

## **A Growing Tradition? Examining the African American Family Foundation**

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Family foundations are rapidly increasing as a venue through which to give philanthropically (Weiss, 2000; Remmer, 2005).<sup>1</sup> These institutions are of particular interest to African Americans, who prefer to put their trust in organizations that are close to them and that aid the surrounding African American community (Council on Foundations, 1999; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003). To date, there is limited scholarly research on family foundations in general, and none related to African American family foundations (Browne, 1977).<sup>2</sup> As a result, little is known about these organizations, their founders' motivations, their make-up and operations. The purpose of this article is to develop a basic knowledge of African American family foundations from which additional research can be generated. I sought to answer the following questions: From what types of professional backgrounds do the founders of African American family foundations hail? In which areas of the country are African American family foundations located? What is the range of assets possessed by African American family foundations and how are these assets managed? How do African American family foundations use board members, employees and volunteers to support their organizations? What are the overarching goals of African American family foundations? And, in what areas are they concentrating their donations?

### **Analysis of Relevant Literature**

#### **Family Foundations**

According to an emergent body of literature, one of the most significant trends in the area of philanthropy is the rapid growth of family foundations (Lawrence, 2000; Green, 2000). In spite of the quick development of these institutions, the philanthropic community has yet to

agree on a definition of a family foundation. While the Council on Foundations includes in its definition only “private foundation[s] in which the donor or the donor’s relatives play a significant governing role,” (Remmer, 2005, p. 83) the National Center for Family Philanthropy includes donor advised funds through a community foundation ([www.NCFP.org](http://www.NCFP.org)). The difference between these definitions lies in who manages the foundation – an outside organization or the family itself. According to a report by the Council on Foundations, there are an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 family foundations in the United States, a figure that has grown by over a thousand a year since 1990 and has increased even more rapidly since 1999 (Remmer, 2005). As noted by Ellen Remmer, “Annual giving by family foundations is estimated to be about \$12 billion on an asset base of approximately \$195 billion, and family foundations grew from less than a quarter of the membership of the Council on Foundations in 1992 to 40 percent in 2002” (Remmer, 2005, p. 82; Foundation Center, 2006). According to a recent study, within the majority community, the primary motivations for establishing a family foundation include tax savings, a philanthropic agenda, family closeness, and legacy (Gersick, 2004).

A sign of family foundations’ unprecedented growth is the number of how-to books that have surfaced, telling families with moderate to great wealth how to create their own foundations (Edie, 2002; Edie, 2001; Freeman & Hausner, 1996; McCoy & Miree, 2001; Prince, Rathbun, & File, 1998; Esposito, 2002) and how to manage these foundations (Born, 1999; Buhl & Healey, 1995; Campbell, 1996; Gast, 2002; Gast & White, 2001; McCoy & Norcott, 1999; National Center on Family Philanthropy, 1999). Still other books have been written on intergenerational issues related to family foundations (Frey Foundation, 1994; Gersick, Stone, Desjardins, Muson, & Grady, 2000; Ylvisaker, 1997) and within-family challenges resulting from the establishment of foundations (Stone, 1997; Stone, 1998). The practical and scholarly literature on these

institutions reveals a great amount of diversity among family foundations in terms of what they look like and how they operate. According to Ellen Reemer, “the variation is clearly influenced by such complexities as the personality and objectives of the donors; the personalities of other family members; family culture, traditions, and dynamics; ...the context within which the philanthropy operates, and the strategic philanthropic choices made by the family” (Remmer, 2005, p. 85).

### African American Family Foundations and African American Philanthropy

A review of the literature on family foundations also reveals that there is no scholarly literature pertaining specifically to African American family foundations.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, there has been an increase in the scholarly materials produced on African American philanthropy in general. This literature has shown that contrary to perception, African Americans have a long history of philanthropic giving. In addition, this literature has helped to identify the motivations behind African American giving – motivations that might be similar to those of families establishing African American family foundations.

