just the numerical appearance of difference, but rather the reality of experiential breadth that extends beyond their own identity group or class.”*

*Interview conducted by Henry A.J. Ramos, Diversity in Philanthropy Project Director, January 2008.*

Mr. Carson’s admonition provides the perfect segue way for me to conclude these remarks by recognizing the contribution of many others from outside philanthropy who have patiently schooled me and given depth to my understanding about what it means to be both diverse and inclusive in pursuing a socially responsive agenda. In all the areas of concern to us, poor people, people of color and other historically excluded groups are deeply implicated both for their needs and for their under-tapped assets and potential to help address the key challenges facing our society. What I want is for our profession as a whole to assume responsibility for promoting a mission that compels us to embrace and advance diversity and inclusivity wherever our core interests happen to focus—the arts, race, class, environment, disabilities, education, sexual identity, employment, housing or aging.

And when that happens you’ll find as I have that there are hundreds of people who can educate and guide you to better strategies and outcomes. I am deeply indebted to Jody Raphael who explained the horrors of domestic violence to me; Anne Ladky who provided the primer on career mobility for women; John Plunkett and his innovative work in helping inner-city residents access suburban jobs; Evette Cardona and Roberto Roquero who powerfully remind us of the needs of the LGBT community, John Bowman, Alex Polikoff, Wendy Polluk, Bob Wordlaw, Lauren Sugarman, Jackie Reed, Aurie Pennick, Sokoni Karanja, Michael Bennett, Sunny Fisher, Iris Kreig—well the list is endless. Thank you all for favoring my career with your wisdom and support and helping philanthropy continue to do the right thing for the right reasons.

On a more personal note, I would be remiss to not mention: the ever reliable support staff at MacArthur who eased the burden of administrative processes and helped grantees navigate the complexities of philanthropy—Janice, Michelle, Louise and Carlene; or the group of guys, self-named the Mac Fellas’, who helped preserved each others’ mental health when needed—Steve, Gerry, Herman, Craig, Fabio, Marshall, Jacquet, Mijo and Nigel. Last, of course, and most important is Nedra, my lovely spouse of 39 years who in spite of her persistent skepticism that there was no job in our capitalist society that enabled me to give money away, was always happy that I enjoyed going to work.

I am flattered to receive this honor and generally feel undeserving given the accomplishments of past recipients, their rise to prominence in the field and impact on the issues of diversity and inclusiveness. CAAIP says that The Handy L. Lindsey, Jr. Award & Lecture on Inclusiveness in Philanthropy is an important part of its mission by honoring a colleague in the field who has demonstrated unwavering dedication as a champion for racial and ethnic diversity and inclusiveness in philanthropy. I have taken your time this evening to remind you that

whatever merit you may have seen in my career was built around the examples set by others who came before me in philanthropy and respect for the wisdom of those in the field who originate the good ideas and execute the practices that attract foundation investment.

*Valerie Lies, President of the Donors Forum of Chicago once said that “. . .Organized philanthropy achieves its highest purposes and its most significant work when it is guided by openness, inclusiveness, accessibility, ethical conduct and sensitivity to society’s growing diversity”.*

I could not have expressed it better. Thank you, again, and goodnight.