

November 9, 2014

To: Lena Townsend and Anne Lawrence

From: Andy Fisher

Subject: Personal essay: **“Why I Joined the RBF Board – and Would Do So Again”**

Years ago, when Lena, Jennifer, and Jane were good enough to invite me to join RBF’s board, I accepted with alacrity and real enthusiasm. I’d known and admired several RBF board and staff members for years, but my deepest interest was much more deeply rooted. For, I had also worked for most of my life as a high school and college English teacher and, then, as a foundation officer with special focus on youth development. And, the RBF had long been a leader in setting high standards in New York and America’s out-of-school fields -- and in driving implementation of best practices through smart grantmaking.

RBF’s trademark was (and remains) inspiring, guiding, and supporting a very special kind of learning: learning that is engaging, informal, inquiry-based and centered on literacy. Most people who’ve ever been teachers, parents, and mentors to young people know almost intuitively that this kind of learning can be uniquely appealing to and effective for children and teens from all backgrounds. Much qualitative and some quantitative research supports this almost common-sense insight. I had also experienced the power of informal learning first-hand in everything from my summers as a camper to my time as a “Big Brother” mentor to a decade of guiding tens of millions of dollars of grantmaking for out-of-school youth development programs.

As a grantmaker, I respected RBF for:

- Its evidence-based program and grantmaking principles and disciplined giving focus. Like most excellent foundations (and organizations), it concentrated year after year in doing a few important things well.
- Its expertise in learning styles and topics that delight, move, and quietly “speak to” young people.
- The staff’s humility in being open to continuous learning from peers, grantees, and the out-of-school field at large. I also knew that RBF grantees respected and valued the staff not just for what it knew but also for how it worked with grantees: namely, as supportive coaches, patient listeners, and partners in problem-solving. RBF staff understood the importance of overcoming the power advantage that all funders have with grantees and grant applicants. And, they did everything humanly possible to mitigate the potential distorting effects of this power imbalance.

- The consistency with which RBF included careful documentation and assessment components, as appropriate, in its grants – and made time for reflecting about its own grantmaking practice and lessons learned.

It has been said that the two cardinal sins of foundation work are arrogance and ignorance. I know of no foundation even close to RBF in size that has consistently done a better job of avoiding both faults – and in fact, in embodying quite the opposite qualities.

As RBF approaches its final year of operations, I can say that, while I began my RBF association with enthusiasm, I'll be ending it with something more: heartfelt pride.