

## **The Portland Foundation - First a dream, then a reality, today a tradition**

For the cover of its final issue of 1951, Jay County's quirky tabloid publication, The Graphic, surprised readers with a look at the future rather than a recap of the past. A clip-and-save calendar previewed the year to come, and the accompanying message was more like a holiday toast than a newspaper headline: "The Best To You in '52." Only the Page 1 photograph of a hand holding a newly hatched baby chick seemed oddly out of sync with the season. This was Christmastime; Easter was months away.

But the picture, subtly appropriate, was a birth announcement of sorts. It symbolized an event that had occurred 10 days earlier, on Dec. 17, when three local businessmen—John Jaqua, Hugh Ronald Jr. and W. Haynes Starbuck—officially released from incubation an idea they had shaped during conversations after their Tuesday Rotary Club meetings. The concept was as fresh and fragile as The Graphic's photo suggested.

They called their brainchild The Portland Foundation and credited its founding in part to Dick James, a classmate from their old Portland High School days. Now active in state politics, James returned frequently to Portland and often visited his childhood pals. During the trips he described the good works of the Indianapolis Foundation, second only to the Cleveland Foundation as the oldest community foundation in the country.

"Dick must have pollinated the idea to his friends back home," surmises Jack Ronald, son of one of the founders and an eventual member of the Foundation's board of directors. "The time was right. The community was full of guys just back from war, a lot of construction was going on, and there was a sense that anything was possible."

Even in an era of optimism, birthing a foundation in a city as small as Portland might have seemed premature to residents more skeptical than Jaqua, Ronald and Starbuck. "We had about 7,000 people back then," recalls Elizabeth Starbuck, sister of Haynes Starbuck. All three founders had banking ties: Jaqua was president of Citizens Bank, Starbuck was president of Peoples Bank, and Ronald served as a director at Peoples Bank. If the men were competitors in business, they were united in their view of community service. They attended the same church, belonged to the same service club and had been influenced by Angie Wilson, a civic-minded teacher who served as a role model for scores of Portland youth. They actively supported any cause that boosted their hometown, and the Foundation fit the description.

"They worked hard to get it off the ground," says Betty Starbuck. "No gift was too small. Some of the early accounts, overseen by the trust departments of the two banks, became part of the Foundation and are still in existence today."

### **Establishing a tradition**

The concept was destined to catch on—Indiana currently boasts more than 90 community foundations with combined assets in excess of \$1 billion—but in 1951 only Indianapolis had such an organization, and the two cities were hardly parallel in population or resources. Still, the Indianapolis Foundation served as a model when the founders created a charter document that was short and direct. The two banks would accept and invest gifts on behalf of the Foundation, and the income generated by the gifts would support worthy causes as determined by a six-member foundation board.

Temporary Chairman Hugh Ronald called to order the Foundation's first meeting within three weeks of The Graphic's announcement. The location, Ronald's office at the Jay Garment Company, was appropriate because the initial gift to the foundation, a check for \$1,000, came from the company and was designated as an educational trust. Two years would pass before interest on that gift and a handful of others would allow the board to award three scholarships, \$200 each, to students bound for Manchester College, Purdue and International Business

College. With the announcement of the scholarship recipients, a tradition was born and a precedent was set. For the next two decades the community would view its Foundation primarily as an education fund.

"The process was simple back then," recalls John Coldren, board member from 1971 to 1985. The Foundation's directors met two or three times a year, often in members' homes, around a pot of coffee. The president would arrive with a shoebox full of papers, the Foundation's meager records, "which we seldom looked at," admits Coldren. "Once a year we talked with the guidance counselor from Portland High School who would give us a list of students; then the banks would tell us how much money we could spend, and based on that information we would decide on the number and size of the scholarships." Meeting adjourned.

### **Maintaining a low profile**

In keeping with the founders' vision, board members did not actively solicit funds to build the endowment. Gifts trickled in, sometimes from surprising sources, and enabled the Foundation to increase steadily the number and amount of scholarship awards. A bequest of almost \$100,000 from the estate of Dr. John Chitwood, a bachelor dentist without heirs, made headlines in the local newspaper and boosted the Foundation's visibility as well as its cash flow. Taking their cue from Chitwood, area residents began to include the Foundation on their lists of beneficiaries when they drew up their wills.

