

For Good. Forever...The First Fifteen Years

A synopsis of the history of the Community Foundation of Ottawa

Building the Foundation - 1986-1990

Ottawa has a long-time reputation as a comfortable city, a place with a strong, stable economy and a diverse, active community. Over the past 15 years, Ottawa has also built a reputation as home to a recognized leader in community-based philanthropy - the Community Foundation of Ottawa.

When the Community Foundation's story began in 1986, Ottawa already had a wide variety of charitable and community organizations. Many people and groups were taking on different challenges facing the city and its citizens. Others were supporting activities that make the community a better place to live.

However, 13 community leaders met on December 4, 1986 because they saw a gap. They believed that Ottawa needed an organization with a longer-term charitable orientation - a community foundation.

The community foundation concept was already well established in other North American cities. Originating in Cleveland in 1921 and later spreading to cities such as Vancouver and Winnipeg, community foundations are based on a different model than most charitable organizations. Donors give money or other assets to these foundations, which is then held in perpetuity under professional management. The income generated by these assets is put to work in the community, often to meet charitable priorities that might not have been anticipated at the time of the original donation. In other cases, donors designate broadly how the income is to be used, such as to meet the needs of children and young people or to support the arts.

All but one of the 13 Ottawans who came together to explore the community foundation concept were members of the local United Way's Bequest and Endowment Fund. With that experience, they knew what issues the fledgling Community Foundation would need to take on and the helpful role it could play in the Ottawa area.

The idea of a community foundation for Ottawa was not new but creating the pool of funds to begin the work was a challenge. Following the formal establishment of the Community Foundation of Ottawa-Carleton in 1987, the issue was resolved with the transfer of the United Way's long-term endowment funds to the new Foundation, giving it more than \$500,000 in immediate capital. The new organization was also designated as the beneficiary for approximately \$700,000 in gifts of life insurance from the same source.

The founding Board members of the new Community Foundation of Ottawa-Carleton initiated a strong and comprehensive framework for their new organization. They created a Nominating Committee to identify and attract community leaders with diverse backgrounds and perspectives to the Board on an ongoing basis. They instituted other committees to deal with priorities, such as asset development and investment, grant allocation and promoting the work of the Community Foundation. Most importantly, they attracted a mix of skilled people from across the community for each committee.

One major early decision was to aim for a target of \$5 million in capital funds, a target that the Community Foundation reached in 1994.

The path to that achievement was a long one, and the way to many donors' hearts was through their stomachs. During the early years, much of the outreach to potential donors and supporters took place through luncheon events that were hosted in offices, board rooms and private homes throughout the city.

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At these events, Board members and supporters of the Community Foundation explained the concept and its value to an expanding circle of people from across the Ottawa community. A short video from the Rochester, New York Community Foundation and a later one done specifically for Ottawa showed potential supporters what community foundations were all about.

This personal touch proved to be an effective strategy. In some cases, people made donations on the spot - at one memorable lunch, a guest quietly handed over a cheque for \$25,000 before leaving early for a dental appointment. In other cases, people organized events such as one Community Foundation director's 40th birthday party, to raise funds for the Foundation.

To reach out more widely, the new Foundation initiated other approaches. The first of a series of Annual Celebrations, which continue to this day, took place in 1989. The combination of a prominent guest speaker and presentations from people personally involved in projects funded by the Community Foundation grants gave current and potential donors an understanding of the kind of work being supported and a sense of some of the wider issues affecting charitable organizations.

Very early on, it was possible to point to examples of "good people doing great things", which later became the Foundation's motto. Grant allocations started quickly. One of the first, made in 1988, helped to create a playground in Brewer Park that was fully accessible to children with disabilities. The new playground was developed in co-operation with the City of Ottawa and Foundation money was used to purchase specialized swings and play structures to enable all children to participate and play together.

By 1990, what had begun as a good idea less than four years earlier had become a complete organization with a staff of two, a growing asset base and a rapidly emerging public awareness of its support for valuable activities in the community.

Earning an Impressive Reputation - 1990-1997

The early to mid-1990s were a period of sustained growth for the Community Foundation of Ottawa-Carleton. Much of this reflected the reputation that the Foundation had earned for its innovative grantmaking and its commitment to partnerships.

With a relatively limited pool of grant funds to begin with and the immediate needs of a community experiencing the effects of a recession, the Community Foundation initially focused on support for projects to address poverty, homelessness, hunger and related issues. Growth in assets through the 1990s meant growth in returns that could be used in other areas of community interests, such as the arts and community-building efforts.

