

Murdock Charitable Trust CEO Steve Moore talks waterfront, challenges and local impact

As organization celebrates 40th year, executive director reflects on trust's role

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One year ago this month, the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust made headlines when it was announced as the first official tenant heading to the 32-acre Waterfront Vancouver development, which is now under construction.

We asked Steve Moore, executive director of the Trust, to discuss the reason for the move, the Trust's impact on Southwest Washington, how its grants are awarded, and more.

Q: What factors led to the decision to move to the new waterfront development?

Moore: There were three main factors that led to our decision to move our offices to the new waterfront development. First, we saw it as an opportunity to join with the city, community leaders and others to spur economic development and strengthen the downtown Vancouver core. Second, we believe the location and space improvement will allow us to serve our constituencies in a more effective way for the next season of the Trust's life. Third, Gramor Development made a compelling case for the combination of living, retail, office and related development and what it will bring to the city, the county and the region. We considered several options, but the waterfront seemed to be the best fit for us.

Q: You're one of the largest foundations in the Pacific Northwest, but it seems many people don't know about you. Why is that?

Moore: That's a good question. We're certainly not a secret in the nonprofit community, but outside of those folks I can imagine some people might not be familiar with our efforts. The bulk of what we do is helping behind the scenes to thoughtfully encourage the great work our nonprofit partners are doing. Our mission is to enrich the quality of life in the Pacific Northwest by providing grants and programs to organizations seeking to strengthen the region's educational, spiritual, social and cultural base in creative and sustainable ways. That's a fancy way of saying we catalyze the great work our partners are doing. We empower them in local communities to increase their capacity and effectiveness in fulfilling their missions. We sometimes say "our fruit grows on other people's trees." So, while we're proud of our work in the region, our mission drives us to spend less time telling our own story and more time helping others achieve their missions and effectively serve their communities.

Q: You've been the executive director since 2006. What are you proudest of during your time at the helm of the Murdock Trust?

Moore: The Trust is celebrating its 40th anniversary and began in 1975 with assets of \$91 million. Over the years, these assets have grown to more than \$1 billion, and we've granted more than \$850 million. I'm proudest of the consistent legacy of generosity and stewardship we have sought to cultivate as a foundation and the lives we've touched through our nonprofit partners.

We've invested millions in scientific research. We believe we have helped strengthen both public and private higher education. We support the arts and conservation efforts. We work with diverse organizations and people. We support faith-based initiatives. We have a remarkably gifted and thoughtful team who works creatively, often in the background, to strengthen our broader network of partners across the region. Each one of our lives is touched by schools, nonprofits, churches, synagogues and service organizations in so many ways. We sometimes fail to stop and recognize what a difference these groups make.

Q: What are ways the Trust has impacted Southwest Washington?

Moore: Vancouver is our home and has been throughout our 40-year history. Even though our funding is primarily focused on Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington, we also like to invest in our local community. From our inception through May 2016, the Trust has awarded 172 grants to 88 organizations in Clark County. All told, that's an investment in excess of \$24 million in the Vancouver area alone. But these statistics are more than mere numbers. They represent decades of relationships and commitment to partnering with the good work of our neighbors in Southwest Washington. From the Fort Vancouver Trust, to the Food Bank, to the Boys and Girls Club, to the Free Clinic of Southwest Washington, to the new water sculpture at the Columbia River Park – wow, what great groups doing great work! We are fortunate to be in such a vibrant community.

Q: The Murdock Trust awarded nearly \$52 million in grants in 2015. How do you go about determining where that money goes?

Moore: We like to think about helping organizations build their own capacity to become more effective at accomplishing their missions. We often fund capital projects and programming or equipment grants, all with an emphasis on raising or expanding the reach of our partners. And we have programs that help organizations grow their fundraising, strengthen their boards or improve the effectiveness of their leadership.

Our focus is to enrich the quality of life in the Pacific Northwest by providing grants in education, health and human services, arts and culture and science education and research. That lens guides our thinking and helps us prioritize our partnership opportunities. We also focus on our partners' planning, execution and sustainability and always ask: can the organization operate effectively?

