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Taking Foundations to Task

Activist seeks to force grant makers to do more to help poor minorities

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Al Pina, of the Florida Minority Community Reinvestment Coalition, says grant makers in the state have a responsibility to do more to help poor minority families.

Al Pina is a fighter. The former U.S. Air Force sergeant is dedicated to helping families who live in poor neighborhoods dominated by minority groups. Since 2004 he has gone up against banks and other businesses here to get them to support these families, even going on a 16-day hunger strike to bring his opponents to the negotiating table.

Now he has a new target: foundations.

Mr. Pina, 46, who is chairman of the Florida Minority Community Reinvestment Coalition, says wealthy grant makers in the state do too little to benefit impoverished Floridians, a population largely made up of blacks and Hispanics.

His ally in this effort is the Greenlining Institute, a Berkeley, Calif., public-policy group that has raised similar concerns about foundations in California and elsewhere.

The institute is pushing members of Congress to require grant makers to disclose information about the diversity of the causes they support, as well as of their staff members and boards of directors.

Both the institute and Mr. Pina argue that as tax-exempt organizations, foundations are obligated to tell the public about how much of their giving aids members of minority groups.

Many foundation leaders, for their part, argue that Greenlining's demands stifle philanthropy and ignore the social benefits of giving to the arts, the environment, and other causes not directly related to fighting poverty.

Death Threats

In Florida the debate has gotten ugly. As Mr. Pina says, it's gotten "personal."

After the Publix Super Markets Charities, a grant maker affiliated with a Florida-based supermarket chain, disagreed with Mr. Pina's position and recruited a grantee, the United Way, to defend its philanthropy, Mr. Pina questioned the United Way's ability to help needy people and proposed a consumer boycott of the chain.

The Wall Street Journal editorial page accused Mr. Pina of "racial extortion" and running a "philanthropy shakedown" to create nonprofit jobs for college-educated minorities.

Mr. Pina says the state Legislature has expressed little interest in his cause. But with public pressure, along with interest in the issue expressed by some members of Congress, like Rep. Xavier Becerra, a California Democrat, Mr. Pina may succeed in getting Florida-based foundations to change how they operate.

"I'm beating the drum and making some people nervous, which I really don't care," says Mr. Pina, who says he's received death threats for his outspoken views about philanthropy. "The unemployment rates, the poverty rates, the crime rates are increasing. And they're going to continue to increase until we address them. I'm telling the foundations: You're not the only one responsible. Everybody's responsible."

Digging Up Data

The controversy started with a survey.

The reinvestment coalition commissioned Greenlining to examine giving by Florida's 10 wealthiest foundations.

The institute, as it has done in California and Pennsylvania, looked at how many grants and how many dollars went to "minority-led" charities — those with racial or ethnic minorities whose members make up at least half of the staff and governing board, and which offer services predominantly to minorities.

Only one foundation agreed to participate in the survey, so Greenlining collected data from the informational tax returns grant makers are required to submit to the Internal Revenue Service.

The study, released in November, found that in 2006 about 5.5 percent of grants and less than 7 percent of grant dollars supported minority-led groups.

By comparison, a Greenlining survey last year found that in 2005, the nation's 25 wealthiest foundations awarded 12 percent of their grants and 8 percent of their grant money to minority-led organizations.

Foundations involved in the Greenlining study argue that it undercounts their support for minorities.

For example, the Flight Attendant Medical Research Institute, in Miami, says its support for research into antismoking efforts and cancer treatment serves to help minorities.

"It funds research that applies to everybody," says Rod N. Petrey, a lawyer for the organization, which emerged from a class-action lawsuit against tobacco companies on behalf of flight attendants who had died or become sick as a result of secondhand smoke on airplanes.

A Confrontation

The Publix Super Markets Charities, which according to Greenlining awarded almost no grant dollars to minority-led charities, disputed the survey's findings, too.

In a letter to Mr. Pina, Tina P. Johnson, the group's treasurer, said that the foundation did not track how much it gave to minority-led groups and disagreed with his analysis. "It infers that a very small percentage of our giving helps and improves the lives of minorities. And this is simply not true," she wrote.

She pointed out that a large portion of the \$30-million the foundation gave in 2008 supported local United Way chapters, Boys & Girls Clubs, and Habitat for Humanity affiliates, which serve a large number of black and Hispanic as well as other people.

