



## FAMILY CASE STUDY:

### The Dobbs Fund: An Evolving Vehicle for Developing Younger Generations for Philanthropy

*Case Study developed by the R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation for the NCFP Community Foundations Family Philanthropy Network. © 2017, National Center for Family Philanthropy. All rights reserved.*

## Overview

The R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation is the legacy of Howard Dobbs, Jr., a lifelong Atlantan who was a respected businessman, a civic leader, and a generous philanthropist. He did not have children of his own but was very close to his sister's three children. As Mr. Dobbs grew older and began making decisions about the long-term future of the family foundation he'd established in 1959, he turned to his nephew and nieces for leadership (i.e., 2nd generation). He asked them to join the foundation's board and tasked them with responsibility for its stewardship after his death.

With the conviction that the foundation should be managed for perpetuity, it was determined that board service by members of succeeding generations would be considered a privilege and not a right. Candidates would be expected to have a record of interest, commitment, and capability where community service and philanthropy were concerned. ([Click here to see the foundation's Trustee Profile: Desirable Characteristics document.](#)) Recognizing these characteristics need to be cultivated, the board took steps to provide a philanthropic training ground for succeeding generations.



Fortuitously, at the same time, the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta (CFGA) was launching a new initiative focused on nurturing family philanthropy among its donor advised fund holders. Mr. Dobbs was a long-time CFGA fund holder and, with his support and leadership from Dobbs Foundation Board Chair Cody Laird, it was determined that Mr. Dobbs' donor advised fund would be dedicated for use in an annual grantmaking exercise by interested next generation family members with leadership provided by CFGA staff.



Mr. Dobbs

The inaugural meeting of the The Dobbs Fund was held in November 2002 and included all twelve next generation cousins, the grandnieces and nephews of Howard Dobbs, Jr. (i.e., 3rd generation). The meeting was organized and facilitated collaboratively by CFGA staff and Dobbs Foundation staff, a tradition that continues. To open the meeting, Cody Laird recounted the foundation's history which, in effect, was the story of Mr. Dobbs' life and philanthropy. He went on to express the board's hopes that the Dobbs Fund would serve as a place for younger family members to learn about philanthropy and come together as an extended family.

In the course of the first meeting, the group engaged in group-building work such as a values clarification exercise. With help from CFGA staff, they explored the meaning of strategic philanthropy. They established a structure for the Dobbs Fund that was meant to guide the process, increase ownership among family members, and spread responsibility for the work. Initial guidelines were established that coincided with the Dobbs Foundation. Family members self-selected into sub-committees around each focus area based on personal

interests (Education, Health and Human Services, Environment) and they agreed to share responsibility for identifying, evaluating, and advocating for grant candidates. They agreed on a schedule for communicating (i.e., quarterly conference calls), soliciting applications (with administrative support from the CFGA), and making grant decisions by way of an annual meeting. Finally, it was agreed that Dobbs Fund members should provide leadership for the annual grant cycle and began the practice of electing a chair and vice-chair annually with the stipulation that these roles should rotate among the three family branches.

While the structure used for administering the Dobbs Fund has evolved over the years (see Lessons Learned on page 6), the annual grant cycle continues today. A variety of factors have impacted the natural ebb and flow of participation, for example: phase of life issues, geography, and interest or lack thereof. Still, approximately half of the original 12 participants have joined the annual process on a fairly consistent basis and, over the last several years, 4th generation members have begun participating.



In 2011, with approval from the Dobbs Foundation Board, the Dobbs Fund launched a Matching Grants Program designed to encourage community service among 4th generation members. Described in more detail on page 5, the program has been an effective means for supporting younger family members across a wide range of ages as they explore volunteerism and fundraising on behalf of causes that are important to them. The Matching Grants Program is also intended



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to foster a meaningful connection between these younger family members, Mr. Dobbs' Legacy, and the Dobbs Fund itself. The program has been well received with matching grants approved and paid annually since the program's inception.

