

THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS 1978-1998

CHARLES H. REVSON
FOUNDATION

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

STRIVING TO
make a
DIFFERENCE:
THE FIRST
TWENTY YEARS

In the late 1970s when the Charles H. Revson Foundation began making grants, the end of the century seemed very far away, and none of us thought we would personally have the opportunity to assess our history through such a long lens. Early on, a consultant said to our board, "Imagine that you are reading about the foundation in a major magazine twenty years from now. What would you want that article to conclude?" Even then, it was clear to us that while the destination mattered a great deal, the quality of the journey mattered even more. Now, with the unexpected opportunity to reflect on the Foundation's first twenty years, I see it less as a time to draw conclusions and more as a moment in time from which to "look backward for a while . . . to refresh the eye, to restore it," in the words of one writer, "and to render it more fit for . . . looking forward."

The world of philanthropy has also changed significantly over this period of time. With the growth of the U.S. economy, the number of foundations has grown dramatically: from 22,000 in 1980 to more than 44,000 today. With new fortunes created in the stock market boom years of the 1980s and 1990s, there is more money around for philanthropic purposes, in virtually all parts of the country. Over the next few decades, it is predicted, the greatest transfer of wealth in history will occur with the passing of a generation that amassed fortunes in the post-World War II economic expansion. These legacies, amounting to trillions of dollars, will create new opportunities for philanthropy on a scale never before seen in history.

Between 1978 and 1998 the Charles H. Revson Foundation, beginning with an endowment of \$68 million and giving away a little over \$3 million in its first year, has seen its endowment grow to close to \$200 million and its grant appropriations increase to more than \$9 million annually. As a foundation of modest size, we've concentrated our energies on a relatively small number of projects. We've worked with hundreds of partners to make things happen that we could not have underwritten on our own. To the nearly \$120 million we have granted, an additional \$130 million in funding from our partners has made it possible to bring to fruition a number of big ideas, especially media projects with nationwide educational ambitions that require very substantial budgets. Our giving has been distributed roughly equally among our four program areas.

We have tried always to define the Foundation in a way that would leave it open to innovation, able to grow by its experiences, build on its successes, and learn from its mistakes. In charting a long-range course, we have wanted to give new programs enough time and support to flourish. One of the hallmarks of our history has been a willingness to remain flexible and stay with an idea, following it into new directions that emerge over time.

Several trends have emerged that shed light on what we have valued and how our vision has evolved. These trends cut across our program, representing a substantial portion of resources disbursed: the creative use of communications technology as a means to further other goals, from interfaith understanding to citizen participation to classroom learning; innovative fellowship programs that are aimed at the talented, committed individuals who will help shape the next century in law, science, urban development, and other fields; and the vital work of independent organizations that monitor government policy in order to make democracy more

responsive to its citizens. Looking at the Foundation's first two decades through this perspective helps illuminate many of the concerns, values, and passions that have animated our giving. The grants discussed in the pages that follow, while only a few of the 858 grants we have made over twenty years, represent some of the highlights of our program.

THE POWER OF MEDIA

The impact of the telecommunications revolution will surely be as profound as the transition from the scroll to the book, and harnessing this revolution in behalf of human progress is our generation's challenge for the next century. A world of limitless channels can represent simply more offerings of triviality and violence, or it can provide new insights into human history, tell inspiring stories, educate and bring people together, challenge the mind and touch the heart.

In the Foundation's first report, we articulated our interest in the impact of media and technology on education and other fields, and noted the prediction by experts that "by the end of this century" interconnected systems will deliver an array of services, from instruction to shopping to mail, and that "the new links will change the ways we teach, learn, and live." The predicted changes have indeed occurred, and continue to emerge at a breathtaking pace. The ramifications are significant for the future of education, from the early years to adulthood.

Television, the dominant communications medium in 1978, continues to grow into its multichannel future, but it is now joined by an unfolding assortment of technologies that offer new opportunities for conveying ideas and, through interactivity, involving the user in exciting ways. With these, as with all technologies, it is, fundamentally, the content that matters; the vehicles – computers, CD-ROM, DVD – are only the means of delivery. But new technologies have opened up new avenues of creativity, communication, and learning, allowing some of the projects we have assisted over this period to evolve in some fascinating new directions.