In recent years, scholars have uncovered myriad examples of Black efforts to shape and improve the lives of African Americans. Emmett D. Carson’s (1993) groundbreaking work *A Hand Up: Black Philanthropy and Self-Help in America* was in many ways the impetus for this expanded research. Carson was able to capture the creativity and agency of African American philanthropists from the era of slavery through the current day. According to Carson and other scholars, the origins of Black giving and the organizations around which it is focused are rooted in efforts to overcome oppression. The ideas of communalism and social solidarity among African Americans can be traced back to their ancestral roots in Africa. A strong network of mutual aid and community support was critical to surviving slavery (Gasman, 2002; Joseph,

1995). Black churches, the first Black-owned and operated institutions, played a central role in early social services and education, and they continue to be a focal point for Black philanthropy today (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Byrd, 1990; Frazier, 1963). Philanthropy in the church is consistent with general patterns of giving among Blacks, which show them to be motivated by those who are close to them and efforts that make a difference in the daily lives of other African Americans (Carson, 1993; Carson, 1989). After the church, the next priority in African American philanthropy is social service organizations, especially those that are in the giver's neighborhood and that focus on children and youth. For example, research shows that African Americans give approximately 25% of their charitable donations to organizations, such as after school programs, which serve the public need (Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, 2004).

Education is held in high esteem by Black communities and has historically been a way for African Americans to help themselves as individuals, but also to uplift their communities as a whole. Much philanthropic giving is directed toward scholarships and educational institutions (especially historically Black colleges). Approximately 15% of African American philanthropic dollars fund educational causes (Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, 2004). Education provides tangible results and the direct impact of giving in this area can be seen in the local community.

In the area of health, some sectors of the Black community have been long-time givers to the research and treatment of sickle cell anemia and diabetes. More recently, African Americans have been supporting research and social service programs related to HIV/AIDS and cancer (especially, breast cancer). HIV/AIDS, in particular, has become a dire problem, with African Americans representing 49% of all new HIV/AIDS cases in the United States (Center for Disease Control, 2008). Perhaps because of the HIV/AIDS crisis, 13% of African American philanthropic

dollars are now directed to health-related causes, a percentage that has increased significantly in recent years (Johnson, Van Slyke, Gasman, and Shena, 2004).

### **Methodology**

Using an open-ended questionnaire as well as document analysis, I sought to answer the research questions outlined earlier in this article. Specifically, through web searches, social networks, and a lexis-nexus search, I identified 103 African American family foundations. I defined an African American family foundation as one that was established by an African American family or individual. The foundation also included family members in the operation and leadership of the foundation.

After identifying the foundations, I sent a letter and questionnaire to each foundation via email. The electronic version of the questionnaire was developed using Survey Monkey and was contained in a link in an email message to the foundation leader.<sup>4</sup> The electronic questionnaire bore a very low response rate (5 questionnaires were completed) so I made phone calls to all 103 family foundations, explaining the project and encouraging their participation. Afterwards, I mailed a paper questionnaire and a letter to each foundation. The original questionnaire response rate was a very low 22% so I made a second round of phone calls to those foundations that had yet to complete the questionnaire. Afterwards, I mailed a follow-up letter and copy of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire response rate was 42%, considerably lower than I desired so I used document analysis to bolster the data. An examination of African American family foundation 990s, individual African American family foundation websites, and Guidestar and Charity Navigator profiles proved useful in filling in missing data.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section of the article highlights the findings from both questionnaires and document analysis. I have organized the findings into five sections: founders' backgrounds and motivations for starting a family foundation, location of family foundations, assets, board and staff make up, and overarching family foundation goals and areas of grant concentration.

### Founders' Background

Most African American family foundations have been founded by five groups of people: professional athletes, musicians, actresses, doctors and business leaders. Of the 103 family foundations included in my sample, 73 percent were founded either by or in honor of an athlete by his or her family members.<sup>5</sup> These athletes were, for the most part, in the National Football League or the National Basketball Association. However, a few were former Olympic athletes, typically those individuals who had set national or world records or were the first African American to compete or win in their sport. More well known or currently active athletes were less likely to have daily involvement in the foundation. Those retired athletes or those with a more regional following were more active, participating in grant making decisions as well as foundation events on a regular basis.