The 15th annual meeting of the Dobbs Fund will take place in June 2017 with a growing emphasis on 4th generation family members. For the first time, a member of the 4th generation will serve as the Dobbs Fund chair.

Since the Dobbs Fund was launched in 2002, the annual grantmaking meeting has taken place in several venues including the board room of the CFGA, meeting space within non-profits supported by the Dobbs Fund, and the board room of the Dobbs Foundation. Since 2010, the meeting has been held at a mountain home originally owned by Mr. Dobbs. The house remains in the family and provides the perfect venue for the Dobbs Fund meeting and, equally important, a family reunion for anyone who can attend. It's important to note that participation in

the Dobbs Fund meeting is always framed as a choice. There is an open invitation for anyone who's of age and interested, regardless of participation in years past or lack thereof.

Family members gather on Saturday for a day of unstructured fellowship and occasional service projects in a nearby community. They enjoy a BBQ dinner Saturday night. The Dobbs Fund meeting takes place on Sunday morning before the group adjourns until the following year. The significance of enjoying a beautiful place that was very special for Mr. Dobbs is not lost on the group. The weekend's activities help extended family members renew ties and younger family members build relationships and the annual experience contributes to a sense of place, family ties, and tradition that's good for everyone.

It's also worth noting that four members of the 3rd generation now serve on the multi-generational board of the Dobbs Foundation. Their readiness to serve was a direct result of regular engagement in the Dobbs Fund.





## Dobbs Fund Leadership: Division of Labor

Leadership for the Dobbs Fund is provided by the chair and vice-chair of the Dobbs Fund, president of the R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation, and a senior philanthropic advisor of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta (CFGA). While there are clear roles and responsibilities, the group works together in a very collaborative manner.

- Chair, Dobbs Fund
  - o Provides leadership during early stage of docket development
  - o Encourages participation in annual meeting
  - o Chairs Dobbs Fund meeting
  - o Reviews and approves Matching Grants applications
- Vice-Chair, Dobbs Fund
  - o Supports docket development process
  - o Prepares for service as Chair during following year
- President, R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation
  - o Communicates periodically with next generation family members (and, when they are under 18 years old, their parents) about Mr. Dobbs' legacy, the Dobbs Foundation, the Dobbs Fund, and associated activities
  - o Coordinates leadership team across annual meeting cycle
  - o Serves as liaison between CFGA, Dobbs Fund leadership and members when developing docket
  - o Communicates with Dobbs Fund members about annual meeting
- Senior Philanthropic Advisor, Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta (CFGA)
  - o Participates in Dobbs Fund meeting
  - o Develops minutes of Dobbs Fund meeting, and
  - o Coordinates Matching Grants Program including the review and approval of Matching Grant applications
- President, R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation
  - o Coordinates CFGA staff in support of all aspects of grant management
  - o Provides leadership during Dobbs Fund meeting
    - Leads skill building sessions; focus varies according to interests and needs
    - Reviews and interprets End of Grant Reports from previous year
    - Facilitates grantmaking session
  - o Reviews and approves Matching Grants applications
- [Click here to see an example of The Dobbs Fund annual work plan.](#)





## Matching Grant Program

In 2010, Dobbs Fund members led the development of a matching grant program designed to encourage community service among 4th generation family members and, in time, succeeding generations. Authorized by the Dobbs Foundation's Board of Trustees, the program was formulated with several convictions in mind:

- Philanthropic attributes—empathy, compassion, generosity, work ethic—are typically developed in the context of one's home and community. The process begins as early as a family chooses; it's rooted in basic experience with stewardship of time, talents, and resources. The primary drivers are parental modeling and leadership, family collaboration, and personal interest. A matching program will always be supplementary to what begins at home and within one's community.



- It's important to emphasize that philanthropy during this age range is not about money; it's about personal engagement. As such, matching potential is intentionally limited to keep the entire exercise in perspective.
- A matching program can provide a user-friendly structure for encouraging family conversation about each family's approach to community service and philanthropy and the younger generation's growing awareness of and responsibility for stewardship.
- Traditional geographic guidelines for the Dobbs Fund (i.e., Southeastern United States) are waived

in the interest of rooting participants' formative philanthropic experience in one's home and/or college community.