Exploring Jewish History, on Television and Through DVD

In the year 2000, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, an acclaimed 1984 public television series with Abba Eban about the interaction of the Jewish people with other cultures over the course of history,

will debut in a new format called DVD, or “digital video disc.” Four years in development, with the support of many funders, the *Heritage* DVD will enable users not only to see the series on their computers with twice the resolution of television but to stop the program at any point to delve into a topic more deeply by drawing on a vast database that includes entries from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, film footage, artwork, photographs, animation, audio recordings, maps, and dramatic readings. By sliding along a timeline and across maps, a user can travel through history, seeing borders change, nations rise and fall, trade routes appear and disappear, settlements flourish and fade.

We never could have anticipated that a single project – begun with one of our very first grants – would end up spanning the twenty-year life of the Foundation. Seed money we provided in 1979 gave rise to the idea for the original nine-part series, ultimately supported by more than a hundred donors, that was seen by more than fifty million U.S. viewers and several hundred million more when it was shown in sixteen other countries, including Russia. After the initial broadcast, grants from the Foundation made it possible for the filmmakers to save the extensive research and footage for the series – which included hundreds of hours of film as well as photographs of more than five thousand art objects from museums all over the world – awaiting the day when technology might provide new opportunities to make use of it. The original, extensive study materials created to accompany *Heritage* made it possible for a viewer to watch a segment of the series – on, for example, the Dreyfus trial – consult the study guide for background on anti-semitism in nineteenth-century Europe, and read, from the sourcebook of original documents, excerpts from Emile Zola’s *J’Accuse*. The DVD takes this a giant step further, with full interactivity and a treasure of new material, in print, sound, picture, and motion.

Bridging Differences: The Many Pathways of Sesame Street

A second project that has spanned nearly the whole of the Foundation’s history and that has evolved into ever more exciting forms is the Israeli version of *Sesame Street*, *Rechov Sumsum*, which was first broadcast in 1983. Since that time it has been a lively resource not only for early learning but also for promoting tolerance and respect for differences by familiarizing children with the many ethnic and religious groups that make up Israeli society. A unique adaptation, *Shalom Sesame*, has introduced North American children to Israel and the Hebrew language through television broadcasts and the marketing of more than 350,000 videocassettes.

Taking a path-breaking next step, this year a new Israeli-Palestinian coproduction, designed to model a better world for children in the Middle East and assisted by a broad spectrum of donors in the United States and Europe, premiered in Israel and the West Bank. With Israeli and Palestinian “streets” and characters (human and Muppet) visiting each other’s neighborhoods,

My wish, indeed, my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part the curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s plight.

EUDORA WELTY

introducing Hebrew and Arabic to one another, and learning about shared traditions and culture, from food to holidays, the series has already proved to be helping to break down barriers of prejudice and mistrust. An evaluation of young viewers on both sides of the Jordan River

showed such positive results that it led to a conference bringing together broadcasters and educators from Northern Ireland and South Africa, who want to learn from the model, as well as representatives from Jordan, which may participate in a planned second season.

Finding Common Ground in the Stories of Genesis

Another landmark project, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* with Bill Moyers, grew out of our belief that the search for knowledge can bring people together, and that bringing people together can yield understanding. This 1996 public television series, which we supported with a number of funding partners, brought together theologians, writers, artists, and scholars, believers and skeptics, men and women, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Jews, to discuss some of the oldest stories of Western civilization – the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood. Local churches, synagogues, and interfaith and interracial community organizations all over the country held their own “conversations,” mirroring the television series. A study guide and a website enabled viewers to deepen their learning and to “chat” with others from around the world.

Genesis garnered a wide audience, received worldwide press coverage, including the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and demonstrated the abiding power of ideas. But perhaps most striking, it demonstrated that people from widely divergent backgrounds can find common ground in the Bible – sometimes in their agreement, always in their engagement. By studying and talking together,

participants found that sometimes, “despite our differences,” as Bill Moyers put it, “we shared our deepest values with people who seemed most unlike us.”

Expanding Knowledge and “Lighting the Fire”

“Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire,” wrote William Butler Yeats, and nothing illustrates this better than the use of television and other telecommunications media for education. The power of media to bring the past to life is reflected in Foundation grants to several projects that, with creativity and seriousness, expand knowledge of history and deepen awareness and understanding of the human experience.

Encarta Africana uses the vast dynamic capacity of a CD-ROM to combine text, illustrations, film, and music into a visually splendid, intellectually rich, comprehensive encyclopedia of Black history and culture. Released last year to great acclaim, *Encarta* was developed by Professors Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. Anthony Appiah of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University, with assistance from the Foundation and others until an investment by Microsoft made the project a reality.

