

THE LIBRA FOUNDATION

Going Upstream: Philanthropy's Role in Advancing Justice

By Crystal Hayling, Executive Director of The Libra Foundation

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This post is part of "Liberate Philanthropy," a new blog series curated by Justice Funders to re-imagine and practice philanthropy free of its current constraints – the accumulation and privatization of wealth, and the centralization of power and control – to one that redistributes wealth, democratizes power and shifts economic control to communities. Throughout the series, we will be sharing stories from some of our most forward thinking, transformational leaders in philanthropy about how they are facilitating a Just Transition for philanthropy.



New Libra grantee [Forward Together](#)'s Stepping Into Power movement building fellowship program.

There's an often-told story in public health school about a group of villagers near the shore of a river who suddenly see children being swept downstream. After they form a human chain to save the children from drowning, one man decides to go upstream to stop whoever is throwing children into the river.

It's a classic example of the importance of "going upstream" to take a systems-change approach by addressing the root causes of a problem, rather than focusing on providing services that simply address the symptom.

The challenge of systems change is revealed, however, when the man in the story arrives at the next village upstream to find the water there so muddy and brackish that it's suffocating the fish near the shore. As a result, the young fishermen must wade deep into the racing waters of the river to catch fish, where they risk being swept downstream. The man learns from them that the

excessive tree-cutting to build ever bigger homes in **his** village downstream caused the soil-run off that is destroying this neighboring village.

Like the man living upstream who thinks the culprit is upstream, we are all part of the system that needs changing. Many of us benefit from injustice without knowing it. There is no changing “the system” without also changing ourselves.

In my role as executive director of The Libra Foundation, that means examining our role in perpetuating inequality – and taking proactive steps to promote equity and justice – at every level of the organization: with and among grantees, staff and the board.

Before my time, the board had already begun to make important changes in how it stewards the family’s financial resources that – as a foundation – had been entrusted to the public welfare. They started awarding multi-year, general operating grants to reduce the time that grantees spent on applications and reporting. And they began shifting toward an ecosystem approach, funding clusters of organizations to strengthen social movement infrastructure. They also saw a moral obligation to align the foundation’s investments with their social justice values.



New Libra grantee [BOLD's \(Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity\)](#) Director's training program.

When I joined the foundation one year ago, I was excited to be working with a family that boldly challenges the dissonance of profiting from the same structures and institutions that its grantees seek to overturn. But that was only a beginning. I made a commitment to deepen the moorings that anchor this rich history.

“One of my first priorities was to apply a racial justice lens to our human rights framework.”

As a domestic human rights funder, The Libra Foundation’s program areas – women’s rights, environmental justice and drug/social policy – all exist within the reality that your race shapes all of your experiences. Black women’s #MeToo experiences are compounded by racism, and therefore inherently different than that of white women. The Sacred Stone Camp was built to defend indigenous land and water because the Dakota Access pipeline was purposely re-routed through Standing Rock reservation when white, affluent communities rejected having it pass through their neighborhoods.

At the grantee level, we recently examined our Women’s Rights grants and strength tested our racial justice analysis.

“What we found was that only a small number of our grantees were women of color-led organizations working to address intersecting forms of discrimination (based on gender, race, sexuality, immigration status, etc.) through organizing and movement building strategies that seek to affect systemic change.”

As a result, the board approved new grants that expanded funding for Gender Justice organizations, which organize women – particularly women of color and low-income women – and marginalized communities to change structural power inequalities, support the leadership of women, and build social, political and economic capability and power. Adding Gender Justice organizations to our family of grantees deepens our focus on trust in women and communities to take the lead in organizing and advocating for a more just democracy that values the human rights of all.



New Libra grantee [SONG Southerners on New Ground](#) organizing retreat.

At the staff level we are building with intention. I have hired two new team members with broad experience in and a healthy skepticism of philanthropy. That experience proved critical in being able to quickly move \$350,000 in grants in early July to frontline organizations fighting family separation and the administration's new 'zero-tolerance' policy.

Based on our shared values of trust and respect for our grantees, our team collaborated to shift the responsibility for accountability and information gathering from the organizations on the frontlines of this crisis to those of us at our desks in San Francisco. It was an experiment with new processes that we recognize comes with risks, but they are risks that we as a foundation are willing to assume for the purpose of allowing our grantees to focus their time and energy on their important work, rather than paperwork.

At the board level we are building trust through nearly weekly meetings that include discussion of policies, practice and lots of laughter. The board has committed to bias and privilege training as a means to explore even more ways of weaving our shared values throughout this work. For our staff—who are all women of color—it's deeply refreshing to work with a board that is open to having conversations about how they have benefited from a dominant culture that perpetuates racial and economic injustice, and how they can take an active role in promoting the dignity and self-determination of marginalized communities.

The phrase “going upstream” is often used to describe getting to the source of the problem. But the problems aren’t just “out there.” Habits of inequality live within us and our institutions as well.

“In philanthropy, we have to build new muscles for trusting and engaging, if we hope to support emancipatory social movements.”

Yes, that means looking outside at who we usually fund, and finding more groups led by people of color, working intersectionally and building community power. And it also means looking internally to liberate ourselves and our organizations from assumptions and practices that undermine our effectiveness in advancing justice. We all have to keep searching for the ‘upstream’ in us.

Crystal Hayling is executive director of The Libra Foundation, a family foundation based in San Francisco. She has a wealth of domestic and international experience across a broad spectrum of issues, grounded in equity. She recently lived in Singapore where she built bridges between civil society and emerging donors in Southeast Asia concerned about income inequality and climate. As managing director of the Aspen Institute’s Environment Fellowship, she designed a global leadership program focused on the food system’s impact on the environment. Previously, she was CEO of the Blue Shield of California Foundation where she spearheaded work to achieve universal health coverage. She was part of the founding team at The California Wellness Foundation where she led a groundbreaking initiative to shift youth violence prevention from a criminal justice issue to a public health one. She has served on the boards of the Center for Effective Philanthropy, Northern California Grantmakers, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network, and Grantmakers in Health. She has also lived and worked in China and Mexico.