In many cases, the Foundation established itself as an innovative partner to other agencies and governments. For example, the former Ottawa Board of Education began a School Breakfast Program in 1990 to provide breakfasts to students who might not have otherwise had a nutritious meal to start their days. Soon, the Community Foundation, the United Way and the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton agreed to strengthen and expand the program, with Foundation support covering kitchen equipment set-up costs. The enhanced program was quickly in place in 25 schools, attracting national attention and replication across Canada. By 2001, the School Breakfast Program was reaching 4,500 students in 84 Ottawa schools.

Safety Net(Works) was another example of an innovative partnership. Community Foundation collaboration with public sector agencies and youth social service groups enabled the creation of an important mix of programs and services for young people in low income areas. Since its launch in 1990, Safety Net(Works) has provided access to essential services that help young people get started in life, allow them to gain work

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experience in their communities and to prove to themselves and to others what they can accomplish.

The Community Foundation's growing capacity and commitment to innovation led to the Investing in People program in 1993. Unlike most grants, which are allocated in response to applications for support, Investing in People is a pro-active grantmaking program. Community leaders are identified by the Board and are invited to accept a grant from the Foundation, for which they will design the purposes. Recipients of Investing in People awards have come from schools, arts groups, health services and social service organizations.

Such demonstrated commitment to the community helped to make the Community Foundation a leading contribution choice for a growing number of donors throughout the 1990s. In some cases, the donations were in response to high profile events that touched Ottawa deeply.

The 1994 death of Nick Battersby was one of them. Battersby, a recent arrival in Ottawa from England, died from a random shot fired at him while he was walking along Elgin Street. When friends and co-workers set out to create a foundation in his memory and discovered the complexities involved, they turned to the Community Foundation to make it happen.

Other donations, such as the creation of the Paul and Adelle Deacon Fund, showed how donors were recognizing community foundations as effective means through which to meet their charitable and tax planning interests. When Paul Deacon, a newspaper executive, had to sell some of his stock holdings, he was faced with an unexpected tax burden. His brother had been a founder of the Toronto Community Foundation, and Deacon and his wife were already supporters of the Community Foundation. His additional donation of \$500,000 enabled him to ensure that his family's support could continue, while generating some tax savings for himself at the same time.

Underpinning much of this donation growth was a new generation of asset development activities, particularly the work of the Professional Advisors Program from 1993. Foundation leaders recognized the central role that advisors such as lawyers, accountants and financial planners could play in making potential donors aware of how the Community Foundation could help them to realize their charitable goals.

The creation of a steering committee for the program, combined with individual advisory circles for estate planning professionals brought a sustained focus to this personalized outreach approach that makes it remarkable to this day.

A re-orientation of Foundation communications efforts to support the asset development strategies led to the creation and adoption of the slogan, "Helping Good People Do Great Things". In its informational material, the Foundation emphasized the human dimension of its work by recognizing individual donors and the people who benefited from the grants. Some of these publications proved to be award-winners in international competitions.

The growth of assets during the early and mid-1990s was a clear indication of how well the Community Foundation was making its mark in Ottawa. In 1994, total assets under management or pledged reached almost \$12 million. By 1997, the Community Foundation's tenth anniversary, those assets had reached more than \$33 million, with two-thirds of that in planned gifts such as life insurance and designated bequests in wills.

The growth of assets for immediate investment led to an evolution in the Community Foundation's investment policies. The original focus on interest-earning investments broadened to include stocks and related equities that would provide a consistent, rather than speculative return.

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The strong start that the Community Foundation had enjoyed, and the drive of its leadership team had begun to establish it as a Canadian philanthropic leader. In 1990, the Foundation hosted Canada's first conference on community foundations, attracting representatives from foundations already in operation and people from communities who were interested in the idea. This led to the creation in 1992 of a national organization, Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) as a vehicle through which to exchange information, provide support and promote the community foundation concept.

Underlying the overall growth of Community Foundation activities was the close attention paid to smooth, cost-effective administration. At the beginning, the Foundation operated out of an 8 by 10 foot space in the United Way's offices. Between 1990 and 1997, it moved through a series of offices donated by generous landlords. That nomadic existence ended when it settled finally in 1997 at its current site at 75 Albert Street.