In the 1980s, the award-winning PBS series on the civil rights era, *Eyes on the Prize*, was called “one of the most moving series that has ever been shown on television.” The series formed the basis for a course used on campuses all over the country, giving thousands of young people their first true sense of the urgency and drama of the movement for racial equality.

The Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies was one of the first projects to demonstrate the value and power of video testimony to document this most terrible chapter in modern history. Begun by a small group of Holocaust survivors in the city of New Haven who wanted to ensure that their stories would not be forgotten, the project moved to Yale with a Foundation grant in 1982 and has since conducted nearly four thousand interviews in the United States, Europe, South America, and Israel (it was endowed by the Fortunoff family in 1987). Its testimonies have been incorporated into national curricula on the Holocaust used by thousands of classroom teachers and in a number of films, including *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust*, to be broadcast on PBS next year. In addition, the archive has helped to train others in projects around the world and has created a standard interview template used by other groups and institutions, including Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which is in the process of collecting fifty thousand testimonies from Holocaust survivors, whose numbers diminish every year.

Two Foundation-initiated projects have collected video material on Jewish subjects and made it available for educational purposes. The National Jewish Archive of Broadcasting, established at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1979, has received and archived more than four thousand programs dating back to the early years of television, capturing the voices and images of David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, the artistry of Marc Chagall and Isaac Stern, the wisdom of Elie Wiesel and Isaac Bashevis Singer. The Jewish Heritage Video Collection – an extensive video library of outstanding film and television programs, along with original film-based curricula on topics from Yiddish culture to romance to Israel – has been installed at nearly 150 sites in 38 states, where it is accessible to teachers, students, and families.

The Internet offers enormous potential to make information on historical, educational, and policy issues available in new ways. In beginning to explore this area, we recently made grants for a number of Internet-based projects, including the Electronic Policy Network, a website offering information on public policy issues and links to the websites of more than fifty nonprofit policy organizations; the Jewish Women's Archive, a "virtual archive" that draws on primary materials dispersed in many locations and makes them accessible to a worldwide audience over the Internet; and Citizens Union, for a daily newsletter with links to policy and government websites of concern to New Yorkers.

Finally, we have supported two innovative projects, created by the Waterford Institute and by Boston's WGBH/Channel 2, that teach reading to youngsters through imaginative computer programs, a lively television series, videos, books, and activity guides, as well as the involvement of parents and teachers.

BETTING ON PEOPLE

While communications grants are by their nature aimed at the largest possible audiences, grants for fellowships work on a different scale, reaching individuals. They seek to accomplish change by supporting women and men who, as scientists or scholars, law students or community activists, strive to expand their horizons and thus enhance their capacity to help others. Investing in individuals requires faith: You can only help a limited number of people, and you may not be able to tell for decades whether the investment has paid off. In the two decades since we began making grants, nearly one-third of our funding has gone

to individuals through a series of carefully crafted fellowship programs, many of them named for Charles H. Revson.

Since 1979 more than two hundred activist, midcareer professionals with a record of leadership in the neighborhoods and organizations that make New York City tick – from community organizations to unions, from the uniformed services to the press – have spent a year at Columbia University as Charles H. Revson Fellows on the Future of the City of New York. Fellows, some of whom have never gone to college, have the freedom to design their own course of study at Columbia and the opportunity to learn from one another. At a twentieth-anniversary conference this year, former fellows talked about leadership for social change. “Find your way around obstacles,” one said, “and make the results happen.” “Have passion for a democratic society,” declared another. “Never,” said a third, “lose your belief that things can be different than they are.” The program, the only one of its kind in the city or the nation, has created a growing network of leaders dedicated to making New York a better place.

A variety of fellowship programs we have supported encourage talented young people to choose careers in the public interest and strengthen leadership in the nonprofit world. Beginning in the 1980s, in a program now directed by the Public Interest Law Center at New York University

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough . . . the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Law School, nearly thirteen hundred metropolitan-area law students, the majority of them women and minorities, have been introduced to the world of public interest law through summer internships at legal, nonprofit, and gov-

ernment agencies. We have also assisted seven different programs that have trained close to a thousand community leaders, educators, and city government and nonprofit officials in New York, as well as minority activists from around the country.