The second largest group of African American family foundation founders was the musicians. These individuals accounted for 8 percent of founders. In two cases, family members established the family foundation in honor of a musician. The majority of the musicians were not active on a daily basis or even regular basis with their foundation. However, most musicians participated in one to two annual events, typically during the holiday season.

The next most common group of individuals was actors, making up 7 percent of the founders. All of the actors were very well known celebrities, with connections across media venues (print, television, and internet). They are all active in the overarching ideas and goals of

their foundations but not the day to day operations. However, as with the musicians mentioned above, the actors play a significant role in bringing attention to the work of their foundations during annual events and holiday seasons.

Medical doctors make up 3 percent of the family foundation founders. As they have lower profiles than athletes, celebrities, and actors, these individuals were more active on a regular basis; however, none of them managed the day to day functions of their foundations. These individuals' foundations operate at a more local and regional level. Regardless, these individuals tend to be pulled in many directions, like their well known counterparts, as they are highly visible people in their local communities. Most of the doctors are on several boards and are also active within their local areas.

The last significant group of people who have established family foundations is business people. These individuals make up 2 percent of the founders of family foundations. All of these individuals have been active in corporate America at a national level. When they started their foundations, they were all actively involved in the day to day decision making but after the first year, they hired professional help to assist with the management of the foundation. These individuals noted that they served on many corporate boards due to their minority status and as such, were stretched in many directions, which made it difficult to be highly involved in their foundation. Interestingly, instead of focusing solely on their own foundations, these individuals chose to reach out to other organizations. Their efforts not only raise the profiles of their foundations, but also assist in their education around organizational leadership issues.

The remaining 7 percent of African American family foundation founders was made up of people from a variety of professional backgrounds. Most of these individuals had inherited

wealth and decided to establish a family foundation as a way of capitalizing on this wealth for their larger communities.

Overall, the founders were motivated to start a family foundation for three main reasons: the desire to give back, the longing to have a significant impact on the world, and the wish to have an impact on disadvantaged children. All respondents to the questionnaire indicated that “giving back” was the main reason that they created a family foundation. In fact, the phrase “giving back” was typically in the first sentence of the respondent’s answer to the question “Why did you choose to start a family foundation?” This reason is consistent with the literature on African American donors. According to Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins who conducted a study on Black college alumni, the major reason that these individuals gave to their alma mater was an obligation that they felt to give back – “to reach back and pull up” another African American (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003). Likewise, a 2004 report by The Twenty-First Century Foundation entitled *Time, Talent and Treasure: A Study of Black Philanthropy* found that African American donors “remain highly aware of the role that others played in bringing about their success” and as such, have a commitment to giving back to society at large (p. 12).

African American family foundation founders also expressed an interest in “having an impact” on the world or leaving a legacy in society. This finding was also prevalent in the literature on Black foundations. For example, in the *Time, Talent, and Treasure* report, those who created Black foundations were labeled “producers” and said to have started their foundations “to ensure that their resources have impact.” (2004, p. 7). Although this idea is similar to giving back, founders mentioned the idea of being remembered for something significant, which is a more self-focused motivation than giving back. Founders talked about

living a good and productive life and passing on that legacy to others within the African American community and society at large. They aimed to “move society forward” rather than be a “hindrance on society.” The idea of creating a legacy is a common motivation in the family foundation literature, but has not been a major finding by those who conduct research on African American philanthropy (Gersick, 2004). Most of the reasons for African American giving, such as racial uplift and obligation, tend to be selfless.

The last reason that the founders expressed as shaping their decisions to establish a family foundation was less abstract. Specifically, they mentioned a desire to help disadvantaged children, noting interest in areas of education, health, personal development, and life skills training.

Interestingly, unlike the literature on African American philanthropy in general, African American family foundations did not mention “racial uplift” explicitly in their questionnaire responses or on their organizational websites. This finding is significantly different from that of past studies. A number of the family foundations specifically mentioned that they “support a diverse cross section of individuals and causes” or “do not make decisions based on race.” Of note, none of the African American family foundation leaders or founders mentioned starting their foundations for tax savings. However, research has shown that people are socialized to know not to include “for tax purposes” when asked for their motivations (Andreoni, 1998; Andreoni; 1990; Drezner, 2006; Frumpkin, 2006).