When Mr. Pina said the letter had not resolved his concerns, the Publix foundation asked Ted Granger, president of the United Way of Florida, to speak out on its behalf. He agreed.

Mr. Granger attended a public meeting in Jacksonville in January, at which Mr. Pina and other minority activists were scheduled to discuss problems facing the city's poor residents with members of the City Council. Mr. Pina had said the issue about Publix's giving would be on the agenda.

When it came time for Mr. Granger's turn at the podium, the United Way leader promoted the work of Publix and said it was helping disadvantaged people. More than one-third of its giving, he said, supported the United Way in Florida, where about half of the 34 chapters serve a population that is more than 50-percent minority.

The comments infuriated Mr. Pina, who confronted Mr. Granger in front of the gathering. "I said, 'How dare you? How dare you disrespect these people? That was so insensitive.'"

Mr. Pina says he was outraged not only by the defense of Publix, but also because the speaker previous to Mr. Granger had complained of the lack of economic development in her neighborhood, adding that her nephew had been killed the previous night in a drive-by shooting. After that testimony, to speak of progress in reducing inner-city problems was insulting to both her and the audience, he says.

Even weeks later, Mr. Pina becomes agitated while talking about it: "Some fights are personal. I can tell you with what Publix pulled in Jacksonville, Publix is now personal to me."

Mr. Granger says he stands by his statement at the meeting. "I understand and am very sensitive to the issue that Greenlining has with regard to the serious issues that low-income, minority, and disadvantaged people are facing," he says. "Our very strong belief is that Publix Super Markets Charities, through United Way and other charities, does an extraordinary amount to help those communities."

He suggests that some of the grass-roots groups for which Mr. Pina advocates do not have the accounting practices and training to measure "community impact" in a way to compete for foundation grants.

'We're Not Respected'

Whatever the reason, charities run by minorities feel ignored by Florida foundations, says Sylvia A. Alvarez, executive director of the Housing and Education Alliance here.

Ms. Alvarez says her group, which operates on a \$300,000 budget, receives little help from philanthropies like Publix but could use grant money effectively. She says her organization desperately needs grants because demand for housing counseling is soaring as a result of the home-foreclosure crisis.

"How can we go out there and teach self-sufficiency when [foundations] are making it so difficult for the nonprofits working in the trenches?" she asks. "We're not respected at all."

Part of the problem — what Ms. Alvarez describes as a "slap in the face" — is that Publix officials have declined to meet with Mr. Pina.

In an e-mail message to *The Chronicle*, Maria Brous, a spokeswoman for the company, says the foundation is unable to meet with nonprofit leaders. It has "a very small staff, to allow for the most dollars to go directly to charities and not to supporting staff," she says.

"Therefore they are unable to accept requests for meetings. The foundation does not meet with any requestor."

Mr. Pina, however, remains confident that talks will eventually ensue. "Publix can fight it all it wants," he says, "but I can guarantee you, it will come to the table, either kicking and screaming or in peace."

His tenacious, if belligerent, attitude comes from a pact he says he made a decade ago with God. After working for the Air Force inspector general, as a sales manager for PepsiCo and Philip Morris USA, and then at an economic-development organization in Los Angeles, he came down with a stomach ailment. During medical treatment, he says, he pledged to God that he would do more to help the less fortunate if he got better: "I went through a serious illness 10 years ago. On the gurney, I made some promises."

His commitment deepened a few years ago when his brother was killed in Phoenix, where they had grown up. He blames not the killer but the rampant poverty that had eaten away at his neighborhood.

His brother's death, he says, gave him "the strength of a lion or Godzilla, depending on which side of the ledger you're on."

For now, that righteous anger is aimed at Publix and the United Way.

He plans to conduct an online survey in Florida to find out whether people in minority neighborhoods think the local United Way is effective at meeting their needs.

And in May he wants to start a statewide public boycott of Publix markets until the foundation's officials agree to meet.

He hopes that Florida foundations will follow the example of their peers in California, where a state lawmaker put pressure on several large grant makers to pledge a total of \$30-million to help charities that mainly serve minorities.

Mr. Pina is optimistic. "I've told bankers and others, You can't beat me. I'm willing to die for what I believe in," he says. "I feel the pain and suffering of [impoverished] people. It angers me. And that anger turns into momentum and energy."