Ridgway White Interview

At the start of this year, Ridgway White became fourth president of the Mott Foundation, taking over in that role from his father, Bill White, who nevertheless remains actively involved in the foundation. That sounds like a recipe for a gradual transition, and indeed, as Ridgway tells Caroline Hartnell, evolution rather than revolution is likely to be the watchword of the new regime.

You are the new president, but your father will remain chairman and CEO. What does this mean in practice?
I think that, most important, it means that there’s going to be a lot of continuity – not only for our grantees and people that we’re partnered with, but also for the staff at the foundation. In practice, we’re still working through the details, and I can’t break down for you exactly how the whole thing is going to work. My father has been involved for a very long time – he still works seven days a week – so I expect he will still be fairly hands on. But I will have more focus on the day-to-day work, and will increase my interaction with key staff members. I will also guide and assist in the allocation of funds across the foundation’s operations.

I think, in his mind and in mine, the best thing about this is that we don’t expect to drive an abrupt change in any programmatic area. Yes, we expect there to be an evolution over a period of time, but it will be a natural evolution. I think that our strength as a foundation has been that we are long-term, stable funders for our grantees, and I don’t expect that to change.

What do you see as the most exciting things about your new role?
One thing that’s exciting is that, over the next ten years, I get to guide how to give away a billion dollars. That’s both exciting and daunting at the same time. It’s a tremendous opportunity. I think the legacy of the foundation presents a clear path, but a path that can meander where there are opportunities in our areas of strength. And I’m both excited and humbled to be able to be a part of that.

Apart from the challenge of giving away a billion dollars, what other challenges do you see?
I think the main one will be making sure that we adhere to the founder’s legacy, but doing it in the appropriate and modern style, and making sure that every dollar is maximized. To do that, we’ve got to make sure that we’re focusing on our strengths as a foundation in what we do.

The Mott Foundation is a local, national and international player. How do you feel about these different geographical aspects of its work?
In my mind, that’s what makes the foundation a special place to work. Not only do we have place-based grantmaking here in Flint, but a lot of our staff and our grantees also have national and international reach and expertise. That produces this great push-pull learning experience, where you might have a best practice or an exciting thing occurring in, say, California or South Africa, and you can bring that back to Flint – and vice versa. We also have exciting things happening in Flint, and that gives us nitty-gritty, detailed experience that can then be transferred elsewhere. One of the highlights of that is the work that was done in community schools that then became the national after-school programme. I think it’s what makes us tick.

Do you see that sort of exchange carrying on at the international level as well?
Yes, I think community philanthropy, or what we call community foundations here in the States, is a prime example. Another component is the community school work, which occurs both in the US and in our civil society programme. It’s another area of work that contributes to the really interdisciplinary nature of our grantmaking.
You bring to your new role an entrepreneurial approach gleaned from 10 years of guiding revitalization efforts in downtown Flint. How could this affect the Mott Foundation’s approach in its other programme areas? Without a doubt, entrepreneurship is very important. I think creating new ways of doing business is what foundations are about. It’s about finding a better way to assist community advice offices in South Africa. It’s about developing new systems and pathways for implementation. In the paediatric clinic at the local hospital in Flint, for example, we’re looking at whether you even need a waiting room or whether there are better ways to get kids in and out faster. Really the foundation’s role should be helping to challenge the status quo and exploring new and creative ideas.

I also bring a lot of business experience through personal ventures and board memberships. For example, I’ve been involved in a start-up baby clothing company and a couple of other for-profit companies. So there’s a nice push-pull of experience I can bring to a more goal-oriented approach to grantmaking.

What would happen if the non-family members ganged up? I can’t answer that, but the board did vote to appoint me president, so I’m grateful for that. I’m grateful that I’ve earned the respect of the non-family members – and honestly the respect of some of the family members may have been more challenging!

Are there changes you anticipate making in the near future? I don’t think there will be any major changes in the near future that the grantees or staff will see. As I mentioned earlier, I do believe in setting goals and benchmarks, and I do have a fair amount of business background. So while there is not a bottom line in terms of dollars and cents, there is a bottom line that we’re looking for in terms of accomplishment. We want to make sure we’re accomplishing everything we set out to do – and, if we aren’t, to understand why we’re not so that we can adjust and go at it from a different perspective. I think we will continue to focus on what we’re good at, making sure that we’re effectively allocating our resources in the areas that we can do the most good.

How important is it that the Mott Foundation is a family foundation, still essentially controlled by the founding family? We are a private foundation that has the benefit of family tradition coupled with a staff of over 80. In addition, we have a 13-member board, and only four are family members. However, at the end of the day, I think that continuity is important, and the fact that I was born and raised here may give the Flint community some assurance that they’ll have a passionate leader going forward.

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