



On Jerome and Retirement: From Outgoing President Ben Cameron

ST. PAUL, MN, September 26, 2022

After almost 40 years spent in the arts—including more than 25 years spent in grantmaking through service organizations or at government, corporate and private Foundations—I was lucky in 2015 to be invited to lead the Jerome Foundation—a singular opportunity that brought me to a Foundation dedicated entirely to the arts, serving the vibrant communities of Minnesota and New York City.

My time at Jerome has been spent asking questions:

- What if we began not with strategy, but with clear core values from which a strategy would spring?
- What would it mean, not merely to support these values, but to model them and to let them guide us in our own recruitment of our Board and staff?
- Could we build a Board that would broaden its traditional role of oversight to (as Richard Chait has said) embrace insight and foresight as well?
- How could we together harness the specific advantages of permanently endowed foundations to maximally benefit communities?
- Could we reconfigure our processes, our eligibility, our relationships to more deeply and equitably connect to and embrace the multiple communities around us?
- How might our connections with the world shift if we saw the role of grantmaker, not as judge/assessor/evaluator, but as facilitator/ listener/synthesizer?
- Could we prioritize aligned values and already demonstrated achievement in determining grantees?
- What would happen if we allowed grantees to deploy funds, not in conformity with what we had pre-determined was important but in line with what grantees themselves told us they most needed?
- And what if we set aside change theories and grants designed to help grantees do new things, and instead supported to the fullest extent possible those already living the changes in the world we hoped to see?



Photo courtesy of
Green Box Festival

There have been some painful moments along the way, not every question has been answered successfully, of course, and some are even now only being cracked open. But my hope is that these questions have cultivated a culture of curiosity, possibilities and reimagining, have produced positive change and have been of value, not only to the Foundation, its board and its staff, but to the larger communities in which we exist.

In this journey, I have been the beneficiary of the patience and hard work and passion of a lean and mighty staff; the dedication, commitment and zealous protection of Jerome Hill's legacy by our Members of the Jerome Foundation; and the generousities of time and wisdom and counsel of our board, our extraordinary, delicious, wonderful board—led at different moments by Charlie Zelle, Philip Bither, Linda Earle and Kate Barr, each a brilliant, brilliant chair. To all of these, I owe more than I can ever begin to say.

I have always been leery of the seductive power of professional grantmaking and have believed that periodic—and relatively frequent—turnover in leadership positions can refresh the field in a way that is good for the individual leader, a foundation and philanthropy writ large. Now the world around me and my own biological clock are telling me it is time (perhaps past time) for me to step down—and so I do, in the belief that the search ahead will bring out the deepest and best in our Foundation, in confidence that my successor will bring their own extraordinary, unique and by necessity thrillingly different perspective to the work ahead; and in hopes that the staff, Members, Board, the artists, the arts organizations and the communities that comprise our world will accord them the same generosity in supporting curiosity, experimentation and growth that they all have accorded me.

Even though I am leaving, I still and will always believe that the arts are essential to our existence, and that the world today has never needed them more. It has been an honor to have been of service to the extraordinary artists, administrators, technicians and organizations I have had the joy of knowing throughout my career. I only hope that I have been useful to them in some way at some time, that something I have done reflects and honors the myriad ways they have enriched my life, and that none will not hesitate to call if I can ever be useful to them in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. E.', written in a cursive style.