



CHAPTER SEVEN

‘We Get to Listen— Not Just Tell’

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HEN ROBERT PINKERTON and George Gillespie formed the Foundation they had no idea what it would eventually become or of the lives it would eventually touch. They had no idea society would go from embracing the notion of rehabilitation, to rejecting it, to tentatively embracing it again. They could not have foreseen an era when

police-community relations were the subject of a national debate or when entire communities would become eviscerated because so many of their males were behind bars. Although Gillespie’s investing acumen was evident early on, they certainly could not have foreseen that the Foundation would become such a financial power. But Pinkerton and Gillespie knew they did not want to overreach; so they started out as modestly as they could, supporting a handful of projects in their back yard that directly impacted people they cared about.

When Senior Program Officer Julie Peterson joined Pinkerton in 2013, after serving several years as director of public-private partnerships for the New York City Department of Probation, the Harvard Law graduate found herself pondering a question: “I remember Rick [Smith] and maybe Laurie [Dien] saying, ‘You’ve spent your whole career trying to change policy. We only fund direct services. We don’t work on policy change. Can you deal with that? Can you work in those parameters?’ And my response was that I totally believe that foundations should support policy change but having spent a quarter of a century working toward policy change and seeing, at best, tinkering around the margins and, at worst, backsliding, I wouldn’t mind spending some time thinking about how to create a transformational relation-

Pinkerton Fellow Rachana Parekh makes her way down a dam during a John Jay outdoor retreat at Princeton University.



UpBeat NYC participant Geussongy Kone prepares for a waterfront concert in the Mott Haven-Port Morris section of the Bronx.

ship in the life of a young person. And for the first six months in this job, every site visit I went on, every meeting I had, people would be telling me about their phenomenal programs, and the good impact it was having on youths. And I would be saying, in my head, ‘How is this changing the system?’ And then I would have to say, ‘Oh, wait, they don’t have to be changing the system. They just have to be helping kids who they’re working with.’ And now, when people talk to me about system change I wonder, ‘But how are you helping the kids that you’re working with?’”

The Pinkerton Foundation began with the central mission of working for the welfare of young people; and over the years, the particulars of that mission became progressively more concrete. At the core of its work was one powerful idea: all young lives matter; even the poorest young people are endowed with unlimited capacity and are as entitled as the affluent to develop their potential. The Foundation concluded early on that school was not enough, that weekends, afterschool hours, and summers should not be wasted time. Instead, Pinkerton’s grantees could use those precious hours to expand horizons and bolster achievement in communities where achievement was not necessarily taken for granted.

As Pinkerton sought grantees with a strong sense of purpose and the organizational skills and vision to uplift the young people who were its focus, the Foundation was strongly guided by the philosophy of Founding Executive Director

Joan Colello. She believed that Pinkerton was not just another foundation rigidly matching programs to guidelines but open to new ideas and methods, even if they were not guaranteed to work. For only by allowing grantees room to sometimes stumble could the Foundation encourage the innovative approaches that would keep young minds engaged.

“The common thread that ties all the programs we support is that they create powerful connections between caring adults and young people in need. Mentors, teachers, coaches, role models, credible messengers of all kinds make the magic. Our mission is to supply the fuel so that these folks can light the spark and change a life,” observed Rick Smith.

Although Pinkerton’s central mission is unchanged, the world is ever-changing. We live in a time of growing inequality in which two-parent households are diminishing and where huge numbers of our young—particularly poor people of color—face entanglement in the criminal justice system.

It is a world in which new dangers loom—some of them lurking on the internet, others at home or in the schoolyard. It is a world where, according to an analysis by NBC News, between December 2012 and December 2015, at least 555 children in America under the age of 12 were killed by guns. It is a world where black students are much more likely to be severely disciplined than whites—but in which black and Latino students are significantly less likely than white and

Instructor Indigo Goodson gives metal-working advice to a Harlem Children’s Zone afterschool program participant.