Leaping to a New Level - 1997-Today

The late 1990s were marked by three related factors that moved the Community Foundation to levels far beyond what anyone could have imagined just a decade earlier. The first was a key change in income tax law; the second was the emergence of Ottawa as a high technology hotbed; the third was the celebration that accompanied the arrival of a new millennium.

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Responding to advocacy initiatives by Canada's charitable sector, the 1997 federal budget included a temporary measure that later became permanent. It halved the capital gains tax for securities that investors donated to charities. This created a clear incentive for Ottawans whose investments had done well to donate at least some of them to the Community Foundation - and donate they did.

The high tech sector in Ottawa was expanding rapidly as the world moved out of the recession of the early 1990s. Company stock was a common way to attract skilled staff. Many people who held early stakes in some local companies were suddenly worth millions of dollars as markets boomed.

Beginning with the Community Foundation's first million dollar immediate gift in 1997 and slowing rapidly with the downturn in the technology sector and stock markets in 2000, the Community Foundation witnessed a wave of interest in converting profits on paper into investments in a stronger Ottawa. This growth of assets arrived just as millennium celebrations were inspiring thoughts about the future that Canadians were building for themselves.

Community Foundations of Canada co-ordinated a national "Our Millennium" program, encouraging Canadians to come together as communities to make special gifts for the future. Ottawa's millennium campaign met this challenge by inspiring and encouraging individuals and groups to organize their own events and then documenting what became 187 local projects.

These three factors helped to trigger a doubling of assets in the second quarter of 2000, then a further tripling in the third quarter. Many of the donations were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars; some were worth millions. With an investment portfolio that favoured the kinds of long-term investments that weather the storm well when markets fall, this translated into a dramatic increase in Foundation investments from \$18.8 million in 1999 to \$55.2 million a year later.

This impressive growth and the effective fiscal strategy that continues to guide Foundation investments yielded a huge increase in granting opportunities. Disbursements to charitable organizations rose from half a million dollars in the late 1990s to almost \$4 million in 2002.

The number of organizations benefiting from this growth went from 270 to more than 400 over this same period.

Adding to its role of funding the many individual grants for projects and activities throughout the community, the Foundation became a central partner in a series of new charitable activities that respond to the emerging needs of the Ottawa community. These needs sometimes arise under special circumstances. The 1998 ice storm was one of those situations. Community Foundation grants went out almost immediately to community groups throughout Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec that were struggling to cope with the needs of tens of thousands of people driven from dark, cold homes.

Support for action on homelessness was another Foundation priority. A million dollar donation from one family as an "Our Millennium" gift was the seed money for a Foundation for the Homeless. This inspired other donations from the community that enabled funding for projects to provide shelter and services to people facing life on the streets or escaping family violence.

Arts and culture also became a growing focus for Community Foundation support. With funding from the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation of Montreal, the ArtsSmarts program promotes active participation in the arts by young people through partnerships between schools, community organizations, artists and arts organizations. When the Community Foundation brought ArtsSmarts to Ottawa, the response from schools and community groups exceeded expectations, with 100 applications for what turned out to be 22 initial grants. The funds supported arts workshops in elementary schools and enabled high school students to develop and present their own adaptation of Shakespeare's works to young audiences.

As the 1990s gave way to a new millennium, the Foundation's role as a philanthropic leader in Ottawa and Canada was steadily expanding, as was its international recognition. One example of this was the decision to launch Leadership Ottawa, a civic leadership program. Based on an already successful model in other cities, this initiative identified a new generation of community leaders and helped them build the skills, insights and networks to realize their potential.

In 1997, the Community Foundation established the Grantmakers Roundtable, an annual event that quickly became an important forum for representatives of the public, private and non-profit sectors in Ottawa to discuss charitable issues of mutual interest. The impact of the Foundation even began to be felt overseas when it was invited to take part in an international network that is of particular benefit to the emerging community foundation movements in Europe and Mexico.

Through all of this, the Community Foundation modernized its approach to governance, focusing the Board on strategic and planning issues, and leaving day-to-day operational considerations to a growing staff. Another transition involved a change of name to the Community Foundation of Ottawa. This reflected the creation of the new City of Ottawa, which replaced the old Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton and its 11 municipalities in 2001.

As the Community Foundation celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2002, it looked back with pride on a record of impressive growth in assets, grants and reputation. It looks forward with anticipation to continuing to work with donors, partners and the community to make a greater investment to increase local philanthropy and build a stronger Ottawa.