

informed *Philanthropy*

Sparking innovative ideas, forging lasting collaborations, and shaping creative grant making. Glen Putman reports on his conversation with some experts in “grassroots” grantmaking.

PORTRAIT BY JACK HUTCHESON

Hillsborough resident Duncan Beardsley turned his four decades of travel experience and wanderlust into a philanthropic endeavor that benefits disadvantaged people in far-flung countries like Burma, Peru, and Zambia. Larry Purcell grew up in a wealthy family in San Francisco and, like his eight siblings, attended college and graduate school. Now, without the aid of any government funds, he helps the very poor and needy from a small house in Redwood City. And Sister Trinitas Hernandez runs the Rosalie Rendu Center in East Palo Alto. “We’re here to help families realize that they are in charge of their lives and they can better themselves through education,” she says.

The common link between these three different individuals and their charitable work is Bill Somerville, Founder and Executive Director of Philanthropic Ventures Foundation (PVF) in Oakland. Somerville has been a self-styled “maverick” grantmaker for 48 years, including 17 years as executive director of the Peninsula Community Foundation, then headquartered in San Mateo.

Although currently residing in the East Bay, he maintains his Peninsula connection by teaching courses on philanthropy at Stanford and is on the advisory board for the Haas Center for Public Service there. Since founding PVF in 1991, Somerville and dozens of others from the Peninsula have forged partnerships that have distributed over \$50 million in grants to truly needy people. “We fund the little guy,” says Somerville.

In March, Somerville’s new book, *Grassroots Philanthropy: Notes of a Maverick Grantmaker*, was released. The book details the defining principles of PVF’s brand of “humanist” philanthropy. Purcell calls Somerville, “very hands on, very creative.”



Bill Somerville and Duncan Beardsley

"The smaller the grant, the quicker it should be made."

—BILL SOMERVILLE

The Peninsula is well represented on the PVF board of directors by John P. Carver, Jackie Speier, and Duncan Beardsley, all from Hillsborough; William Green and Colburn Wilbur of Palo Alto; and Albert Horn from San Mateo.

Beardsley met Somerville about six years ago while serving as Director for the Stanford Alumni Travel/Study program, leading trips to third world countries. "The idea and need for Generosity in Action (GiA)—travelers helping in developing countries—came when I discovered that there was no easy way to accomplish the traveler's wish to give back," says Beardsley, who founded and heads up GiA.

By 2002, Beardsley, a Stanford alumni, had spent 35 years in the travel industry, which included serving as president of Seabourn Cruise Line. He had the foreign ground operators and domestic tour operators in place, and after connecting with Somerville, the first donations started pouring into PVF. "I found that if a traveler's donation could be tax deductible, the amount they would offer was far greater," says Beardsley. "Ambassador Bill Lane, former publisher of Sunset and friend from my many years in the travel industry, suggested that if anyone could accomplish my goal, Bill Somerville was the person," Beardsley recalls. "One phone call to Bill and I had the program under way."

From providing textbooks to tiny villages in the jungles of the Amazon to digging wells in remote Burma and constructing schools in Zambia, GiA has touched the lives of needy people through the stimulus of travel. Philanthropic Ventures Foundation acts as the fiscal depository for over 40 designated funds (like the GiA Fund), set up for projects that do not yet have their tax-exempt status, but are eager to commence their charitable work.

"It seems to me that philanthropy is an eight cylinder engine and we usually only use four . . ."

—BILL SOMERVILLE

Somerville describes their foundation as a public charity that brings in money from different sources, be it corporation, foundations, or individuals. "Virtually every grant approved is funded within 48 hours. We move quickly," he understates, adding that The Packard Foundation is a good example of one of their supporters. "They have a staff of 120, but we specialize in is grass roots grantmaking," he explains. "They gave us some money and said 'spend it on education.' We sent a notice to 44,000 teachers in the Bay Area and said, 'If you'd like \$500 for excursions, science supplies, arts equipment, let us know.'" Requests poured in and within 48 hours, they sent checks out to these needy schools. Somerville adds that, through this "Fax Grant Program," they have given some \$4 million to 6,800 teachers in seven Bay Area counties and that the Packard Foundation is delighted. "They used us to get some things done that they couldn't do," he says.

To say the least, Somerville has the "can do" spirit. "We customize giving for donors . . . if someone wants to do something exciting, we're probably the place to come. That is, we'll create a program for them, find someone else who is doing it, or talk someone into varying their program so it can do what the donor wants to do."

To make a difference, mail donations to Philanthropic Ventures Foundation, 1222 Preservation Park Way, Oakland, California, 94612-1201. For more information on how to also contribute to Generosity in Action, go to www.generosityinaction.org.



Larry Purcell, Sister Trinitas Hernandez, the Honorable Jackie Speier, and Bill Somerville

PHOTO: GLEN PUTNAM

HERE'S WHAT PHILANTHROPIC VENTURES FOUNDATION DOES FOR OUR COMMUNITY AND BEYOND.

Founded in 1991, PVF is a 501(c)(3) public charity, and annually offers some \$5 million in grants, from 2,000 donors to 2,500 recipients. Here are some examples of where the money goes:

CALIFORNIA SCHOLASTIC JOURNALISM INITIATIVE

High school journalism gives students a voice in the community and showcases their abilities. But the presses are stopping at many California high schools, as fewer journalism teachers are trained, mentored, and supported in their work. This initiative's mission is to rebuild the moribund infrastructure in high school newspaper programs—with recent work in East Palo Alto and throughout the Peninsula.

TAKE HOME BOOK PROGRAM

Now in its 10th year, this program implemented in 3,000 Bay Area classrooms increases literacy skills in K – 2nd grade students so that they may develop into engaged, independent readers prepared for academic success. The program also educates parents about their children's reading development.

CATHOLIC WORKER HOUSE

Founded by Larry Purcell in 1975, the Catholic Worker House of Redwood City serves the needs of the very poor, basing the program on the Catholic Worker model: No one is paid to work, and no one is charged for services. The Catholic Worker House runs a home for troubled teens, a food

program for the hungry, a breakfast program for day laborers, and an English language school for immigrant women. "We don't take government money because it's too cumbersome," says Purcell, "Bill [Somerville] is out in the community, and he's willing to take a risk."

TEACHER MINI-GRANTS

This grant put musical instruments, paintbrushes, science kits, and classroom resources into the hands of local students through \$2 million in Arts and Science Teacher Mini-Grants, all delivered in 48 hours.

JUVENILE JUDGES PROGRAM

This program serves the critical needs of foster children through \$500,000 in grants recommended by Juvenile Court judges, social workers, and court-appointed special advocates. "Philanthropic Ventures Foundation has made my job as a juvenile court judge much more satisfying," says former Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Leonard Edwards. "The support that PVF provides on an individualized basis for the abused and neglected children in my court brightens my day and makes the lives of these children much more livable."

PARENT INVOLVEMENT WORKER PROGRAM

PVF created a program that places recent ESL graduates as bilingual workers in the classroom to ease the language barrier and improve communications between teachers and parents in East Palo Alto. ■