

Philanthropy as Family Connector



BACKGROUND

When Frank and Kristin married, a large family was created. Frank has three grown children and Kristin two - plus the second generation have partners and some have children of their own. Frank had a long established structure for his family to have capital for use in supporting business or non-profit enterprises oriented toward purposeful change.

Frank came to MCF ready to build into these goals an approach to philanthropy that would include the full blended family. His hope was that, over time, he could transition the bulk of the philanthropic decision-making out of his hands and into those of the next generation.

“Our goal is that we will see annual interactions and empowerment for each family to be more civically engaged.”

[From Frank’s letter to the family, announcing the creation of the funds at MCF.]

STORY

Frank asked his MCF advisor to open eight funds, five of which would be for each of his or Kristin’s children and their partner. He hoped that a modest amount per fund would provide a springboard from initial experimentation in charitable giving to a deeper commitment over time.

He didn’t want to impose a structure on the next generation by creating one collaborative fund; instead, he wanted to provide each with the autonomy to pursue their own goals - which they did gladly.

Until the murder of George Floyd.

One of the children’s partners, outraged at the injustice, emailed their MCF advisor and the full family, stating that she and some other family members wanted to pool their funds to support organizations that support Black communities and Black activism. She invited the rest of the family to join and asked for the advisor’s help in identifying a strategy to pursue.

Her advisor curated a list of organizations working in support of racial justice for their consideration. A series of discussions ensued with an ad hoc “steering committee” of family members. The advisor coached the two leading the effort on how to facilitate a productive family discussion and arrive at consensus about whether and how the family would make a collective grant to support racial justice. That meeting sparked excitement and great conversation across the family.

They decided to partner on a bold initiative focused on police and prison abolition. One organization rose to the fore as the clear fit. All twelve family members pooled their resources so the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights could establish a new “inside/ outside” fellowship that pays two people directly affected by the prison system – one outside prison and one currently incarcerated – to design alternatives to this unjust system.



OUTCOME

Frank had hoped philanthropy would be a great opportunity for his new family to get to know each other while exploring meaningful ways to engage in their communities, but had no idea it would lead to something like this. Creating a “fellowship” that centers the solution-finding on those most impacted by the issue was a big part of the power of the connection that occurred within the family. It felt very meaningful at both the individual and systemic levels. And it’s an approach that can not only be replicated by this family, but serve as a template for other families seeking to use the power of philanthropy as a tool for family connection.



Fellowship Overview

Objective: Launch and pilot a paid fellowship for formerly or currently incarcerated individuals, focused on advocacy for prison and police abolition, that would fuel individual educational or career advancement while working to achieve systemic change.

Duration: 9 months

Fellow Profile: *Pilot:* formerly or currently incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison; already an unpaid EBC collaborator. Fellow may be male, trans, or gender-non-conforming. *Future:* will open to fellows associated with women's prisons.

Structure: The fellow will work on EBC's policy team and report to State Campaigner James King, who himself was released last fall from San Quentin, where he also attended and served as Program Clerk at the Prison University Project. EBC proposes also partnering the fellow, if incarcerated, with a college intern who will complete project tasks that cannot be done inside prison and facilitate the fellow's access to information they need from the outside to execute the fellowship project; if the fellow is formerly incarcerated, there are aspects of research that the college intern can help complete. The college intern will also gain valuable learnings from the fellow's expertise.

Example Projects: The following examples illustrate types of topics the fellow might address; specifics would be set based on a given fellow's goals within the abolition movement.

- blind spots in the conversation about alternatives to incarceration
- the intersection of the health impacts of incarceration and public health
- imagining a new youth justice system as well as adult justice system
- shifting the narrative around the deserving and undeserving
- centering gender violence and state control of the body through incarceration

Success of the Fellowship: **The project will:** result in a final deliverable—such as a toolkit or advocacy guide—that EBC can deploy as well as disseminate for broader use in the abolition movement.

The fellow will: be on a pathway into a career in community work, organizing, and/or policy; have an on-ramp to any post-incarceration employment, given the marginalization that many people experience while job-searching post-release, and/or; have built the skills to undertake such endeavors in the future; have the final deliverable as a tangible demonstration of their skillset and work product

The organization will: have launched and piloted a fellowship program; have developed an evaluation tool to use to inform future iterations of the fellowship or have demonstrated a model that could be replicated by any organization seeking to empower those most directly impacted by a system or challenge to build solutions