The changing role of women and, in particular, bringing more women into public life, has been one of the ongoing themes of the Foundation’s work. Foundation-funded fellowships at the Georgetown University Law Center and George Washington University have brought more than a hundred talented young lawyers and graduate students to Washington, where they have gained hands-on policymaking experience in organizational and congressional offices on issues

affecting women and children while doing graduate work and attending special seminars. In Albany, seventy fellows have had the opportunity to work on women's issues in the New York State Assembly and Senate while doing graduate work in public policy at the Center for Women in Government of the State University of New York. We have also funded workshops that have, over the years, trained more than ten thousand women in the practical campaign skills needed to run for public office.

In the area of biomedical research, Revson Fellowships at preeminent research institutions in New York and Israel have enabled more than three hundred gifted recent MDs and PhDs to do postdoctoral work in laboratories of established scientists, where they have gained the necessary experience to embark on their own research careers. During the 1980s, when cutbacks and retirements were decimating whole departments at Israeli research institutions, appointments as Revson Fellows at the Weizmann Institute of Science and Hebrew University of Jerusalem helped bring more than seventy young Israeli scientists back from overseas and put them on track for permanent positions.

The rapidly growing field of Jewish studies has been enriched by more than one hundred scholars sustained by Revson Fellowships in the doctoral program at Jewish Theological Seminary, who are now teaching at colleges and universities in North America, Europe, and Israel. And, in a program that spanned the late 1980s and early 1990s, Revson Fellowships at arts institutions in New York City assisted fields with few resources, helping more than a hundred young sculptors, choreographers, directors, composers, dancers, painters, and writers make the transition from student to professional.

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

Making the promise of democracy a reality depends on the ability of ordinary citizens to understand and be involved in the political system. But in our complex world of information overload, sorting out the processes of government and providing reliable analysis to the public can be daunting tasks. Nonprofit policy organizations play a crucial role in shedding light on the often obscure actions of government, offering an independent voice in the arenas where policy is made, informing the public, and providing an

essential link in the democratic process. For almost two decades, with about a quarter of our funds, the Foundation has supported organizations in Washington, New York, and Israel that help fulfill the promise of a civil society by ensuring accountability in areas as diverse as civil rights, budget policy, Arab-Israeli cooperation, and biomedical research.

A number of key groups dedicated to representing the interests of the most underrepresented segments of society in the nation's capital have received our support, with a particular emphasis on their public-information activities. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, which established a Washington office in 1977, has played a central role in monitoring civil rights decisions and activities in all three branches of government and in working for more effective laws to protect the rights of minorities. The Children's Defense Fund, founded by Marian Wright Edelman in 1973, has been an impassioned advocate for children, especially those who are disadvantaged, through its research, testimony, and publications that reach a wide audience, from government officials to families. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, founded in 1981 by Robert Greenstein to examine the impact of government policies on low- and middle-income Americans, studies extremely complex but highly consequential budget and finance issues, dis-

*The world rests on three things:
justice, truth and peace.*

PIRKE AVOT
(SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS) 1:18

seminating its analyses to policymakers, the press, and the public. The Communications Consortium, established in 1985 to improve the capacity of nonprofits to use communications technology, has helped thousands of organizations all over the country articulate their mes-

sages, launch collaborative campaigns, and utilize media effectively for public education and policy change.

In New York, the passage of welfare legislation mandating benefit reductions and work requirements has led to a major initiative, launched with Foundation support, to monitor the effects of welfare reform at the city and state level. Six organizations with experience in different aspects of welfare – including the Legal Aid Society, Coalition for the Homeless, and Community Food Resource Center – are working together to track the immediate results of reductions in the welfare rolls, such as evictions, denials of child care, and emergency food needs, and reporting their findings to the public. Over the longer term, they are joining in an effort to shape policies that help people become self-sufficient while offering protection from the damaging effects of poverty.

Taking a long-term perspective on New York City has been a part of our mission since one of our first grants helped establish the Urban Research Center at New York University. The center, which was endowed by the Taub family in 1994, has become a respected locus for original, objective research that is aimed at policymakers and the public. Another Foundation-assisted project – the Environmental Simulation Laboratory – has made mapping the city of tomorrow possible today. The SimLab, as it is called, is an innovative computer model of the city that makes it possible to “walk” down a street, “drive” through a housing complex, and “look down” into surrounding neighborhoods from a twentieth-floor window, thus visualizing the impact of proposed projects before they are approved.

