

DAVID CAY JOHNSTON

Giving Charities a Voice: the Legacy of Norton J. Kiritz

When people start new careers, they often have little understanding of what went before, why things change, and who wrought those changes.

Those who have entered the nonprofit world in the last quarter-century live in a world unimaginable to the generation before. And while many people contributed to the changes, none played a more pivotal role than Norton J. Kiritz, a nonprofit entrepreneur and advocate for empowering the poor who died this winter from skin cancer at age 70.

The training provided by the Grantsmanship Center, the organization he created in 1972, helped many grassroots groups get the money they needed to get started and flourish. And the Center's publication, *The Grantsmanship Center News* (later renamed *The Grantsmanship Center Magazine*), paved the way for the journalists who today scrutinize charities and foundations with growing sophistication and skepticism.

Three decades ago, just suggesting that grant seekers had the right to knock on the door until they were admitted and seated at the table of American philanthropy was as alien to foundations as Rosa Parks keeping her seat on an Alabama bus was in the 1950s. And the very idea that grant seekers would ask inconvenient questions of grant makers was, well, as unimaginable as equal pay for women.

In those days, United Ways ruled the world of on-the-job fund raising, journalists had yet to

discover the tax forms filed by charities, and failed grants were never mentioned.

That is all different now. Grant makers accept the notion that grant seekers have a right to criticize them. United Ways now face competition from dozens of other groups that raise money through on the job drives.

Journalists scour charities' informational tax returns for clues about how efficiently charitable dollars are spent. The imperfect art of program evaluation attempts to measure how effectively grant dollars were spent.

Mr. Kiritz, who grew up in a poor family in Brooklyn—his father worked as a welder and a shoe salesman—had tried several careers before he started working at organizations created to fight the war on poverty. He realized that grass roots activists lacked the skills they needed to win money from foundations and government agencies, so he set up The Grantsmanship Center to train them.

A few years later, Mr. Kiritz hit upon an idea that ended up reshaping philanthropy. He grew angry as he watched the deliberations of the Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs, which was created by John D. Rockefeller III in 1973 to respond to charges in Congress that foundations were abusing their tax-exempt status and mostly just serving as piggy banks for donors and their friends.

The commission had allocated \$1.1-million (nearly \$4-million in today's dollars) to conduct

research on American philanthropy and make the case that foundations deserved to keep their tax-exempt status, and that donors should continue to be allowed to write off their gifts to foundations. The commission also was looking at the other big power brokers in American philanthropy, including United Ways and corporate foundations.

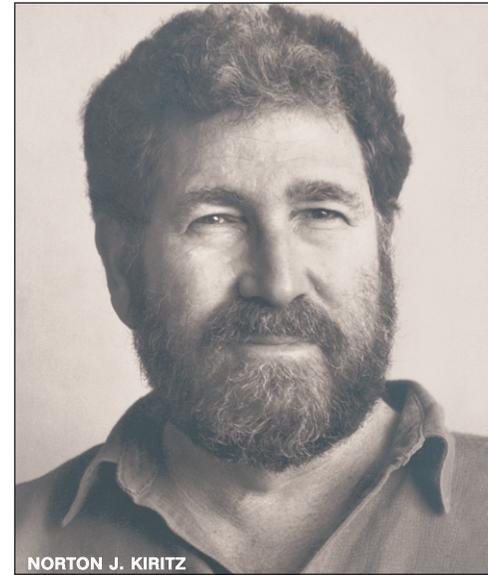
The commission divided up the research work by asking United Ways to assess the state of volunteerism; the Conference Board, which represents big companies, was to measure the impact of corporate giving; and big foundations were to evaluate the significance of their grants.

That was the accepted order of things at a commission that was not only started by a Rockefeller, but chaired by the head of the Aetna insurance company, John Filer.

Mr. Kiritz saw things differently. He was appalled that the donor class ignored those who were the sole justification for the existence of grant-making foundations: the grant seekers.

He called his friend, Pablo Eisenberg, the founder of the Center for Community Change (and now a *Chronicle* columnist), and asked him to write a critique of the commission for *The Grantsmanship Center News*.

Mr. Eisenberg's piece, published in 1975, was short, polite, and very much to the point. He showed how only half of American philanthropy was being considered by the commission and warned that "the traditional reliance on estab-



NORTON J. KIRITZ

lishment views" could mean a unique opportunity would be wasted.

Newspaper editorial writers and other influential people picked up on the frustration Mr. Eisenberg expressed, and his call for change was suddenly being pushed in places where it made a difference.

Grant seekers were given a role in the deliberations of the commission.

And when the panel issued its volumes of findings and recommendations, Mr. Eisenberg and others created the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy to serve as a watchdog organization that would make sure foundations paid attention to the real needs of charities. Its first donor was Mr. Rockefeller, who gave \$5,000. Mr. Filer gave three times as much.

Without those efforts to give grant seekers a voice, many organizations would never have gotten off the ground.

And Mr. Eisenberg's article on the Filer Commission was far from the only *Grantsmanship*

Center News piece that demonstrated how journalism has the power to change philanthropy.

Jack Shakely took Mr. Kiritz's very first class in how to write grant proposals and later wrote a critique of community foundations for *The Grantsmanship Center News*, including a devastating comparison of the one in San Francisco to the one in Los Angeles, which was so moribund it was known as the place to get a grant for an IBM Selectric typewriter.

The trustees took the criticism to heart and hired Mr. Shakely, who built the California Community Foundation into an innovative force for good. For example, he came up with the idea of offering loans to new immigrants who didn't have the money to apply for citizenship. Virtually all the money lent has been paid back.

Mr. Kiritz's own writing was also influential. One of his early essays on proposal writing remains the bible for crafting applications.

Its clarity reflects his training at Cornell University, where, as a scholarship student, he studied engineering, starting out on a common path for poor boys hoping to make it into the middle class.

Two-thirds of the 1,400 people who first took his class on proposal writing won grants, earning Mr. Kiritz the nickname “guru of grantsmanship.”

In its earliest days, Mr. Kiritz’s Grantsmanship Center was nothing but an idea. Mr. Kiritz operated from a folding table and chair in the hallway of a Los Angeles antipoverty group, where he looked for community activists who were starting charities and needed help drafting grant proposals. At night, the whole nonprofit enterprise was stored in a closet.

A decade after its founding the Center ran into financial trouble, in large part because President Ronald Reagan successfully proposed cuts in federal subsidies to groups that taught people how to write proposals and manage nonprofit groups.

Mr. Kiritz’s wife, the artist Cathleen Kiritz, sold real estate and used her commissions to cover The Grantsmanship Center’s payroll. Facing failure, he converted the enterprise from a nonprofit organization to a business, actions that caused two members of his board, Mr. Eisenberg and Mr. Shakely, to resign.

Mr. Kiritz was a big bear of a man whose soft-spoken voice and gentle nature belied a fierce determination and a rigidity that kept him honest to his values, especially to giving those born

into poverty the tools required for a real shot at success.

David Cay Johnston, a reporter for The New York Times, has written about charities for two decades. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 2001 for articles on the federal tax code.

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