



## **Interview With John Hunting**

### **Q: How did you first get involved in philanthropy?**

**A:** When I was six years old, my father gave me stock in a small company he co-founded in Grand Rapids, Michigan that eventually became Steelcase, the world's largest manufacturer of office equipment. In my 30's I started giving away 50% or more of my income to charities and progressive causes. My theory has always been that a lot of people have great ideas - the missing ingredient is money, and that's what I can provide.

I created the Dyer-Ives Foundation to support youth and neighborhood improvement projects in Grand Rapids. Then I got very involved in environmental issues and started the Beldon Fund as a national foundation to help strengthen environmental advocacy and to build support for policy change.

### **Q: Why did you decide to set a 10-year time horizon for the Beldon Fund?**

**A:** When Steelcase went public in 1997, I was able to give most of the proceeds from the sale of my stock - over \$100 million – to the Beldon Fund and I decided at that time to give it all away quickly. As an environmentalist, I felt that given the state of the world it would be inexcusable not to try to make a difference by spending out now.

### **Q: What are the Beldon Fund accomplishments you are most proud of?**

**A:** I think Beldon's programs helped strengthen environmental advocates so they are now much better positioned to take advantage of policy opportunities and respond to new environmental threats. I'm proud of what our grantees were able to accomplish in a difficult political environment. They have won scores of state policy victories, which helped build momentum for reform of national policies.

### **Q: Looking back, what would you have done differently?**

**A:** When we started out we made the mistake of taking on too many issues. All of us—staff and board—are committed environmentalists, and when you want to bring change you can sometimes end up biting off more than you can chew. An external evaluation two years into this work made it clear that we were spread too thin to be effective. So we whittled down to two programs and created a third flexible fund for opportunistic grants.

**Q: What advice would you give other funders?**

**A:** The first bit of advice is to hire a good executive director and pay him or her well. If the executive director has plenty of stuff on the ball, he or she will find other good people to hire. I would also urge foundations to put on their board people who are knowledgeable about their issues.

Second, for foundations that are just beginning, we learned that it's better to start with a tight focus and expand if warranted, rather than start with too many issues and then have to reduce them. Third, if you want to influence public policies, it's important to fund the full range of advocacy that nonprofits are allowed to pursue. Even though these are totally permissible activities, I know there is still some caution among foundations. So my advice is to involve a good lawyer who understands the law on foundations and advocacy, and then jump in.

Fourth, one of my little pet theories is that money is not always the most important thing a foundation offers. You can be a convener, a sounding board for ideas, and a broker between effective organizations and other funders. I think it's also important to promote collaboration among foundations, which makes all of our work more effective.

Finally, the Beldon Fund tried to make a difference by committing all its resources over ten years, and that allowed us to make big investments in a few key strategies.

Even if you don't want to choose the spend-out path, try not to get locked into the five percent payout. Consider a more flexible funding cycle that would allow you to meet timely needs in the field and to take advantage of opportunities to have a greater impact.