

Serving Greater Seattle with a commitment to equity and opportunity: A Q&A with Tony Mestres

Tony Mestres joined Seattle Foundation in 2014, bringing 20 years of leadership in the high-technology industry to philanthropy and social impact in Greater Seattle. Together with the board of trustees, Tony is leading the foundation's evolution from an impartial philanthropic bank to an authentic civic leader committed to advancing equity and opportunity. NCRP's Yna Moore asked Tony about the foundation's journey so far.

Yna: Tell us about the Seattle Foundation's move toward greater civic leadership. Why is this role important and how does this fit in with the foundation's overall strategy to support equity and social justice?

Tony: There's no debate about the role that community foundations should be playing in society. We are powerful civic leaders, providing deep knowledge about our community to the philanthropists we work with every day. A community foundation committed to carrying out its mission in any of our country's major metropolitan regions must assume the role of civic leader; the challenges are too great and complex not to.

Creating a meaningful and measurable social impact is also a competitive commercial differentiator for us. Philanthropists have many choices in the marketplace. They can open a private foundation or work with the charitable arm of a national financial services provider, but they come to us when they realize that we are much more than an investment vehicle for philanthropic dollars.



Tony Mestres

At Seattle Foundation, we offer effective philanthropic advising, deep community knowledge and powerful civic leadership, all to advance equity and opportunity. We are unambiguous about this commitment. That clarity is attracting more philanthropists, non-profit leaders, corporate leaders and elected officials to partner with us.

I believe that, when we do what's right for the community, we are doing what's right for the community foundation. This requires taking a stand and leaving impartiality behind.

Yna: What were the important steps you took as you began operationalizing the foundation's commitment to equity and justice?

Tony: It has been important from the start to demonstrate that our commitment to social impact is inspired by more than values and beliefs. We are disciplined in our use of data and re-

search to substantiate our positions and our investments. For example, our partnership with King County is driven by racial and economic data that capture the tangible impacts of poverty on people in terms of health, life expectancy and more, along with regional economic competitiveness. This data guides our investments and how we engage with policymakers.

In 2015, we captured our new approach to community philanthropy with our brand: "the heart & science of philanthropy." This describes us as both champions of the heart and practitioners of the science of strategic philanthropy. We know we need compassion and substantiated strategic execution in order to make authentic, long-term, social change.

Yna: What tips would you have for other community foundations that are hoping to play a similar role in their regions?

Tony: The Seattle Foundation comes to the table with humility and openness to listen to opposing and divergent voices. We are genuine about getting feedback from all perspectives, and that is the most important role for a community foundation to play.

We call our approach to community impact the "3C model": communicate, convene and catalyze. We catalyze public, private and philanthropic investment, including funding, knowledge and people, to advance social change.

Convening brings together philan-

New and Renewing Members

Arcus Foundation

Asian Pacific Community in Action

Barr Foundation

The California Wellness Foundation

CivicLab

Edward W. Hazen Foundation

Ford Foundation

Foundation for Child Development

Greater New Orleans Foundation

Hill-Snowdon Foundation

Hull Family Foundation

Interfaith Worker Justice

Kansas Health Foundation

Kresge Foundation

Lloyd A. Fry Foundation

MapLight

Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

Max M. and Marjorie S. Fisher
Foundation

Midwest Academy from Chicago

National Housing Resource Center

National LGBTQ Task Force

New Visions Foundation

North Star Fund

Northwest Area Foundation

Pittsburgh Foundation

Silicon Valley - Mendelsohn
Family Fund

Southern Coalition for Social Justice

Tecovas Foundation

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation



Seattle Foundation's Vibrant Democracy Initiative aims to strengthen the voice and participation of underrepresented communities to allow for more equitable systems change. Photo courtesy of Seattle Foundation.

thropists, community leaders, academics, practitioners and, most importantly, residents to explore new ways of thinking about community needs and pathways to greater opportunity.

We also have begun to exercise our communication muscle. We know our most valuable assets are our knowledge, our networks and our voice. When we activate these strengths, we elevate the cause of equity and opportunity, and we advocate for the system change necessary to create the inclusive community we desire for all Seattle residents. We also can fight the fragmentation that often hinders effective policy-level change.

A community foundation that wants to assert its civic leadership needs to start with an evaluation of its readiness and capacity to execute well on all three C's.

Yna: What can nonprofit grantees and donors do to encourage or support this kind of role in their own community foundations?

Tony: Our mission is to ignite powerful, rewarding philanthropy to make Great-

er Seattle a stronger and more vibrant community for all. Now, more than ever, the “for all” is imperative. Political divisiveness and polarization have reached new heights, and, regardless of what side you lean toward, there exists a cacophony of feelings and anxiety about the future.

With nonprofits and philanthropists alike wondering how we are going to find a path forward, everyone should expect more from community foundations in leading that journey. We see ourselves as “the community’s foundation,” and our partners should push us for leadership and accountability.

Large foundations, in particular, do not necessarily always conduct the self-inspections they should. We need to be held accountable for investments that directly benefit underserved communities and advance greater equity and opportunity.

A community foundation’s focus cannot be defined by geography alone. We need to measure, with precision, how our efforts explicitly support people of color, the LGBTQ community, women, young people and other vulnerable populations. ■