

A SOLID FOUNDATION

Fred Blackwell, on stage, steering an ambitious new strategy to combat inequality from San Francisco to Oakland and beyond.

BY MICHELLE KONSTANTINOVSKY

In the months since November's election, countless organizations and community groups across the country have declared a renewed commitment to social justice issues. But long before ballots were cast and poll results poured in, one of the nation's largest community foundations set its sights on leveling the uneven racial and economic landscape of the Bay Area. The shift in focus was no overnight decision; it was the culmination of careful strategizing over many years paired with the addition of a forward-thinking innovator ready to take the reins.



Since joining The San Francisco Foundation (TSFF) in 2014, CEO **Fred Blackwell** has led the nonprofit toward significant change—no small feat considering the nearly 70-year-old institution has more than \$1.3 billion in assets and distributes nearly \$100 million a year to nonprofit organizations. Last summer, Blackwell helped TSFF revamp its grantmaking strategy to explicitly address racial and economic disparities. For the first time, funding was divided into three main categories: “people,” “place” and “power,” awarding grants to nonprofits working within those categories to remove systemic barriers, enrich local communities and strengthen political involvement.

“Since we were founded in 1948, we’ve been committed to social justice,” says **Judith Bell**, the foundation’s vice president of programs, adding that “we’ve been able to build on this strong foundation, moving from a regional footprint to a regional agenda, and from a commitment to social justice to a focus on racial and economic equity. We are committed to advancing an agenda for people, place and power to make sure that everyone in the Bay Area can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.”

Last July, the foundation awarded nearly \$5.3 million to 42 organizations working toward those goals. San Francisco’s Tenderloin Neigh-

borhood Development Corporation was among the organizations that benefited from the move, receiving \$250,000 to support its efforts to reduce residential displacement in low-income neighborhoods. “The residents of the Tenderloin have long been vulnerable to displacement, but never more so than now, when inequality is so acute throughout the nation and the threat

so real,” says **Don Falk**, the nonprofit’s CEO. “The new direction of the foundation ... goes to the heart of the underlying issues that stand as barriers to racial and economic injustice.”

Another way the foundation has addressed these core issues is through its new rapid-response fund for “movement building,” which provides timely resources to groups faced with “unanticipated, but critical opportunities or challenges” that impede equality. These grants, which range from \$3,000 to \$15,000, are generally paid out to recipients within 30 days or sooner to help

support individuals facing crises or organizations addressing urgent community needs. According to Bell, about 70 percent of the funds are currently going toward issues around immigration.

“We had a rapid response fund planned before the election, but we accelerated the launch,” Bell says. “There’s no question the requests we’re receiving are reflective of the current context.”

Recently, a rapid response grant went toward providing legal counsel for a UC Berkeley student fighting to stay in the U.S. through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an immigration policy for undocumented individuals who entered the United States as children. “The rapid response fund can provide legal support for those folks and provide emergency text alerts in case there’s an ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] raid,” Bell says.

As the executive director of Oakland’s Alliance for Community Development, **Nayeli Maxson** has seen the effects of the initiative firsthand. The foundation “is giving community members and organizations hope right now,” she says. “[Thei r] rapid-response work shows resource providers and grassroots organizations that they are listening. They hear the community’s voices saying loud and clear that *we need help and we need it urgently.*”

As the future remains unclear for many amid new leadership in Washington, some look to the foundation as a source of optimism. Says **Sheryl Davis**, executive director of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. “I’m excited for the work TSFF is doing—the intentionality around equity is needed more than ever and working with ‘the people’ to move the power back to community has started a movement that has brought hope back to many who have felt forgotten or discarded.”

Read Janet Reilly’s interview with Fred Blackwell on page 52.

“THEY HEAR THE COMMUNITY’S VOICES SAYING LOUD AND CLEAR THAT WE NEED HELP AND WE NEED IT URGENTLY.”

—**Nayeli Maxson**, Alliance for Community Development in Oakland