- The matching program stands alongside and complements the formal grantmaking program of the Dobbs Fund. Developmentally, the former encourages engagement in the latter as teens grow into young adults.
- Payout considerations.
  - Remember that the asset base for the Dobbs Fund is a CFGA donor advised fund.
  - The annual budget for the matching program is limited to 2% of the fund's average fair market value over the preceding 6 quarters. Imposing a cap seemed prudent and the limit seemed workable as it's unlikely that everyone who is eligible will participate during any given year. Likewise, it's not likely that everyone who participates will apply for the maximum match. These assumptions have been borne out with experience and payout for matching grants has always been below budget.
  - Payout for the Dobbs Fund annual grant cycle has traditionally been set at four percent of the fund's average fair market value over the preceding six quarters.
  - Since the matching grant program's payout is above and beyond the 4 percent allocated for the traditional grant cycle, the 6 percent total implies potential for erosion of principal. As such, the program requires periodic evaluation to confirm its value. If the program performs well—and it has—the assumption is that the Dobbs Foundation Board of Trustees would replenish the donor advised fund if needed.
- Foundation trustees reserve the right to terminate the program at any time.

Rather than summarizing additional guidelines and mechanics of program here, a Matching Grant Program Package can be found [here](#). These are the materials provided to parents and participants.



## Dobbs Fund: Lessons Learned and Observations

- From staff
  - **“No-guilt, open door” policy reduces barriers to participation.** Phase of life issues naturally impact attendance (e.g., pregnancy, parenting small children, and vocational commitments). Sometimes there’s a simple calendar conflict. In short, participation ebbs and flows. With a no-guilt, open door policy family members are always welcome to join regardless of past participation.
  - **Fewer time intensive assignments helps manage responsibilities.** Using program



committees to build ownership and distribute work among participants proved to be difficult to maintain in the face of participants’ busy lives. Dobbs Fund members are still called upon to participate in and contribute to the grant cycle at key points along the way but time demands are less intensive.

- **Shared responsibility for grantmaking process is more conducive to learning.** An early feature of the committee structure included the responsibility of individual Dobbs Fund members to evaluate grant candidates and advocate for them during decision-making. The unintended consequence was a strong sense of personal ownership for a grant candidate’s fate and hurt feelings when one’s candidate did not receive grant support. Dobbs Fund members now have shared responsibility for identifying candidates, determining the final docket, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of candidates, and determining grantees. Decisions are made by consensus.
- Structure should change with circumstances, e.g.:
  - **Age of participation lowered from 18 to 14 years old**  
The Dobbs Fund was founded with a focus on 3rd generation members, all of whom were adults at the time. The youngest was 32 and many had young children. With an eye toward the 4th generation, participation in the Dobbs Fund was set at 18. In 2017, with nine members of the 4th generation currently between the ages of 18 and 14, it was decided to lower the minimum age to 14 in the interest of engaging young people sooner. With the increased emphasis on engaging younger members, the role played by older family members will naturally shift toward mentoring.
  - **Structured activities introduced to build relationships between cousins**  
With the formal Dobbs Fund meeting taking place on Sunday morning of the



weekend, Saturday's have traditionally been left unstructured so family members can reconnect and relax together. Increasingly, family groups are participating with younger children and the cousins have limited experience with one another. As such, there has been a recognition of the need for some structured group building activities on Saturday to help cousins develop relationships and feel at home with one another.

- o **Reimbursing travel expenses removes cost of participation as a barrier.** The Foundation agreed to reimburse travel expenses on the condition that the Dobbs Fund member fully participates in the grant cycle (i.e., offers input on candidates and final docket prior to the meeting and engages in the Dobbs Fund meeting itself).

