



CHAPTER FOUR

Rethinking the Mission

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ITH THE DEATH of Ann Pinkerton in November 2010, questions about the Foundation's mission were again front and center. Joan Colello, who had run the Foundation practically since its beginning, was then in her mid-seventies and decided to retire. The board turned to Richard Smith, a tall, affable former editor-in-chief and CEO of Newsweek magazine who joined the Pinkerton board in

1996, and offered him the reins.

The transition could not have been smoother. "In my experience, what happens when there's a change in leadership at a foundation [is that] they go through a whole refocusing exercise of their grant-making procedures," observed Colello. "We did none of that. We just kept doing what we always did . . . [Rick] was familiar with the work . . . He was very much in agreement with it."

Over the years, however, that work had changed—not so much in focus as in scale. That alone changed the scope—and, to some extent, the nature—of what the Foundation was doing. The assets of the Foundation had grown nicely, thanks in large measure to George Gillespie's financial stewardship. As Rick Smith observed, "It's no exaggeration to say that George's strategic vigilance and investment acumen—including a significant early position in Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway—still shape the Pinkerton Foundation of today."

As the estate of Ann Pinkerton was settled, another huge cash infusion was coming; and Smith pondered whether the Foundation's rapidly growing assets should change how it did its work.

Chanel Wallace, a participant at the Possibility Project, takes part in a team-building exercise.

A Detroit native who played basketball at Cass Tech High School and Albion College and later drove a taxi while earning a graduate journalism degree from Columbia University, Smith did not assume he knew the answer. Instead, he turned to skills that had served him well during his nearly 40 years at Newsweek magazine: “I went about this in the only way that I knew how. I’m a journalist. I’m a reporter. I asked a lot of questions of people in philanthropy but also in the academic world and in the community organizations we work with. I have to say it was one of the most interesting reporting projects of my life. I started with an open mind. With assets that were in the neighborhood of a half a billion dollars, it seemed thoroughly reasonable to think about supporting national programs. It seemed thoroughly respectable to think about expanding our areas of concentration. I knew we didn’t want to change the character of the Foundation. Our focus is on young people in disadvantaged circumstances—that was not going to change. But obviously that’s a broad enough brush that you could change quite a lot and still be serving that same constituency.”

AS HE PONDERED, Smith found himself returning repeatedly to a demographic fact—New York City has a population of nearly 8.5 million, more than 1.1 million of whom are children in public schools. “One out of every three hundred Americans alive today is a New York City public school student. I kept coming back to that and saying, ‘If we’re having an impact on the lives of one out of every three hundred Americans, we are by definition a national program. We’re having a national impact.’ I also saw the great benefit of being able to concentrate our resources. Everybody we support is a subway ride away. With that kind of proximity, you can get a much better sense of what programs are working and which ones aren’t. The second question was a little harder. Okay, you’re much bigger; how does that change the way you do business? We looked into doing more early childhood work. We looked at programs for health and disabilities and drug treatment programs, and other things that we had traditionally not spent a lot of time on. There was not one eureka moment, but it gradually occurred to me that there was a real advantage in staying with the programs that we had focused on but in thinking about engaging with those programs at a different level. The result was that we did not dramatically change the categories of giving for the Pinkerton Foundation, but by looking at programs in a much bigger way, we saw that we could have a greater impact on the lives of young people by being present at the creation of some new and, we hoped, innovative programs.”

So after three months of interviews and reflection, Smith opted to keep the focus on New York City and on four program areas dear to the Foundation: youth and family justice, after-school and summer learning programs, education in general, and career readiness. Working with the staff and with input from the board, he produced an extended statement of values entitled “What We Believe.”

“We [the program team] loved it because potential grantees could easily see whether their proposals matched up with Pinkerton’s approach to youth development and effective programming. It also gave us something to point to when we had to say no,” said Laurie Dien.



MARTY LIPP/HARLEM CHILDRENS ZONE

In May 2011, Smith wrote the board a letter explaining, “I’m convinced that, for now at least, there is plenty of running room well within our traditional guidelines. . . . [We] have already begun to prompt our current grantees to think bigger, bolder, deeper. We have challenged ourselves to think bigger—and smarter—as well. . . . With our new resources, we clearly have the ability to make important things happen.”

One of the challenges, in Smith’s mind, was juggling the old approach with the new: “We all knew that we wanted to stay engaged with those small programs—be incubators for their growth. But with the growth of the assets, some of the questions changed. If you’re looking at a twenty-five thousand dollar grant to a small organization, or a fifty-thousand dollar grant, you are essentially doing your reporting and deciding yes or no. . . . We’ve done that in the past and we’ll do that in the future. If you’re looking at potential grants in the five hundred, seven hundred thousand, or one million range, you are almost by definition dealing with a program that is either

Two-year-olds at a career-themed Halloween party for Harlem Gems, an early childhood pipeline program at Harlem Children’s Zone.



Becoming a Pinkerton Fellow allowed Alex Griffith to see the justice system in a way he had never previously experienced.

brand new or undergoing a major transformation. That creates a great opportunity but also a different kind of challenge for the program staff because they must be engaged in creating and shaping very new initiatives . . . So I established as a goal over the next three to five years that, in addition to the ongoing small grants, we would develop three or four signature programs—much larger grants that combined direct and immediate benefit to a larger number of young people but also had the potential to create models that other cities, other foundations, other institutions could replicate.”

The catalyst for one of those signature programs, the Pinkerton Fellowship Initiative, was a routine, modest funding request from John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

“It was a request for \$25,000 to support one or two interns,” said Smith. “And since we don’t generally support colleges and universities, I said, ‘I’m not terribly interested.’ Then I started thinking back to a program that I was in at Columbia called the International Fellows Program. It brought together top students, called fellows, to discuss international issues. We went on field trips to Washington and met regularly with policy makers. And I thought, ‘What if we went back to John Jay and proposed a fellows program focused on the role of nonprofits in the youth justice field?’”

