

Moving Foundations

CANADA'S LARGEST
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
SETS A NEW
DIRECTION

vancouver
foundation



JAMIE KOWAL

Jake Kerr (chair) and Faye Wightman (president and CEO) of Vancouver Foundation.



TIFFANY BROWN COOPER

Vancouver Foundation works to help children, youth and families.

VANCOUVER FOUNDATION IS ENTERING A NEW ERA. The 65-year-old institution – Canada's largest community foundation – is transforming itself, from a pillar of B.C.'s philanthropic community into an agenda setter.

"We've always done great work. But by being more proactive, we can have a bigger impact," says Foundation president and CEO, Faye Wightman.

Wightman, who's in her late fifties, speaks quickly, laughs easily, and exudes the energy of a woman decades younger. A non-profit sector dynamo (probably best known for overseeing a 650-per-cent-revenue increase while B.C. Children's Hospital Foundation president), Wightman took over the helm of Vancouver Foundation in 2005, and promptly launched a listening exercise: Foundation staff travelled throughout the province, asking British Columbians

what mattered to them. (The Foundation's name is somewhat deceptive; a substantial portion of its funds is actually distributed outside of Metro Vancouver.)

"Community foundations support communities in a given region – in our case, B.C. – rather than a specific cause, such as the environment, or sick kids," Wightman explains, framed by the spectacular panorama of the docks and North Shore mountains that is the view from Vancouver Foundation's 12th-floor office. "To support communities, you have to mirror the complexity of the communities," says Wightman. "That's why we fund such a range, from arts and culture, to environmental protection, to medical research, to youth and family issues. After 65 years of giving, the listening exercise was a reality check for us. Are we really supporting the right things in the right way?" >

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VANCOUVER FOUNDATION



GARY FIEGHEH

Supported by Vancouver Foundation, New Beginnings is a successful school-based program for pregnant or parenting adolescents and young adults.

That exercise ultimately led to Vancouver Foundation taking a more active leadership role. Vancouver Foundation chair and forestry mogul Jake Kerr (who's also a softwood lumber negotiator, avid art collector, co-owner of the Vancouver Canadians baseball team, and, obviously, no stranger to leadership) supports the move wholeheartedly.

"Vancouver Foundation is very well-respected, and we've earned that respect: we've done tremendous work by linking donors to important projects across the province," says Kerr. Beside his desk, a buoyant E.J. Hughes scene of timber being loaded on a ship at Cowichan Bay counterpoints the sleek minimalism of his office.

"But we've been mainly reactive. We waited for donors to come to us to set up a fund on a particular issue, or we waited for applications for funding to come to us." Kerr taps his fingers impatiently on his bare desktop. "But given that we are the biggest community foundation in Canada, we felt we could do more – we could use our knowledge of communities and giving to help donors catalyze big changes.

"In a certain way, we've always done this: We have often led the way, and taken chances – sometimes investing in organizations or initiatives that are unusual, or long-shots, or a bit controversial," Kerr continues. "Because we're so credible, once we gave the first grant, the charity was then able to get other funders on board. So it's that kind of thing, but on a much larger scale."

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MICHAEL HALWA

The growing gap between the rich and the poor and the shortage of housing continues to be a pressing problem.

What does this “larger-scale leadership” role for the Foundation mean, in concrete terms?

Wightman immediately points to the Metro Vancouver *Vital Signs* project, an annual report card Vancouver Foundation began producing in 2006. The report evaluates key livability indicators for the region, grading areas such as transportation, the gap between rich and poor, and work opportunities, and identifies the two top priorities for each area.

“The *Vital Signs* project has been a big success on a number of levels. First, it gives us a clear sense of what we and our donors should focus on,” says Wightman, enumerating the list on her fingers. “Second, the process of researching all this helped us refresh our connections in the community and meet new partners. Third, other people are using *Vital Signs* as a basis for planning and dialogue; it’s being used in the classroom in several schools, and at BCIT and SFU. We’re really pleased with its impact on all of those levels.”

Another example of the Foundation taking leadership is its new focus on homelessness, says Wightman. “When we asked British Columbians what they were concerned about, homelessness was right at the top of their list. It’s something we’ve worked on indirectly for years by supporting groups like the Portland Hotel Society, so we understand the issue, and we have strong connections in that community. And we thought, yes, there is clearly a need out there, and we can really do something about it.”

The Foundation developed a new Poverty and Homelessness Initiative, and hired Catharine Hume, former policy and research director with the Canadian Mental Health Association, to direct it.

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AN ILLUSTRATED JOURNEY

A RECENT PROJECT THAT WAS FUNDED BY VANCOUVER Foundation helped refugee children who had recently arrived in Canada tell the story of their journey in comic book form.