On our website and in our conversations, we talk about what makes for a strong, effective and purposeful organization – it's all about leadership, strategy and people – bringing the mission to life.

Q: Has the Trust funded any business-related programs at local colleges/universities?

Moore: Our funding at local colleges and universities is focused in much of the same way we work across the region. We work with presidents of the schools to identify their highest priority in building their capacity to serve students. Often it is with science research or equipment, technology, learning support or services and sometimes healthcare. You might say we seek to help them do their business better and fulfill their missions. Some recent local grants have been made to Clark College for its dental programs, engineering and science research equipment at WSU Vancouver, a capital grant for a new engineering facility at the University of Portland and a grant for the new Physical Therapy program at George Fox University. Those are a few examples that have business and community implications, as well as workforce training and professional preparation.

Q: Most organizations are trying to make money. Your job is to give it away. What are some of the differences in approach?

Moore: We actually don't give money away. We invest it. Time is money for most businesses and for each of us individually. For us, we take a lot of time when considering a potential grant recipient because we hope to establish ongoing relationships with our partners. We've been given an incredible opportunity and a great responsibility to use our resources to leverage impact across our footprint, the Pacific Northwest.

It is true that we are stewards of more than \$1 billion and have partnered with almost 2,500 nonprofit organizations across Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington. But it is also important to know that foundation giving is only about 14 percent of income for most nonprofits. The largest part is individual donors like you and me. One thing we share in common is that we all love and invest our time and resources in places that make a difference and that we value.

Q: How does the Murdock Charitable Trust approach giving in the midst of heated situations that can get politically polarized down party lines?

Moore: We live in a challenging time, don't we? Public discourse has lost much of its nuance in recent years. Extremism on both sides of the aisle oversimplifies complex topics. It turns important debates into shouting

matches or social media wars. You aren't without the occasional critic when you partner with widely diverse groups with widely diverse views, such as we do.

The Trust respects the right for the public to disagree with our mission or the missions of our grantees. Our nonprofit partners have diverse viewpoints, perspectives and missions. We do not expect every person or organization to approve of every grant we make. In fact, we ourselves do not expect to agree with everything that grant recipients do or say.

We all have much to learn from each other, and civil discourse cultivates that learning and leads to better thinking. We want to encourage elevating the conversation above the fray of reactionary and sensational claims. We love being part of dialogues, and regularly are, about the topics that matter to our communities, incorporating voices from across the spectrum. We have actively done so for many years.

Q: Can you give me some examples of that?

Moore: We have supported and encouraged tough discussions, from identifying solutions in the Klamath River Basin, to homelessness, to increasing graduation rates in underserved populations, to democracy and strengthening first amendment rights, to making healthcare more affordable and accessible and much more. Our role is one of facilitation, focused on helping groups frame and engage in the conversation and work toward thoughtful solutions. Our work is a small part of a bigger effort by educational, business, nonprofit and public leaders to help our community improve and flourish. We are a learning organization, seeking to navigate and contribute to the challenging times in which we live. Special interest or political advocacy groups may not be happy with what we do. We are drawn to work with those who rebuild and renew, unite and reform, serve and inspire families and individuals. We have little time for those who stand on the sidelines and criticize.

Q: Looking at your organization internally, how much succession planning has been done at the Trust?

Moore: We discuss succession planning, professional development and business improvement all the time. We learn from our nonprofit partners, our investment partners and the many relationships with leaders from across the region. We seek to consistently improve our processes and practices. Recent additions of two new program directors and a new trustee are some of the more visible examples of this planning. We seek to be a learning and growing organization. It is very much in the spirit of Jack Murdock.

Q: What will the next 40 years be like for the Trust?

Moore: When Jack Murdock wrote his last will and testament (something we all should do), he is reported to have said, "I don't know what the world will be like in 40 years. The people I entrust these resources to will have the challenge of fulfilling the mission in ways that best serve communities in those times." Well, here we are in 2016 seeking to be faithful to the mission of helping individuals, families and communities as Jack Murdock and our team have dreamed.

I won't likely be around in another 40 years, but I would guess the Trust will be "on mission" at that time helping build healthy and vibrant communities in 2056. We are planting trees under whose shade our grandchildren may sit.