

As delivered

**Remarks at Acceptance of Paul Ylvisaker Award
Council on Foundations
Toronto
April 27, 2004
Stephen Heintz**

Thank you very much. The board and staff of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund are both honored and challenged by this very meaningful award. Honored by your recognition of our work to shape public policy. And challenged, as we look forward, to live up to the high standards of philanthropy that Paul Ylvisaker set 40 years ago.

This award means a great deal to all of us at the RBF but it recognizes, in particular, the outstanding work of Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas, who directs our New York City grantmaking.

Ben began his philanthropic career in 1987 at the William Randolph Hearst Foundations, where he worked on education, human services, and arts & culture. He has been with the RBF for eight years and directs our multi-disciplinary grants program in New York City which links our interests in Democratic Practice, Sustainable Development, and Human Advancement. Ben is a truly innovative grantmaker as well as a real community leader. This award is well deserved recognition of his creativity, his clear, strategic thinking, and his commitment to grass roots activism as an engine of public policy innovation.

Ben and I agree, however, that the award really belongs to the four grantees who

have done the hard work: the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, Environmental Advocates, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, and the Pratt Institute's New Partners for Community Revitalization.

This award is recognition of their joint efforts to tackle the problem of abandoned brownfields that have blighted New York City neighborhoods for decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, every industrial state except New York moved forward with programs to encourage the reclamation and reuse of brownfield sites. In New York, the competing stakeholders and political powers couldn't reach consensus on how to solve this major urban problem.

These four community-based organizations and the RBF worked together over five years to break the logjam. When Governor Pataki signed the brownfields legislation, it was hailed as the most significant environmental law passed in New York State in more than twenty years. On behalf of all of us at the RBF, I salute Jody Kass of New Partners for Community Revitalization who is with us here this evening, and her many colleagues who are not, for their drive, energy, and determination in turning a stale debate into a path-breaking solution.

The RBF is honored to join the list of those who have won this award in past years. But this award, and the legacy of the man for whom it is named, are also a challenge for RBF and for all of us. For Paul Ylvisaker believed not just in effective philanthropy, but in philanthropy that changed public policy and changed society itself. His legacy represents the highest standard of what we can achieve – and what we must

attempt.

We don't have time tonight to cover the breadth of Ylvisaker's extraordinary career. But just consider his ten years at the Ford Foundation, when the public affairs department he ran created an urban renewal program that became the blueprint for President Johnson's War on Poverty, at the same time as it supported other public policy initiatives that changed the lives of a generation of Americans: Head Start, children's educational television, and VISTA, to name only a few.

But I wonder... if a 21st-century Paul Ylvisaker came to me today and said, Stephen, this year we should fund major new initiatives to reverse global warming, to eliminate the democracy deficit here at home, and help the UN to reach the Millennium Development Goals – and each of these initiatives is going to require substantial advocacy efforts in Washington– I wonder what I would say, what any of us would say.

Wouldn't I be tempted to say, now Paul, we have to be careful. Those are awfully big commitments. You know how nervous the Board is about big untested programs. We just can't afford to risk a major public failure. And as far as Washington advocacy is concerned, the last thing we want to be doing right now is attracting anyone's attention in our nation's capital. What with the media stories about mismanagement and financial abuses at some foundations, and legislative efforts to rein us in... no, we need to stay under the radar, fund the things we know are working, and wait until the environment is more positive.

Of course, if Paul Ylvisaker and his generation of reformers – and the foundations that courageously supported them – had waited until the environment was more positive, there might have been no Head Start, no War on Poverty, no civil rights movement, and no environmental movement.

Every foundation here has its star performers, -- its innovative grantees and entrepreneurial program officers who are generating new ideas and influencing public policy beyond the individual communities where they work. The past recipients of this award offer profuse inspiration.

But a night like this one is a good moment to stop and ask ourselves whether we are doing enough, whether we are challenging ourselves enough in a time of complex problems, urgent needs, and considerable peril.

And so as I contemplated the meaning of this award, I asked myself a series of questions.

As globalization, interdependence, and the sheer speed of change challenge the innovations of Paul Ylvisaker's generation, are we at the RBF and in the foundation community today reexamining our assumptions and creating the innovations needed for our times?

As we watched venture capital transform private enterprise over the last decade, have we been as far-sighted as venture capitalists of social innovation?

As government lacks the resources for innovation – and the tolerance for failure – are we ready to support experimentation, to take risk? Or have we forgotten that, in order to achieve new breakthroughs, we must be willing at times to fail?

Are we too prone to funding excellent micro projects rather than broad efforts of transformation? Do we really understand that significant change takes time and that foundations need to have the faith and even the stubbornness to stay the course, even when things may not look promising?

As we find ourselves too often in the news on account of our shortcomings, are we ready to take bold action to improve foundation performance, accountability, and governance? And, are we also prepared to shift public attention where it belongs, by shining a spotlight on what our grantees and we are doing right?

Finally, are we shaping and enabling a healing vision for our times, as Paul Ylvisaker did for his?

I can only speak for the RBF. I am proud of our work. But in these challenging times, I know we must do more.

We can't know whether among us tonight is the person or organization who will light the spark that reverses the decline of American democracy; who will find the 21st-century medium to create real dialogues across party, religion, nationality, and race; who

will lead the advocacy that finally brings quality health care within the reach of all.

We do know two things: first, that if we are not taking risks, and going beyond our comfort zone, we are simply not meeting our mandate. Failure while taking risk is instructive. Failure to take risk will be defeating.

Second, we know that major social change takes place when community and government come together, when we are ready to get our hands dirty in the messy business of public policy. Social change doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens when the innovation and passion of activists, the resources and wide-screen views of foundations, and the implementing machinery of government come together. We in the foundation world are uniquely able to bring those forces together. That means not just offering the round table but supporting – and sometimes leading – the advocacy that convinces all sides to get to the table and get to work.

Paul Ylvisaker was determined to see beyond what was in front of him, and impatient with those who wanted to wait for better circumstances or a clearer picture. “Don't wait for a master weaver to design your life,” he once said.

This award commemorates the work of many, many people to bring together disparate threads and knit them into a valued fabric of community for New York City. It challenges me, and perhaps all of us, to find and fund the transformative movements of our times and the people who are already weaving among us.

Thank you.