“Many of these kids feel very different than non-refugee kids, so they have a hard time integrating.

Drawing the comics helps these kids process very traumatic experiences,” says Wightman.

“Even better, as they share what they’ve drawn with other children who have had similar experiences, they also learn they aren’t alone; there are kids out there like them. It’s a fabulous process, and great project.” □



TIFFANY BROWN COOPER

Congratulations on 65 years of making a difference
in communities throughout the province.



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haven't had the support needed to transition successfully to adulthood, but often they're no longer eligible for the supports available for children."

Youth dealing with homelessness need specialized help to continue with schooling, learn how to manage a household, find work, and develop effective employment skills, Hume says. They're also often dealing with mental health and addiction issues. If they can get the help they need at this stage, Hume believes their issues with homelessness can be minimized, stabilizing people who might otherwise face escalating – and increasingly intractable – problems over the long term. Vancouver Foundation will begin distributing grants for youth and homelessness projects later this year.

It's precisely the in-depth analysis behind both the Metro Vancouver *Vital Signs* project and the Poverty and Homelessness Initiative that makes the Vancouver Foundation so invaluable to donors, says Wightman.

"We help individuals and organizations create endowment funds, which are basically investment savings accounts used to fund grants. Donors can decide what to fund on their own, but many rely on our expertise to



JOSHUA BERSON

Vancouver Foundation's Neighbourhood Small Grants Program supports resident-led activities that enhance neighbourhoods.

Hume is soft-spoken, with a warm, motherly demeanour – but she's also a fierce advocate for the disadvantaged. Her previous work on poverty and homelessness convinced her that those issues could only be addressed through serious collaboration between non-profits, government and business.

Hume took the position with the Vancouver Foundation because "the Foundation has the credibility and capacity to effectively bridge all these sectors. I also really liked the Foundation's willingness to work on the issues over a longer timeframe than most funders, which increases the likelihood of making progress. And I loved that all the staff and board had personally committed to learning more about homelessness. That said to me, 'These people really mean it.'"

After consulting with stakeholders, Hume recommended the Foundation focus first on youth struggling with homelessness. Statistics suggest that 300 to 700 people between the ages of 16 and 24 are homeless – or are at risk for becoming homeless – every day in Vancouver, and this population is believed to be particularly vulnerable and currently under-served.

"These youth fall through the cracks in the system," says Hume. "They generally



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JAMIE KOWAL

Vancouver Foundation has supported the Vancouver Aquarium's Marine Mammal Rescue program.

guide them. After 65 years, we know the issues, the communities and the other players. We know how to pick out good grant proposals and we know what doesn't work. We've just done this 'reality check' listening exercise across B.C. to make sure we're on track, and we did all this research for Metro Vancouver *Vital Signs*. So I'm very

confident we can help donors put their money where it will be most effective."

Wightman admits Vancouver Foundation has been upping its profile and refreshing its look (the organization recently launched a polished new corporate identity package) partly because banks and commercial money managers have been moving in on the Foundation's turf. These financial institutions have realized they too can set up endowment funds for clients – and make a profit doing so.

"Banks and money managers can do the investment end," acknowledges Wightman. "But they really can't compete with us in terms of ensuring the donor's money has the greatest impact."

Others clearly agree. The Foundation, which began with a \$1,000 gift in 1943, now holds close to \$800 million in assets in over 1,100 philanthropic funds. Fund holders with the Foundation are varied and include artist Takao Tanabe, big-band leader Dal Richards, Charles Flavelle (former owner of Purdy's Chocolates), Special Olympics BC, Jewish Family Service Agency, Mountain Equipment Co-op and the Vancouver Sun.

Yosef Wosk, who's been called "one of

B.C.'s premier intellectuals," explains why he chose to hold his fund with the Foundation: "I had heard about the Foundation for years," he says, "When I began to think more seriously about long-term creative philanthropy, I decided that it wasn't just a question of depositing money in the bank and hoping that it would somehow get to the right places. Thankfully, Vancouver Foundation was there to mentor, nurture and offer financial responsibility."

While the Foundation has always been well-respected, the organization's new focus on leading social change, melded with its experience and \$800 million in funds, sets it up to be a powerhouse. While many 65-year-olds are slowing down, this one is revving up – and if the results to date are any indication, both the Foundation, and communities across British Columbia, could find the years ahead golden indeed. ■

This promotional feature was prepared for Vancouver Foundation by BCBusiness magazine's Special Advertising Features Dept. Writer: Dorothy Bartoszewski. For information contact BCBusiness VP of corporate features John Cochrane at 604-299-7311. Email: jcochrane@canadawide.com

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