### Geographic Location

As could be expected, African American family foundations are located in states and cities with high concentrations of African Americans. California boasts the most African American family foundations with 36, eleven of these foundations are in Los Angeles. Of

course, the location of these foundations in Los Angeles is a reflection of the predominance of African American athletes, musicians, and actors founding family foundations. There is also a large number in the San Diego area. It should be noted that California has one of the largest concentrations of family foundations in the country; there are more than 1000 (Foundation Center, 2006).

Ten African American family foundations are concentrated in the state of New York, with all but one of these organizations housed in New York City. Again, the location of these foundations in the city of New York is a manifestation of the high number of business people, actors, athletes, and musicians among the founder sample. Like the state of California, New York has a large concentration of family foundations, with over 1000 (Foundation Center, 2006).

The state of Georgia boasts nine African American family foundations, with all but one located in Atlanta. Given that Atlanta is a predominantly African American city and is drawing more and more African Americans to the city and surrounding areas each year, it makes sense that these family foundations are located in the metropolis (Johnson, Van Slyke, Gasman, Shena, 2004). In addition, most of the Georgia African American family foundations were founded by athletes and business people. According to the Council on Foundations, the state of Georgia has over 300 family foundations (Foundation Center, 2006).

The state of Illinois has eight African American family foundations, with all but one in the city of Chicago. Again, Chicago has a large concentration of African Americans and thus, boasts the most African American family foundations in the state. Like California and New York, Illinois has a large concentration of family foundations with roughly 1000. The states of Florida and Texas have 7 and 6 African American family foundations respectively and also boast over 1000 family foundations each (Foundation Center, 2006). The rest of the African American

family foundations are scattered throughout the country, mainly in the Midwest and on the eastern seaboard. Interesting, there are three African American family foundations in the West. They are located in Nevada, Arizona, and Washington State. These foundations were all established by athletes who played for teams in these western states.

#### Assets and Management of Assets

Acquiring information on African American family foundation assets and financials was particularly difficult. Most foundations did not complete this section of the questionnaire and as a result, I consulted their 990s for relevant information. I was not surprised by the unwillingness of those completing the questionnaires to answer questions directly related to money. Research shows that African Americans can be averse to talking about money, especially in relation to philanthropic giving (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003).

Of the 103 African American family foundations in my sample, 95 had profiles with Guidestar and all but five foundations had recent 990s on file. These five institutions indicated on their profile that they make less than \$25,000 per year and as such, did not need to file 990s. The net assets of the family foundations ranged from \$425,000 to just over \$40 million, with the mean being slightly less than \$1 million (Foundation Center, 2006). It should be noted that among family foundations overall, regardless of racial make-up, 60 percent reported assets less than \$1 million in 2006 (Foundation Center, 2006). Most of the African American family foundations are very small and have minimal revenue resulting from their assets; revenue ranged from \$320,000 to just over \$5 million, with the mean being roughly \$650,000. None of the 103 foundations used community foundations to manage their assets instead they worked with independent financial consultants, feeling that they would have more control over their monies if managed this way. This finding is consistent with research that shows many African Americans,

especially those who have recently acquired access to wealth, lack trust in well established organizations and want to control the use of their money (Meizhu, Leondar-Wright, & Robles, 2006; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003). Consistent with family foundations overall, most African American family foundations were established in the 1990s during the Clinton presidency, a time of increased opportunity and wealth for African Americans. According to the Council on Foundations, 40 percent of family foundations were established in the 1990s (Foundation Center, 2006).

As noted above, it is immensely difficult to gather data related to financials and African American family foundations. These figures provide a start but additional research as part of a study specifically focused on assets and financials is needed.

#### Family Foundation Personnel and Board Composition

African American family foundations are, for the most part, small and have relatively few staff members. The majority of the foundations (80 percent) had between 1-5 full-time employees and no part-time employees. Fifteen percent of the foundations, mostly the larger ones, had between 6-10 full-time employees and averaged 1-5 part-time employees. Lastly, five percent of the family foundations had 11-20 full-time employees and 6-10 part-time employees. All of these foundations in the last group were founded by actors or celebrities and had considerable assets. Staffing patterns are consistent with those reported by the Council on Foundations; larger foundations tend to have more paid staff and those with assets under a million have bare bones staffs (Foundation Center, 2006). The most common full-time position among African American family foundations was either an executive director or president, followed by a secretary or office manager.