"Local attorneys, who knew the financial situations of their clients, probably suggested the Foundation as a good organization to support," says Jim Peterson, board member from 1977 to 1986, who well remembers reading about the Chitwood bequest in *The Commercial Review* and the public impact of the gift.

"That's why we always kept lawyers on the board," jokes Coldren, himself an attorney. "The Foundation didn't cultivate a great public presence back then, and we depended on estates for a lot of the funding. Often attorneys would use education as the touchstone to connect clients to the Foundation." Each spring the Foundation strengthened its link with education when the president of the board announced the year's scholarship winners to an auditorium full of students and parents. By the mid-1970s, the number of annual recipients had expanded to 10 high school seniors, and checks had increased to \$1,000 each. "That spread the word about the Foundation as fast as anything," says Peterson.

Still, the organization was unknown to many county residents. John Jaqua Jr., son of one of the founders, recalls visiting Ona Myers on behalf of Citizens Bank, the appointed executor of her late brother's estate. "Ona had inherited some property from her brother, Clyde Geeting, and asked my advice about what she should do with it," says Jaqua. "Her family was particularly interested in children, so I suggested that she give it to The Portland Foundation to benefit kids. She had never heard of the Foundation, but she liked the idea." She took Jaqua's suggestion, deeded the family farm to the Foundation in her brother's name, and today two Geeting memorial trusts have a combined value in excess of \$125,000.

### **From reactive to proactive force**

If unexpected gifts nudged the Foundation to consider activities beyond scholarships, a memorial fund established by the Lee Hall family more than doubled the endowment and challenged the Foundation to assume a leading role in community initiatives. Hall, a contemporary of Jaqua, Ronald and Starbuck, displayed generosity by making the large gift and exhibited faith in the Foundation by not attaching strings to it. Members of the board of directors could earmark the funds to support any projects that would benefit the quality of life in the community.

"The board wanted some guidance from Lee on the money's use," says Jack Ronald. "For three years I pestered him to write a letter that would at least indicate his fields of interests. For example, if he had a soft spot for the humane society or 4-H, he needed to tell us. We all knew

Lee personally, but we realized that future board members wouldn't know him and might appreciate some direction on how to use the funds in ways that would please the family. We finally got the letter, and although it wasn't binding, it confirmed his strong interest in the arts."

The Hall gift would help shift the Foundation's emphasis beyond the city to embrace the county as well. Since the Foundation's beginning, its grant-making activity had generally favored Portland people and projects. That focus had begun to change in the 1975-76 school year after the county's high schools consolidated into one. Candidates for scholarships suddenly included students from Bryant, Dunkirk, Gray, Madison, Pennville, Poling and Redkey. To avoid turf wars and prevent any group from dominating the new Jay County High School, the district chose "neutral" colors, mascot, coaches and administrators. This led to a countywide effort to raise money for band uniforms and use the Marching Patriots to unify the badly split community. "We had to work hard to find enough money in unrestricted accounts to make a contribution for those uniforms," recalls Lon Racster, who joined the Foundation's board that year and characterizes it as a "divisive time."

A second effort to reach residents beyond Portland involved the Jay County Fairgrounds and occurred in the mid-1980s. Foundation assets had topped the \$2 million mark and board members were looking for a project. Doug Milligan, then president of the Jay County Fair Board, recalls receiving a casual phone call from Jim Peterson. "Jim asked me, 'Could you guys use some money? We've got some funds available and we need a project,'" says Milligan. "They ended up helping us put a roof on the grandstand." The gift began a relationship between the Foundation and the fairgrounds that continues today. "Since that first project, the fair board has received almost \$400,000 from the Foundation," says Milligan.

### **Bricks and mortar**

Improvements to the fairgrounds are among many bricks-and-mortar projects that stand as evidence of the Foundation's 50-year presence in the community. As the board became more involved in countywide initiatives, members invested more time in their work and took more heat for their decisions. Support for the arts—encouraged by large gifts from the Hall and Abromson families—sparked lively conversation and occasional controversy.

