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"All Things Change." Inside a Family Foundation's Journey Toward Sharing Power

Dawn Wolfe



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Twenty years ago, founder Hans Schoepflin renamed his family foundation Panta Rhea, inspired by the Heraclitus quote that translates to “All things flow; all things change.” As it celebrates its anniversary, Panta Rhea is living up to the name with a reorganization of its funding programs, a new website, two new board members and a change in the board’s leadership.

In addition to inviting outside perspectives and creating ways to further share power with their community, the social justice and environmental funder hopes its newest evolution can serve as an example for other foundations that are still keeping it in the family, but would like to become more open and responsive.

The reorganization comes at a time when funders big and small are rethinking how well they serve their communities, taking a hard look at internal staffing, governance and grantmaking policies, and considering whether they might relinquish some of their control.

As Lisl Schoepflin—Hans’ daughter, former board chair, and now co-chair of the board—said in an email to Inside Philanthropy, “I hope we can support and inspire more family foundations to find

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ways that work for them to share power and decision making.”

New board members, reorganized programs, and a new look

Hans Schoepflin, who eventually became a successful venture capitalist after emigrating to the U.S. in the 1970s, used his wealth to endow both Panta Rhea in this country and Schöpflin Stiftung in his native Germany.

As part of its latest change, the funder has brought on Solomé Lemma, executive director of Thousand Currents, and social impact leader Cedric Brown, a senior fellow with Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity, who has also worked with the Obama Foundation, Color of Change, the Kapor Center and Foundation, and the San Francisco Foundation, among other roles. The appointments of Lemma and Brown mark a large shift in Panta Rhea’s board membership: They are the first members from outside of the Schoepflin family and their circle of friends, and the first leaders from the broader nonprofit community to sit on the board.

In addition to new members, the board’s leadership is now a shared position. Holly Roberson, one of the first non-family members to join the board during a previous reorganization in 2015, is now co-chair of the board alongside Lisl Schoepflin. Roberson told

Inside Philanthropy that she's excited to be part of a more diverse team than was present on the board when she first joined in 2015.

"This is a moment when we can walk the talk of Panta Rhea's 'all things flow; all things change' motto," she said in an email. "It's one thing to *say* you believe in the power of change and transformation, and quite another to manifest it in the bones of an organization."

Change is also happening at the programmatic level with the reorganization of Panta Rhea's giving into three named funds: the Food Sovereignty, People Power, and Global Roots funds. Meanwhile, the funder will continue to provide overall support to nonprofits through its "Resilience and Renewal" fund. Anna Lappé, an internationally known author and advocate for food justice and sustainability, will continue her leadership of the Food Sovereignty fund, which was initiated six years ago as the "Food and Democracy" program.

The changes will refine Panta Rhea's existing work to advance racially just and sustainable food systems, expand democracy, and support climate resilience in the Caribbean and Americas, according to Panta Rhea's executive director, Connie Malloy. The funder may also initiate additional efforts as they see gaps, as in the case of the 2020 launch of the Seaflower Resilience fund, in the wake of the two

hurricanes that hit the Western Caribbean islands of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina that year.

A foundation with a personal touch

The foundation that became Panta Rhea took on increasing importance to Hans Schoepflin in 1995, after the death of his teenage son. Malloy told Inside Philanthropy that the loss inspired him to reassess his role in the world and to take a greater interest in using his wealth to improve people's lives.

While the funder has historically focused on California and the U.S. overall, Malloy wrote that owing to the combination of some longstanding grantees in the Global South and the existence of their sister foundation in Germany, "we are increasingly leaning into that global identity and impact."

The family's giving has been growing in recent years, although it's somewhat difficult to track—only a portion of giving is reflected in Panta Rhea's finances, which showed just over \$428,000 in grants in 2018. However, in addition to funding provided directly by the foundation, nonprofit funding also moves through other family trusts and donor-advised funds, Malloy said. Between 2018 and 2020, these sources collectively doubled, she said, and in 2020, the combination of direct and

advised donations amounted to more than \$8 million.

As it evolves, Malloy said, Panta Rhea's mission has always—and will always—revolve around social justice and the environment. "I think, as someone who made his money in the corporate sector, he had seen so much of the abuses around resources and capital," and those experiences inspired Schoepflin to build his foundations "with an eye toward equity and an eye toward the environment and the Earth."

The foundation also plans to continue moving money via its "Resilience and Renewal" fund, which provides a range of support for nonprofit needs, including capacity building, leadership development, and "other resources that enable them to thrive in a challenging era."

