

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Viewpoint
Transformative Philanthropy for Racial Justice
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VIEWPOINT

Transformative Philanthropy for Racial Justice

We created the Democracy Frontlines Fund to enable experienced anti-racist organizers to do their crucial work. They taught us how to do philanthropy better.

BY CRYSTAL HAYLING

In May 2020, a video of a white police officer in Minneapolis kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, until he suffocated went viral. I was shook. Shook is not to be confused with shock, which is surprise. White people were shocked. Black people were shook—that deep, existential awareness of our otherness in America.

I've worked in philanthropy through other catastrophic racial injustices, including the 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers and the uprising that followed their acquittal, the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, and the countless other Black people murdered by racism. Each time, if the story stayed above the fold long enough to elicit a response, foundation leaders would form committees, commission studies, and maybe move a few grants to universities or white-led think tanks that presented beautiful PowerPoints.

I needed this time to be different. And this time, I was in a position to try to do something different. I told my board at The Libra Foundation that I wanted to create a fund that would live up to its grantmaking principles—including that those closest to an issue understand that issue best—and invite other foundations to join us in moving money and building a learning lab together. The board and my team agreed, and we encouraged each other to dig deep, past what seemed possible, to do the things we knew to be essential. We held to the following truths to guide the design of what came to be the Democracy Frontlines Fund (DFF):

- Anti-Black racism was the fodder fueling authoritarian leaders seeking to enshrine injustice and inequality.
- Anti-Black racism in philanthropy starves Black-led groups of vital resources.
- Anti-Black racism is the cancer destroying our country from the inside out.
- Black organizers were the leaders putting themselves on the front lines of saving our democracy from the compounding pandemics of COVID-19 and authoritarianism.

The Democracy Frontlines Fund had to ring a loud bell for philanthropy to course-correct. It needed to fund Black organizers with substantial unencumbered funds in a way that shifted power from the privileged to experts on the

ground. It needed to build partnerships based on trust. And it needed to create an ongoing community of practice to learn together with our grantee partners.

With these key elements in mind, I started calling philanthropic leaders to tell them about our vision. Some leaders said no or ghosted me after the initial conversation, because they were too uncomfortable with DFF's approach. Many of them went on to commit resources to large donor-directed funds that stayed within their comfort zone of power and control. But the open, brave, and strong response by others surprised me. Leaders at 11 more foundations stepped up very quickly to meet the moment. Within eight weeks, we gathered \$36 million in multiyear, unrestricted commitments for groups at the front lines of the fight for our democracy. It represented a new form of philanthropy responding to the communities we serve by removing barriers and red tape.

DEMOCRACY AND ANTI-RACISM

The Democracy Frontlines Fund innovated in several key ways. First, funders committed to three years up front to a slate of 10 grantees that would be selected not by them but by the fund's brain trust—a powerful group of Black women and women of color we asked to join, because they brought decades of collective experience and insight to this task. By departing from standard philanthropic practice, the fund acknowledged that those with decades of expertise in funding frontline organizers were better positioned to decide how to rapidly deploy essential resources in the struggle for social justice.

Second, DFF defined democracy from the perspective of those most systematically excluded from it. Despite COVID-19, police brutality, and violent counterprotesters, Black Lives Matter organizers showed how the movement's mission is foundational to



- Anti-Black racists must be stopped from killing Black people.

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The DFF funders are Crankstart, Kelson, and Loud Hound foundations; Tao Rising; the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; the Kataly Foundation; the Rockefeller Brothers

Fund; Sobrato Philanthropies; the Someland Foundation; The Libra Foundation; the Schmidt Family Foundation; the Wend Collective; the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; and an anonymous donor.

all other efforts to improve our democracy's functioning.

Third, becoming actively anti-racist in philanthropy requires space for deep reflection and learning. In an early DFF convening, our facilitator and guide on our learning journey, Tynesha McHarris, challenged our philanthropic partners to "go to the places where you are nervous." In discussing Black-led organizing, she said, we must collectively define "what kind of power is required to build the democracy we say we want and know we need." Cliff Albright of Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute, a DFF grantee, invoked the lessons of Black history in challenging funders to "give the keys to the car" to Black organizations that are building power.