John Jay president Jeremy Travis remembers the conversation. Smith “saw an opportunity for John Jay to be leveraged, in essence, to do work on youth justice reform in New York City. And that was something we had not seen initially. We have fellowship programs—perhaps half a dozen of them. That’s what we brought to Rick the first time. He said, ‘You can do more.’” Instead of a fellowship program that took place totally at the university, Smith proposed one “that would actually have the fellows involved in other nonprofits and even government agencies.”

The year-long fellowship would employ students full-time during the summer and in January and 14 hours a week for the rest of the year. For Travis, the potential benefit was obvious. It would connect John Jay to nonprofit institutions working on criminal justice issues in the real world, it would give their students a much deeper experience, and it would provide those organizations with some much needed help.

WITH PINKERTON’S BACKING, John Jay launched two new fellowship programs—one for undergraduates and a research fellowship program for graduate students. Alex Griffith was one of the first fellows. Born in Guyana, South America, Griffith moved to Jamaica, Queens with his family when he was eight. He recalls being bullied in school, kidded for his looks (he was nick-named “roach”) and mocked for his accent. That changed when he was in the 7th grade and learned that he could get people to like him by becoming the class clown. His new role made school life more tolerable, but his grades suffered. When he was a junior in high school, his best friend made the honor roll and he didn’t: “My mom was looking for my name and didn’t see it. That was a deciding moment.”

Griffith dropped the class clown act and got serious about his studies. He ended up on the principal’s list and the honor roll. He became student government president and barely missed becoming valedictorian. After graduation, he went to John Jay. He applied for the prestigious Steamboat Foundation scholarship but was not selected. Then he learned about the newly inaugurated Pinkerton fellowship, which he applied for and won.

He ended up at exalt, an organization that works with young people who have gotten into trouble with the law. Griffith went to court with a 16-year-old girl he

helped mentor and watched as she was sentenced. She got seven years, a much harsher penalty than he imagined for the gang-related offense she committed. “It was a horrific moment. I cried in court . . . Instantly she was in handcuffs. She fell on her knees and the moments after that were the longest thirty seconds of my life. She was crying for her mom and her mom was sitting in front of me and I was next to her aunt and they were just sobbing . . . It was overwhelming. exalt provided space to talk about it.”

The experience left Griffith with an understanding of the justice system that he could never have gained in a classroom.

Another signature Pinkerton program—The Science Research Mentoring Consortium—started off similarly, with an idea the Foundation decided was not ambitious enough. The request from the American Museum of Natural History was for a two-year science program for high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first year would be devoted to academics—during which students would learn laboratory techniques and relevant content. The second year students would work in an actual lab, along with a scientist from the museum.

“I remember sitting with [Pinkerton’s Vice President for Programs] Laurie Dien and saying, ‘I just love this program. Why don’t we ask the museum, ‘If we gave you a lot more money could you really expand this program?’” recalled Rick Smith. “Well, we asked the question and got a very unusual answer: ‘No. All of our scientists are engaged in this and we can’t do more.’ Laurie and I kicked it around for a while and I said, ‘What if we funded a planning grant to see if we can get other institutions onboard?’”

Ruth Cohen, senior director in the education division of the museum and director of its Center for Lifelong Learning, remembers that during that time the so-called SRMP (Science Research Mentoring Program) had some 48 student participants. “We said we couldn’t expand beyond sixty. That’s what we thought was the absolute maximum of kids who could be placed in labs around the building. And that wasn’t enough. So we sat down and thought about what could happen to expand this opportunity for other kids.”

“The breakthrough came when we realized that there were many scientific

institutions in this city that could be brought into the program,” said Dien. “With the help of a consultant, a program template was developed and ultimately fifteen institutions came on board. It’s not a cookie cutter approach,” said Dien. “There are certain core criteria: seventy hours of content classes, one hundred hours of authentic research, all for low income kids; and the presentation of a final project . . . The museum did a great job of thinking it through. And because of that, the other institutions, from Rockefeller University to Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and five campuses of CUNY [The City University of New York], have bought into this. It’s pretty exciting.”

By the end of 2015, more than 700 students had taken part in the potentially life-changing mentoring experience. On top of earlier grants of \$5.8 million, Pinkerton pledged \$10 million over the next five years to enroll an additional 1,500 students in the program, which was renamed “The Pinkerton Science Scholars Program.”

Feedback from the young participants has been uniformly positive. A student from the 2012 class wrote, “I was introduced to material I never would have had access to or an opportunity to learn at my high school . . . In class and during the research project, I was an active and engaged student . . . going to the Museum was so often the highlight of my day.” Another student, class of 2013, wrote, “SRMP . . . offered me a bigger and better sense of community than my school did.”

Former Executive Director Joan Colello speculates that her old boss would be stunned at the Foundation’s impact and financial growth: “I’m sure that Robert Pinkerton has turned over in his grave several times. I mean, here was someone who really had to borrow money to pay the bills before the company went public.”

Indeed, no one could have foreseen that in a period of fifty years the Foundation would go from an institution worth a few million dollars at its founding to one with assets of more than \$600 million. That growth not only enabled the development of the new “signature” programs but allowed Pinkerton to make a \$20 million multi-year grant to endow programming at the Madison Square Boys & Girls Club’s new clubhouse in upper Harlem. The building will be known as the “Pinkerton clubhouse.” In the end, Pinkerton’s “relatively modest financial decision,” as Smith describes it, was having a huge impact on Robert Pinkerton’s hometown. ♦



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