"The Foundation hasn't been afraid to take risks, and that's critical," says Eric Rogers, a long-time arts activist who relocated to Portland in 1976 as a CETA employee and now is executive director of Arts Place, Inc. "In our organization's early years we probably weren't viewed as a good risk, but board members were willing to make significant commitments to us. They played a critical part in the first phase of developing our building, and I'm convinced that we couldn't have made it without those commitments."

Arts Place, a center for the visual and performing arts, not only offers programs throughout Jay County but reaches into adjacent counties and serves as the regional partner for the Indiana Arts Commission. John Jaqua Jr. believes his father, who as a young man helped launch the Portland Dramatic Society, would be pleased with the Foundation's support of Arts Place. "I remember thinking that Eric, a talented musician and manager, surely would relocate to a larger 'pond,' at some point," says Jaqua. "But he did something better. He ended up creating a bigger pond instead of moving to one."

A more recent bricks-and-mortar project is the Dunkirk community center, about to become a reality because of a grant from Lilly Endowment, made possible by The Portland Foundation. When the Endowment launched its GIFT initiative in 1990 (Giving Indiana Funds for Tomorrow), it helped create dozens of community foundations across the state. In subsequent phases of the GIFT program the Endowment has used this network of community foundations to identify projects that are deserving of grants. The community center at Dunkirk received a \$300,000 jumpstart on a building project in 1999.

"We made a grant application to The Portland Foundation," explains Chuck Huffman, vice president and trust officer at First National Bank and a Dunkirk resident. "The Foundation ultimately gave the project its blessing and sent the request on to Lilly Endowment. None of this would have happened without The Portland Foundation's involvement. The board invited people in the community to get together and brainstorm on what we needed. The result is that we're going to have a center that might very well turn into a \$1 million asset to the community."

### **Planting seeds, cultivating growth**

The role of community convener is a new one for the Foundation and involves taking the initiative to gather people around an idea or issue. The most aggressive example is a current one and has board members heading a movement to create a community college called the John Jay Center for Learning. Unlike many satellite campuses that strike an alliance with a single college or university to teach off-site classes to local residents, the learning center plans to offer courses taught by instructors from a variety of schools including Ball State, Ivy Tech and Indiana Wesleyan.

"My top goal is to be able to present a Portland Foundation scholarship to a Jay County High School graduate who plans to attend the John Jay Center for Learning," says Doug Milligan, who, as president of the foundation board, facilitated dozens of meetings devoted to the learning center. "To me, that would complete the cycle." With classes set to begin in the fall, Milligan, now in his final year on the board, may see his goal realized.

The Portland Foundation has come full circle in many ways. Begun primarily as a scholarship fund, the organization is still in the business of supporting education but now doesn't limit its work to high school students. The Foundation's executive director, Doug Inman, who attended Indiana University with the help of a Foundation grant, has introduced three programs to instill community values among young children. Third graders get a hands-on lesson in philanthropy when Inman presents \$100 to each class in the county and challenges them to create and implement service projects. Fifth graders participate in Exchange City in Muncie and learn about free enterprise. Sixth graders board buses in the spring for all-day field trips to area college campuses. The goal, like the goal of the 50-year-old scholarship program, is to encourage youth to appreciate education.

"We're always expanding our programs," says Inman. "We're a lot more visible than we were in the early days. We're working hard to build a reputation as an organization that is out there, helping in the community. We may be 50 years old, but we're much younger if you consider our newer role as a community catalyst."

### **The next generation**

In its first 45 years in existence, The Portland Foundation built an endowment of \$7 million; five years later, that number has burgeoned to almost \$13 million. Doug Milligan smiles when he recalls joining the board in 1989 and feeling concern about the Foundation's future. After all, several major benefactors from the early years—John Chitwood, Lee Hall, the Abromson family—were gone. "How are we going to sustain this?" he wondered. It didn't take him long to realize that in its five-decade history, the Foundation has fostered a spirit of philanthropy that is as broad as it is deep. Success no longer depends on the generosity of a few but on the support of many. Community leaders of the past instilled a tradition of giving that shows no signs of dissipating. Now, looking ahead the next 50 years in the life of The Portland Foundation, Milligan anticipates more of the same: more opportunities, more growth and more success because "as anyone can see, the next generation is doing very nicely, thank you."

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