The fundamental power of citizens in a democracy rests in the right to vote – a right too many Americans fail to exercise as a result of disinterest, disillusionment, or inadequate information. In one approach to this problem, the Foundation, along with a large coalition of donors, has since 1984 supported nonpartisan election-year get-out-the-vote advertising campaigns featuring sports and entertainment celebrities that have reached millions of potential new voters. Viewers of these ads are directed to a related project, Project Vote Smart, a comprehensive national data bank available year-round on the Internet as well as through an 800 number, where users can look up the positions and voting records of all thirteen thousand candidates for state and federal office, and can get local information on where and when they can register to vote.

Israel’s Future in a Middle East at Peace

Our interest in Israel encompasses a belief that improving government and other sectors of society through monitoring and the dissemination of information is as vital in Jerusalem as in Washington, and has led to major grants to two institutions that play key roles in Israeli society.

With more than \$8 million in Foundation support since 1980, the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies has become established as an independent policy institute with national scope, the only one of its kind in the country. As a think tank able to draw from all universities and across disciplines, it provides much-needed objective research on Jerusalem and on national social, political, and economic issues that is respected by decision makers across the political spectrum. An increasingly central setting for the discussion of vital issues, the institute regularly brings together government officials, academics, the public and the press for forums that generate extensive media coverage.

Following the Oslo Accords in 1993, the institute expanded its work to help lay the groundwork for future Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. It has since developed projects with Arab research centers to jointly address issues affecting both populations, such as tourism and water resources. Its heralded Peace Kit, used by negotiating teams on all sides, examined the legal issues and the practicality of scores of proposals for the status of Jerusalem that have been proposed over the last century. In a joint project with the Arab Studies Society, the institute has begun to train mediators from both communities in Jerusalem to resolve commercial, social, and environmental disputes and to help mediate interethnic and interreligious conflicts before they result in confrontation or court proceedings.

Our interest in the future of Israeli science led us on a quest that resulted in the establishment of a new Israel National Science Foundation (INSF) in 1993. By 1986, a decade of budget-cutting was beginning to threaten the future of scientific research in Israel, which has, since its beginnings, been home to world-class research institutions, a highly trained workforce, and an important sector of science-based industry. A Foundation-supported study that sought out the advice of prominent scientists across the United States and in Israel called for substantially increased investment and a new mechanism for evaluating proposals and awarding basic research grants. In response, we made a challenge grant of \$5 million to the Israel Academy of Sciences to establish a new fund for basic biomedical research, which subsequently attracted contributions totaling \$25 million from other donors in Europe and the United States and a pledge from the Israeli government to provide continuing support. Israeli government funding for basic research has risen from \$1.5 million per year in the mid-1980s to more than \$30 million in 1999, channeled through the INSF. A new initiative by the Israel Academy of Sciences that targets potentially critical cutting-edge research areas, funded by the INSF and private donors, allows the academy to reach out to outstanding scientists and laboratories in other countries, fostering the originality and excellence that can keep Israel in the forefront of scientific and technological innovation.

THE NEXT TWENTY YEARS

At the end of the twentieth century – which has witnessed such broadening enlightenment and such dark inhumanity – our challenge is to demonstrate to the world, by example and by purpose, the reality of the American dream: that minorities can be protected from the tyranny of the majority, that pluralism is possible, that respect for all peoples is not an impossible wish. In a nation whose population is becoming ever more diverse, in a world where 192 nations strive to make themselves heard, in a city whose schoolchildren speak more than 100 different languages, building on what ties people together, while respecting what makes them distinct, will take all the creativity that can be summoned by government, foundations, and the nonprofit community.

Private philanthropy has the freedom, privilege, and responsibility to do what government cannot. It can use its independence to take the long view, to forewarn, to support the unpopular, the visionary, the dreamers and their dreams. It can test new ideas, try new approaches, and bring together people of widely differing perspectives, disciplines, and talents to discover new avenues of mutual understanding.

Looking back on twenty years of the Revson Foundation, we are inspired by the dedication, the energy, and, perhaps most of all, the belief in the possibility of change of those who come to us with their ideas. We try to join them on a journey of the imagination, but we know that a foundation only vicariously explores the horizons with those it supports. As funders, we are not on the front lines but one step away from the action.

Ultimately, the people and organizations who have embarked on this voyage with us will tell the story of the Foundation. Only they, and time, will tell whether we have set sail in the right direction, navigated well, and made a lasting difference.

Eli N. Evans

President