MARYLIPP/HARLEM CHILDREN'S ZONE

Asian-American students to have access to advanced math and science courses. In this world, especially for those not economically privileged, the future is anything but assured and answering a seemingly simple question—How can we best help young people?—can be endlessly difficult.

PINKERTON HAS NO CHOICE but to look to its grantees as it endeavors to answer that question. But as Rick Smith observed, one advantage Pinkerton has is that those grantees are only a subway ride away. This makes Pinkerton different from most big foundations—and it has made for a different type of relationship with those that it funds.

Jennifer John, deputy executive director of Literacy Inc., spoke of the particular closeness of that relationship: “Most foundations are like, ‘This is our target area. Come fit into that.’ They’re looking for a tight fit on their agenda. And then they’ll have a few conversations with you about maybe why you’re not part of that or why you are a part of that. And you’ll get money and that’s pretty much it. And you produce a report.

“The relationship that we’ve built with Pinkerton has been much more formative and iterative. We’ve always gotten really good feedback from them as to why they want to fund us. Instead of just giving us a check, they’ll say why, or what part of the program they’re really attracted to . . . South Jamaica Reads hasn’t been without its hiccups. And every time we could go back to the Foundation and explain what’s going on it’s, ‘Okay, well, how can we fix that? How can we be a part of that?’ That’s a really different relationship than we have with just about every other funder. There are a few foundations that have ongoing conversations with us about our programs. but this is the most intensive. And they’re also willing to reach out to other foundations on our behalf in a way that is extraordinary.”

It’s a theme heard over and over again from Pinkerton grantees—of a remarkably close relationship between a foundation and the programs it supports. As Andrew Rubinson, the founding director of Fresh Youth Initiatives put it: “We only had a brief track record of working with Washington Heights youth, but the Foundation took a chance on our afterschool community service model and on

me, an unproven nonprofit leader with an idea. I have a wonderful memory of the Pinkerton board and Rick Smith stepping through the mud and around rebar to eyeball our new building on 171st Street.” Or as Keith Hefner, the founder and executive director of Youth Communication, recalled: “Pinkerton provided the grants that enabled us to launch the first-ever magazine written by youth in foster care. Its supportive program officers have provided invaluable advice and feedback and opened countless doors where we could expand or deepen our work.” Mark Goldsmith, the co-founder and president of Getting Out and Staying Out, an innovative prison reentry program which received one of its first grants from Pinkerton, put it another way: “Loyalty is what I’ve appreciated most about our relationship with Pinkerton. Simply said, they are there for you when the going gets tough.” Dr. Robert Gore, the founder of KAVI, Kings Against Violence Initiative, added, “Pinkerton listens.”

“Ours is very much a bottom-up approach,” said Rick Smith. “Because we focus entirely on the five boroughs, we see our grantees all the time. We get to know them in ways that a program officer parachuting in from afar simply can’t. Most of all, we have the luxury of learning from them about what works and what doesn’t. Julie Peterson often talks about the value of ‘credible messengers’ in youth programs—those leaders who can teach by example and experience because they have walked in the shoes of the participants. Laurie Dien sees the programs we support as credible messengers. ‘We get to listen to the grantees—not just tell,’ said Laurie. ‘We get smarter as a result, and sometimes we can put the puzzle pieces together with what we’ve learned elsewhere to help the field get smarter. Our grantees appreciate our approach, but it also makes our jobs much more meaningful.’”

As Erickson Blakney put it: “I guess [in] traditional philanthropy the system is that there is the foundation and there is the grantee, and there is a wall between them. We are more open, willing to have a relationship with grantees—I won’t say equal partnership. Until I’m taking those calls at three a.m. because the police kicked down the door of a family’s apartment and the kids are looking for a place to stay, then I’m not really a full partner. But I can certainly work with and support folks doing some incredible work.” ♦

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We favor programs that include engaging activities . . . and opportunities for young people to serve, learn and lead.

Studio in a School. Bringing the visual arts to students in public schools and community settings throughout the five boroughs



Possibility Project. Through community action and performing arts, teenagers build relationships, take responsibility and resolve conflicts



DreamYard Project. Using project-based art to engage and empower students in the Bronx