

March 23, 2011

## **Brian O'Connell: A Visionary Leader of the Nonprofit Movement**



Brian O'Connell

*By Pablo Eisenberg*

Brian O'Connell's death at age 81 leaves a gaping hole in the front ranks of nonprofit leadership. In an age of nonprofit mediocrities, he stood as an exception, a visionary and a vibrant leader with solid values and integrity.

His life was dedicated to preserving, expanding, and strengthening nonprofit organizations, both in this country and abroad. His work, in particular his efforts to establish and lead Independent Sector, a coalition of charities and foundations, gave increased credibility to the activities and reputation of the nonprofit movement.

Early in his career, he spent a dozen years at the American Heart Association, much of that time as the director of the California affiliate. He then became the national director of the National Mental Health Association. During his years in that position, he championed the organization's work on

community care, the treatment of depression, and the rights of patients with mental illness. It was during his tenure there that he helped organize the National Committee on Patient Rights.

While he was working on health issues, he also became concerned about the bigger issues that stymied nonprofits from doing all they could to serve society.

In the mid-1970s, questions about the role of nonprofits and foundations in American life led John D. Rockefeller III to establish a committee known as the Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs. It was chaired by John Filer, then the head of Aetna insurance company.

In its 1975 report, the commission recommended the creation of a permanent advisory commission made up of government and private leaders to guide, oversee, and protect nonprofit organizations and help increase private philanthropy.

Such a committee was formed in the waning days of the Ford administration but was soon killed by President Carter's secretary of the treasury, Michael Blumenthal.

Shortly thereafter, the National Council on Philanthropy and the Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations asked Mr. O'Connell to do a quick study about the ways nonprofits could coordinate their work to strengthen nonprofits and increase private giving. His report led to the creation of an organizing committee, composed of leaders from both groups as well as prominent outsiders.

With John Gardner, then president of the Carnegie Corporation, as chair, the committee became Independent Sector and Mr. O'Connell was named its first executive director.

In a rare display of disagreement between the two leaders, who became lifelong friends, Mr. Gardner advocated for an organization composed solely of nonprofits, arguing that only as a unified group could nonprofits protect their self-interest and withstand the power and influence of foundations and philanthropists. Mr. O'Connell, on the other hand, saw Independent Sector as an opportunity to bring donors and nonprofits together in a mutual effort to protect and strengthen the role of voluntary organizations.

In hindsight, Mr. Gardner probably had the better idea, a notion to which Mr. O'Connell, in his later days, gave some credence. As long as he was at the helm, however, Mr. O'Connell, by force of his personality and leadership, managed to keep a balance between the two forces, maintaining the integrity and concerns of his nonprofit members. Since his departure, that balance appears to have tilted toward the donors.

The O'Connell epoch was rich in innovation, community outreach, and educational efforts.

He believed in the power of Independent Sector members, so it was natural for him to expand and diversify the organization's membership, to include grass-roots and advocacy-oriented groups as well as more established institutions.

Under his direction, Independent Sector grew to almost 1,000 members, a powerful force not only among nonprofits but in the government and academe as well.

And his vision was not limited only to matters of immediate self-interest to his membership but also to societal needs as a whole. Today's Independent Sector, with approximately 550 members—much less diverse in membership and top-heavy with donors—is, unfortunately, but a pale reflection of the house that Mr. O'Connell built.

Mr. O'Connell's Independent Sector reached out to push for preservation and expansion of antipoverty programs, urged nonprofits to take a stand on national budget priorities, and created new opportunities for young leaders.

Mr. O'Connell believed that education and outreach were the keys to a secure, independent nonprofit world. With the dedicated assistance of his vice president for research, Virginia Hodgkinson, he helped develop a strong and extensive network of nonprofit management and policy centers at universities throughout the country.

Many of the more than 200 of these entities that today train our future nonprofit leaders and conduct significant research about nonprofits owe their existence to Mr. O'Connell's vision. To his dying day, he pushed the idea that research and policy advocacy were essential elements of a vibrant nonprofit world.

With several nonprofit colleagues from both the United States and abroad, he helped establish an international nonprofit organization resembling Independent Sector.

The new group, Civicus, never managed to capture the nature and heart of the organization he and Mr. Gardner had established domestically, partly because it was formed as a top-down group that didn't invite the participation of its members in shaping its goals, a process that Mr. O'Connell in hindsight must have regretted. While it still exists in a semidormant state, Civicus is one of the few instances in which Mr. O'Connell failed to reach his objective.

Unlike many of his colleagues and successors, Mr. O’Connell was a team player, reluctant to take the credit for Independent Sector’s successes or for the efforts of many of the coalitions of which he was a part. He used board members wisely, was always gracious to staff members, colleagues and strangers alike and stayed calm in the face of adversity.

To some, he appeared a bit distant or cold, but he was a private person at heart, always deeply—but quietly—passionate about the issues and causes he loved. He had a huge number of friends and admirers. Some of us who from time to time disagreed with some of his views and practices nevertheless respected him for his candor, integrity, and dedication to nonprofits.

He espoused volunteerism as an essential ingredient of our civil society. His own life reflected this fervent belief. He was a trustee of Tufts University and served on innumerable nonprofit boards and coalitions. He always had time for yet another board or worthy cause.

He will be remembered fondly by all of us. As John Gardner said: “Most Americans welcome the voice that lifts them out of themselves, and of the voices to listen to, there is none more relevant than Brian O’Connell’s.”

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