- From family members
  - o **There is value in coming together across family lines and finding common ground.** In every family gathering, there are differences ranging from age, geography, and interests. As one person put it, "Being with family can be a mixed bag of emotions and memory, but participating in this process has helped me appreciate and honor everyone's different viewpoints, even when I passionately disagree. You have to give up 'being right' or 'having it your way' and trust that the final decisions will represent the best work of the group."
  - o **It's helpful to reunite in a place that's special to the family.** When family members gather at their mountain retreat, they enjoy a shared sense of place. The older generations spent time there growing up and the youngest are quickly making it their own. And, of course,





it was Mr. Dobbs' favorite retreat. All of this helps the group feel at home when it gathers for the annual weekend. Having said all of this, it's worth noting that any place can become special to a family when the group returns on a regular basis and makes memories there that are positive and valued.

- o **Continuity of staff leadership is helpful.** Relatively long-tenured staff from the CFGA and the Dobbs Foundation know the family well and vice versa. This provides a comfort and trust level that facilitates the family's ability to work together. It's important to remember that being in a room with family—from siblings to cousins—discussing how to tackle intractable problems can be challenging. It's not unusual for conversations to stir emotions and participants can feel vulnerable. It's also easy for family systems to drag adults back into childhood roles. Having familiar and trusted facilitators helps family members bring their “adult selves” to the table.
- o **It is important to balance the deeper conversations with fun, play, and humor!**
- o **The Dobbs Fund has been a formative and meaningful experience.** One family member put this best: “This process has made a difference in our lives. It's helped us reconnect



as siblings and cousins and we're stronger for it as a family. Part of that involves the impact of coming together across generations and family branches. And there's something about having a goal that is higher than ourselves. When you try to make a difference in the world with your siblings and cousins, you can't help but have deep conversations and I come away with fresh eyes for them. I will be forever grateful for my Uncle Howard and my dad and aunts for bringing us together to do this work.”

## Additional Resources from the Dobbs Fund

The following additional resources are available in NCFP's [Family Philanthropy Online Knowledge Center](#) for those interested in learning more about the Dobbs Fund's next gen engagement model:

- **Trustee Profile: Desirable Characteristics:** This list of characteristics serves as a guide for identifying and assessing candidates for service as a trustee of the R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation.
- **Dobbs Fund Annual Workplan:** These notes describe the timeline and activities carried out by the Fund for its 2015 annual Dobbs Fund Meeting.
- **Dobbs Fund Matching Grant Program Guidelines:** The Matching Grant Program seeks to encourage younger family members in their volunteer efforts—specifically, fundraisin—on behalf of non-profits in their communities.



### *About the Community Foundations Family Philanthropy Network:*

Multi-generational family giving is a critical and vibrant part of community philanthropy, and community foundations are uniquely positioned to influence lasting community change, acting as trusted resources and partners to philanthropic families. With generous support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and The Lilly Endowment, NCFP's [Community Foundations Family Philanthropy Network](#) aims to grow relationships, enhance practices, and promote more effective and meaningful family philanthropy. This special network is for family philanthropists that give through community foundations, and community foundation staff who work closely with philanthropic families. This special network is for family philanthropists that give through community foundations, and community foundation staff who work closely with philanthropic families.

### *Additional Resource: Ten ways philanthropic families work with community foundations*

This [special webinar](#) describes the many ways that philanthropic families work with the more than 800 community foundations spread across North America. From partnering for impact to serving as a training ground for younger family members, community foundations and families have been partners since the very first community foundations were founded just over a century ago. This webinar provides reminders, tips, and peer advice for families, donors, and community foundation staff along with the stories of how two donor families have made the most of their long-time relationship with their local community foundation.

### *About NCFP*

The National Center for Family Philanthropy is the only nonprofit resource dedicated exclusively to families who give and those that work with them. NCFP provides research, expertise and learning opportunities to inspire our national network of giving families every step of the way on their philanthropic journey. Families learn how to transform their values into effective giving to achieve a positive and enduring impact on the communities they serve.

### *Special Thanks*

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