All but five family foundations used volunteers to help staff their offices and events as well as assist with day to day activities. Sixty percent of foundations enlisted the services of 20-100 volunteers per year to carry out their mission. Twenty percent of the foundations used 100-500 volunteers per year. And, the remaining 19 percent of foundations counted on 500-1000 volunteers to fulfill their goals and mission. This last group was concentrated in larger cities and these family foundations were founded by actors and athletes. In addition, this last group held 50 percent more events and activities than the rest of the African American family foundations in the sample.

Board composition was quite diverse among the African American family foundation in terms of numbers and membership. In terms of numbers, sixty percent of the African American family foundation boards had five to eight members, five percent had between 9-11 members, thirty percent of the organizations boasted between 12-25 members, and another five percent had between 26-35 board members. Those African American family foundations with the largest boards were those founded by actors and athletes. These foundations also had an extensive agenda of events each year. Interestingly, according to the Council on Foundations, the average board size for a family foundation is roughly four (Foundation Center, 2006). The majority of African American family foundations had considerably larger boards than family foundations as a whole. This finding may reflect the limited opportunities that African Americans have to sit on foundation boards; family foundations offer a unique opportunity.

The composition of the boards in terms of diversity was also of interest. Of the 42 percent of African American family foundations that answered the questionnaire, most had a commitment to diversity on their boards. Very few had boards that were merely composed of family members and in fact, felt that they would be “stronger and do better, more far reaching

work” if their boards were diverse. Boards consisted of business leaders, other professional athletes and actors, and family members who were committed to the causes supported by the foundations. With regard to responsibilities, board members were central to fulfilling the mission of these family foundations and helped to keep the foundations focused on their goals. Board members were also expected to make connections to further the mission of the foundations and to be present at major events. Most board members committed to the organization financially; however, family foundation leaders also saw a great benefit in having board members who could give of their time and talent as well or in the place of monetary contributions. In fact, one foundation founder noted, “Time is money, it’s better to give both time and money.” Whereas another put it this way, “Every human can help someone. The magnitude of one’s wealth is not a gauge of how one can be of assistance to others.” These attitudes toward service are also present in *Time, Talent, and Treasure*. In this document, participants defined philanthropy as “both volunteering and giving money” (Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2004, p. 13). This finding is also consistent with research on African American philanthropy in general.

#### Overarching Goals and Areas of Concentration

The overarching theme among all of the African American family foundations was to help others achieve a better quality of life. Over 80 percent of the foundations alluded to this idea expressly in their missions. Specifically, 75 percent of the African American family foundations included youth development or support for disadvantaged youth in their mission and this focus was also reflected in the grant dollars allocated by the foundations. An emphasis on disadvantaged youth is consistent with the goals of family foundations as a whole. In 2006, for example, family foundations directed the majority of their funds toward the economically

disadvantaged and youth in particular (Foundation Center, 2006). African American family foundation founders seek to promote “ethical and moral development” among youth, specifically in the areas of crime prevention, substance abuse and self-esteem building. Much of their focus is on underserved areas and among disadvantaged youth. This focus is most likely due to the fact that the majority of the founders came from low-income neighborhoods and faced difficult circumstances as young people.

Another central focus of the African American family foundations’ giving was in the area of scholarships to individuals and institutions, with 35 percent of the organizations dedicating monies to this purpose. Moreover, several foundations were committed to sending young people to college, increasing academic achievement, supplementing underfunded public school music and art programs, and improving college access through skills building. Of note, the 2004 *Time, Talent and Treasure* study found that 57 percent of Black foundations included education as a program area of interest. Although this report did not disaggregate education, creating separate categories for youth programs and scholarships, the conclusions support the results of the study at hand. In addition, the literature in general related to African American philanthropy clearly establishes that education is a priority in terms of giving among individuals African Americans, with a considerable percentage of support being directed at youth programs (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Gasman & Sedgwick, 2005; Carson, 1993; Carson, 1989).

