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## **Philanthropy Loses Two of Its Giants: Waldemar Nielsen and Alan Pifer**

By Pablo Eisenberg

A touch of greatness marked the lives of Waldemar Nielsen and Alan Pifer, two of philanthropy's legendary figures, who both died last week after suffering long illnesses.

Though they differed in personality, style, and approaches, both men shared the same passion for strengthening the performance and accountability of grant makers. They cared deeply for the vast number of poor and disadvantaged people, both in this country and overseas, especially in Africa. Together they left a legacy of searing intellect and integrity for colleagues who would follow them as leaders in philanthropy.

Alan Pifer, who was 84 when he died, exerted his enormous influence primarily through the organizations, projects, and commissions he headed. Wally Nielsen, who died at age 88, played more of a loner, gadfly role, casting his incisive critical eye over American's private foundations, which he found to lack the transparency, leadership, and performance that society deserved.

Mr. Nielsen cut his teeth working at some of the world's most prestigious organizations. After World War II, he was a key American administrator of the Marshall Plan. He then became a senior executive at the Ford Foundation, where he directed both domestic and overseas projects.

His experience at Ford led him to the Africa-America Institute, where he served as president for almost 10 years. Under his leadership, the organization distinguished itself by helping to train hundreds of aspiring leaders from East and West Africa. During his time at the institute, he wrote three acclaimed books on Africa that analyzed the emergence of newborn nations from colonialism and recommended strong measures to eliminate apartheid in South Africa.

But it was as an analyst, critic, and writer on matters philanthropic that he reached the peak of his influence. *The Big Foundations*, his most celebrated book, was published in 1972.

In that book, he did what no other writer had done before: He exposed the soft, rotten underbelly of many of our largest foundations, institutions previously hidden from public view by a veil of secrecy and silence.

What made the book so compelling was that it was a work of admiration for philanthropy and demonstrated how much Mr. Nielsen loved the field. It was not an irresponsible, wanton attack. Wally Nielsen fervently believed that foundations had a crucial role to play in our society, one that government could not assume. To him, it was almost a sacrilege that so many of the large foundations he examined did not pass the test of relevancy, accountability, and innovation. He questioned whether tax subsidies to foundations and their donors were deserved when so many of the grant makers he examined did not function properly.

Mr. Nielsen's sharply critical analysis achieved another first. His scalpel spared no parts of a foundation's organization: its mission and priorities, its board, its programs, its employees, and its degree of openness. And he did not hesitate to name names. It was no surprise that numerous foundations and wealthy donors were shocked and angered by the book. Many never forgave him for what they believed was a breach of etiquette, if not accuracy.

In 1985 he issued *The Golden Donors*, an updated version of *The Big Foundations*, which looked at a new set of large foundations and found them just as timid and unwilling to take risks or be accountable as the older institutions. Once again the cries of annoyance and distress were loud and lasting. Nevertheless, his two key books had a major impact on many foundations, pushing them to greater openness and higher performance.

As head of the Carnegie Corporation from 1965 to 1982, Alan Pifer worked through the foundation to bring about social change. A foundation report on the plight of low-income college students led to a government effort to provide scholarships, now known as Pell Grants, to needy college students. Under his tenure, the foundation sponsored studies and pilot projects to add momentum to efforts to create high-quality programs to educate children before they reach school age.

Mr. Pifer also played a critical role in public broadcasting's early days. He encouraged Carnegie to finance Children's Television Workshop, which then started the PBS television show *Sesame Street*. He headed a Carnegie-sponsored commission that examined the potential for educational television, and its recommendations led to the creation of the public broadcasting system.

At a time when philanthropy activism was in its infancy, Alan Pifer steered his foundation's grant making into efforts to eliminate racial inequality, promote civil rights and women's rights, improve the quality of the schools, fight poverty, and encourage greater advocacy for the concerns of the public. He provided the leadership that enabled other foundations to embrace efforts to make grants to improve society and to take greater risks. His candor and outspokenness were a departure for major foundation directors better known for their timidity than for their social convictions.

Not everybody liked his forthrightness. He and the leader of the Ford Foundation, McGeorge Bundy, were roundly criticized by conservatives and by some moderates for departing from philanthropy's tradition of neutrality and embracing social activism. He

was proud of this reputation, just as he would have enjoyed still being the head of the activist class today.

Like Wally Nielsen, Mr. Pifer plunged into African affairs shortly after taking over the reins of the Carnegie Corporation, helping to create public-interest law projects in South Africa to combat apartheid policies and racism. He established a committee on poverty and development at the University at Cape Town to study how nonprofit groups in South Africa operated and their potential for eliminating economic and social inequities in the country.

Mr. Pifer was one of the first major foundation directors to steer money to the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, the nonprofit group formed 30 years ago to serve as a watchdog of the foundation world. An ardent supporter of the organization, he resisted the entreaties of some colleagues to drop Carnegie's backing of the organization. He strongly believed that foundations were in need of reform.

Alan Pifer surrounded himself with outstanding program staff members, much like Mr. Bundy did at Ford. He wanted and got the best colleagues, people with high intellect, impressive experience, strong convictions and passion, many of them with their own constituencies. He was not afraid of bright, outspoken, and powerful people, a far cry from so many of our current philanthropic leaders. They produced for him, and he knew their worth.

Impatience with the status quo, a desire for change, and a vision of philanthropy as it should be — those were the qualities that drove the lives of both Wally Nielsen and Alan Pifer. After his two big books on the major foundations, Wally kept criticizing and writing about foundations and nonprofit groups, collecting some of the articles into a book called *Inside American Philanthropy: The Dramas of Donorship*, which was published in 1996.

But he, like Mr. Pifer, also developed an insider strategy for change. He became an adviser to wealthy donors like Robert O. Anderson, a former chief executive of the Atlantic Richfield Company; Walter Annenberg, the television and publishing magnate; and Ewing Marion Kauffman, the pharmaceutical executive who built one of the nation's biggest foundations. His personal advice and efforts to change some of the big institutions were productive, but they could never quite achieve the influence and impact of his writing and critiques.

After his retirement from Carnegie, Alan turned to a more contemplative life of research and writing, yet he maintained his advocacy efforts on behalf of Americans in need. He rounded out his life by directing a major study on the baby-boomer generation, resulting in a book he helped to edit, *Our Aging Society: Paradox and Promise*.

Wally Nielsen and Alan Pifer were the last of this country's philanthropic giants — people like John Gardner, John Filer, Paul Ylvisaker, and James Shannon — who

illuminated the field and demanded a set of philanthropic standards that are in desperate need today.

Their intellect and integrity shone a spotlight on both the strengths and weaknesses of foundations, providing leadership where there has been little: Wally Nielsen, through his criticism, pushing foundations to do better; Alan Pifer, as a result of his forceful leadership, inspiring his colleagues to higher attainment. They will be sorely missed by all of us who long for foundations to fulfill their enormous promise.

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