In our DFF journey, we are learning that funding organizing efforts will force us—not our grantees and partners in this work—to change in profound ways. We are examining the history of oppression, how white supremacy has impacted our communities, and how organizers on the front lines have built trust and relationships as "the infrastructure of power-building," as Albright describes it.

Three grantee organizers are among many who have inspired us as we go through a process that McHarris calls "strategizing and learning together." They are: LaTosha Brown, cofounder of Black Voters Matter; Alicia Garza, a cofounder of Black Lives Matter who also started the Black Futures Lab; and Dara Cooper, the national organizer of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA). Their attributes as leaders are guideposts for our grantmaking: centering leadership in community, sharpness and clarity of purpose, radical artistry and creativity around strategy and tactics, and resilience in the face of adversity and oppression.

Brown's origins in segregated Alabama have enlightened her about how voter intimidation tactics would land on Black communities and about how to overcome those tactics. Her vision provides DFF with strategic priorities. She outlined them in a press interview: "One, in our work, for voters to always stay in the know, in the information, and aware of what is happening around them. Two, that organizations with an advocacy arm

are well resourced ... and three, an ongoing build-out of the ecosystem of civic groups, of church groups, that do have the capacity to mobilize people."

Garza wrote an important book on organizing: *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*. "Movement building isn't about finding your tribe—it's about growing your tribe across difference to focus on a common set of goals," she writes. "For me, organizing is as much about human connection and building relationships as it is about achieving a political goal." In DFF discussions, she unpacked her philosophy about how to build community power through partnership and ultimately strengthen our democracy.

Cooper helps us understand another historic wrong of racism: the violent removal of Black farmers from their land, resulting in a 98 percent drop in Black land ownership over the past century. As NBFJA's national organizer, she works in a coalition model to focus attention on deliberate and systematic assaults on Black and Indigenous peoples in their ability to steward land and nourish our communities.

Some DFF donors were initially surprised by the inclusion of land justice activists among a democracy slate. But their reaction offers a perfect example of the way in which a funder's analysis may lack insights that community members bring. Property has always been central to determining which Americans gain representation in political life. Cooper has mapped out for us a shared path toward change that includes education, activism, and public policy. As she told *Essence* in 2019: "A lot of the work we're doing is around a collective land trust where we're able to help communities return back to regenerative practices that are in better harmony with the Earth and with each other."

NBFJA joined with Senators Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Cory Booker, D-N.J., to develop the Justice for Black Farmers Act, seeking to offer a path back to the land through federal investments of \$8 billion a year to support land grants to Black farmers. Land defines a community's sovereignty, and food embodies its culture. When those have been stripped

away, by greed and government policy, the very boundaries that shape communities have been taken. In Black Belt states where some of the most egregious land thefts have occurred, not coincidentally, white land and business owners maintain solid locks on elected offices.

FUND, LISTEN, AND LEARN

These are very different narratives of Black organizing in America, but they all reinforce the DFF's goal of disrupting defunct philanthropic practices that reify white, privileged perspectives instead of funding power-building and community-defined solutions. They also show a path forward for philanthropy too often lost in its own preconceptions.

We must move money *first*, then build an intentional practice of learning from the best teachers—our BIPOC grantees with lived experience who are organizing for lasting systemic change. We must invest in ecosystems where vibrant change is already happening, where unrestricted resources provide financial scaffolding to match the network of human connections. Funders need to enter this space with humility, acknowledging that privilege and white supremacy permeate the philanthropy sector, so we are obliged now to school ourselves in anti-racism.

All along the funding journey, we need expert guides for the decisions we make. We need to understand our own blind spots and accept that the people closest to the problem we are trying to solve know the most about how to solve it. Rather than imposing a top-down theory of change, funders need to provide organizers and community-accountable re-grantors (i.e., funding intermediaries) with general operating support. They also need to ask the organizers who else in their network needs support, and provide it with speed and generosity.

If you want to create systemic change, step out of the driver's seat and strap in as a passenger. The requirement is that you listen. The gift is what you'll learn. Toss out your outdated road map. Organizers are prepared to lead us toward a more just America, but funders need to give up the wheel and foot the bill for the fuel. ■