Lastly, medical causes dominate the areas of concentration for African American family foundations with various forms of cancer, HIV/AIDS, and sickle cell anemia being the main foci. The majority of grants are directed at educational efforts and prevention of disease; there is minimal funding focused on research in the area of treatment. The *Time, Talent and Treasure* report also showed that Black foundations, not necessarily family foundations, supported health

related causes; 23 percent of foundations in the 2004 study considered health a program area of interest (Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2004). Likewise, the literature on African American philanthropy in general shows that health and medical causes are of considerable interest to individual donors (Johnson, Van Slyke, Gasman & Shena, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Like those in the majority population who establish family foundations, African Americans are concerned with leaving a legacy and having an impact on the world. However, the overarching theme among all those who participated in this study via the questionnaire is one of giving back. This theme is evident in the personal stories of the founders. The theme is also consistent with the findings of the Twenty-First Century Foundation's *Time, Talent, and Treasure* report, which states that "Successful African Americans have usually received a great deal of assistance from very early ages. As they grow older, and advance in their careers, they don't forget that many others helped them." (2004, p. 6). Given this prominent theme, those approaching African American family foundations for financial support should emphasize how their ideas give back to society and contribute in positive ways.

In 2003, the median net worth of a White family in the United States was \$121,254 whereas the median net work of an African American family was \$19,024. Likewise, the median family income for a White family was \$54,121, while it was a mere \$31,778 for an African American family (Meizhu, Leondar-Wright, & Robles, 2006). These numbers do not look promising. However, as more African Americans have access to wealth (and the numbers are growing), there will likely be an increase in family foundations (Meizhu, Leondar-Wright & Robles, 2006). Research shows that African Americans have an inclination to give and with an historical mistrust of organized philanthropy, the family foundation is a likely outlet for giving.

As such, it is important for organizations such as the Council on Foundations and the National Center for Family Philanthropy to reach out to affluent African Americans. These organizations could give increased assistance to African Americans, providing both encouragement and a community in which these individuals could tap the resources they need to establish family foundations.

Currently, African American family foundations are carrying the burden of financial management instead of using the services of community foundations. Research shows that “creating and sustaining a private foundation is difficult and inefficient unless there are large assets (over \$5 million), leading to high rates of foundation dissolution” (Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2004). This study demonstrates that community foundations in cities with large concentrations of African Americans need to identify and reach out to African American family foundations as these efforts could assist family foundations in capitalizing on their assets. In addition, these foundations would benefit from the educational services offered by community foundations. For example, although board service offers a unique opportunity for family members, this study shows that some African American family foundations have unwieldy boards, which could impede their progress and decision making.

Studying African American family foundations is of significant importance and has the potential to increase our knowledge in the areas of African American philanthropy and family foundations in general. As the country’s demographics change, the donor base for most nonprofit organizations will shift as well, making it even more important for mainstream organizations to understand African American giving patterns. Research shows that African Americans are accumulating greater wealth and with proper cultivation, this will lead to an increased desire to provide for the betterment of humanity (Havens & Schervish, 2005).

Increasing the nation's understanding of African American giving will help the majority culture to see Blacks as full participants in American society. Perhaps through their family foundations, African Americans will become more visible agents of change and will no longer be viewed, by some, as merely passive recipients of the generosity of others.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, family foundation is defined as an independent, private foundation established and managed/advised by a family.

<sup>2</sup> There is one published family foundation reflection. It is a chapter in the edited volume, *Faith and Family Philanthropy: Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2002) entitled “An African-American Family’s Experience.” The chapter focuses on Betty and Jean Fairfax and the establishment of their family foundation.

<sup>3</sup> There is one report published by a foundation entitled, Twenty-First Century Foundation, *Time, Talent, and Treasure: A Study of Black Philanthropy*, Washington, D.C.: author, 2004.

However, it pertains to foundations, associations and individual donors. It does not focus on family foundations.

<sup>4</sup> Foundation leaders included paid executive directors, a family member, or on rare occasions the actual founder of the family foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Only three foundations were founded in honor of an athlete by family members.