Another aspect of Panta Rhea that doesn't seem destined to change is the "personal touch" approach they take to their grantees.

"[Panta Rhea] pick[s] up the phone, they call you, they invite you to do events together. They just have a little bit more of a personal touch because they're small and nimble compared to larger foundations that are trying to make this transition" to more equitable ways of moving money and interacting with grantees, said Melissa K. Nelson, president of the Cultural Conservancy, a grantee of the

foundation.

As an example, Nelson said that roughly a week after Malloy came on staff in 2019, she and Panta Rhea board members visited the conservancy at one of its farms for a day of cleaning seeds and working the soil together, an experience Nelson said demonstrated "real embodied engagement, not just intellectual" interest in the conservancy's work. "There's nothing like building community through cleaning seeds together, working with plants together," she said.

Panta Rhea's leadership isn't just interested in learning more deeply about the work they're funding. They have also invited their grantee partners to provide input on the foundation's current reorganization. The Cultural Conservancy was one of three grantees invited to a board meeting to ask the partners' input on Panta Rhea's reorganization plans.

"I don't know that many funders would reach out to solicit that kind of feedback from their community," said Sara Moncada, the Cultural Conservancy's chief executive officer.

The foundation's leaders are also working to make grantseekers' lives easier, providing general operating support as the default and looking to streamline its own application and reporting

process, including accepting proposal and report templates from other foundations.

“Lived and professional expertise”

The stage for Panta Rhea’s current evolution was set in 2015, when the board of directors opened itself to non-family members for the first time. In the beginning, the funder was “very family driven,” Malloy said, and even the new board members added in 2015 were friends of the family

The addition of Lemma and Brown to the board, Malloy said, marks “the first time that we’re really having board members who bring actual lived and professional expertise in the arenas in which we’re funding.”

Lisl Schoepflin said she expects that the changes will result in Panta Rhea being seen “as more a trusted and accountable ally... and take us beyond being only resources of money (which is important) but as advocates and partners for social justice change.”

The Cultural Conservancy’s Nelson told Inside Philanthropy that by adding people of color to their staff and with these additions to their board, Panta Rhea is “walking the talk” of modeling equity from the inside out. “No one will really take any foundation seriously unless they do structural changes like that,” Nelson said.

For her part, Malloy said the existing Panta Rhea board was shocked by how many highly qualified candidates they identified in their search that weren't yet part of any foundation boards.

The candidates they reviewed, Malloy said, "have exponentially more knowledge on philanthropy or on the subject matter than anybody in our network. And yet, they've not had the connection to people who are in control of the wealth and capital to be part of that network" of individuals who ultimately decide where the money moves.

"There's no end of amazing, qualified candidates," she said.

Branching out

Lisl Schoepflin told Inside Philanthropy that she's excited by the changes. By opening up, she said, she thinks "we can, in our own small way, be a source for healing," while also being "smarter, more accountable, creative and complex in our grantmaking and strategy by learning from others and including them in decisions."

"I'm excited to let myself and the foundation be transformed by the process rather than hold on to some incorrect entitlement of power and decision making," she said.

"Philanthropy is a funny space," said new Panta

Rhea co-chair Roberson, "and it can feel like an echo chamber sometimes. It can be quite self-congratulatory, so when you can make some real changes in how you do things and lean into conversations and places you haven't been before, it makes the work more alive and real."

"It's particularly exciting to imagine that these internal changes have the opportunity to ripple out into the broader conversations about philanthropy and power sharing/power building," Roberson added. "We believe these changes are examples of what it means to center equity in the work of stewarding resources and the power and access they provide."

At the same time, Schoepflin said one of the challenges in opening up her father's foundation has been learning "the right rate of change." She added that, rather than pushing for everything at once, "change like this works best in phased transitions" in order to avoid overwhelming the existing leadership.

Another challenge revolves around the feelings that come from confronting the "entrenched systematic biases and inequalities" that inherently exist, not only in philanthropy as a whole, but also "in the structures of family foundations and wealth."

Balancing the desire to be respectful to her father

and other family members while pushing for more shared decision making and confronting the injustices within philanthropy is not always easy, she admitted, though bringing in outside consultants and facilitators, and “keeping love in the center of the work and communication” have helped.

Ultimately, she said, the work of transforming family foundations “comes down to how we understand or reconceptualize legacy and perpetuity: Is it something held exclusively by a few over generations, or by and in community and reciprocity with others?”

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