



Trustees Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, Charles Anenberg Weingarten, Wallis Annenberg and Lauren Bon (photo by Jim McHugh)

The Annenberg Foundation

*Courtesy of Southern California Grantmakers
By James Klein, James Klein Consulting*

While global in scope, the Annenberg Foundation has a special relationship with the Los Angeles area.

The Annenberg Foundation's Radnor, Pennsylvania headquarters was established with its creation in 1989, while the Southern California office didn't become fully operational until 2003. Four out of five of the Foundation's Trustees live in Los Angeles County, however, and work from its Century City office. While both locations accept grant submissions from anywhere in the world, the Trustees' presence in the region and close involvement in the organization naturally leads to support for local projects.

"Our perspective is a Los Angeles one," says Leonard Aube, Managing Director of the Annenberg Foundation's Southern California operations. "Those of us here today were not transferred from the Radnor, Pennsylvania office. We were brought on under Wallis Annenberg's leadership to support her philanthropy in the region primarily."

The Annenberg Foundation is the 11th largest nationwide in giving, authorizing over \$250 million in grants to more than 500 nonprofit organizations in its most recently completed fiscal year. The institution ranks 18th overall in total assets nationwide with more than \$2.5 billion.

Though sizable, the Annenberg Foundation is a family affair. Publisher, diplomat, and philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg founded the organization in 1989. His wife, Leonore Annenberg, became President and Chairman after his passing in 2002. His daughter, Wallis Annenberg, emerged as Vice President. Three of Wallis' adult grown children – Lauren Bon, Charles Annenberg Weingarten, and Gregory Annenberg Weingarten – comprise the balance of the Board. Wallis, Charles, and Lauren live in Los Angeles County, while Gregory lives in Paris but maintains a home in Southern California.

“We are not only funding our community, we are living and working in it.”

–Wallis Annenberg

“We are a small group of family members leading a large-asset foundation which we try to operate in the most human way possible,” says Wallis Annenberg. “We are not only funding our community, we are living and working in it.”

The Annenberg Foundation's community focus extends to recognizing a need to help strengthen the nonprofit sector in the area. “Los Angeles has really shifted over the last 20 years from being one of the country's headquarter-based towns or cities to a town that is defined by regional sales offices,” Aube observes. “And we see that where companies have their headquarters, their giving tends to disproportionately benefit the region. So as more and more companies have left the region, it has left the nonprofit community here struggling a bit...”

Thus, the Annenberg Foundation's investment in the region helped fill that void while considerable efforts were taken to strengthen nonprofits with technical assistance and professional development. The Foundation forged a partnership with philanthropy centers at Indiana University and USC that resulted in tuition-free leadership workshops for nonprofits. In addition, a program was established with The Grantsmanship Center in downtown Los Angeles to offer low-cost grantwriting workshops.

“Among the most important contributions that SCG is making is that it creates a certain kind of forum for the exchange of information and good ideas about best practices in the field,” says Aube. “We really do appreciate the convening, the workshops, the information-sharing... When we read about certain practices and approaches from other grantmakers, it's incredibly helpful to us.”

While the Foundation's grantmaking expresses the founder's original vision, the board members have helped expand its program areas to include some innovative projects and partnerships. “We haven't so much shifted our focus as much as we have added new areas to the portfolio,” Aube explains. “We're still very active in public education, we're incredibly active in the arts, health and human services, but we're also active now in the areas of human rights, animal welfare, and the environment... that's why you see the emergence of projects like Farmlab and Explore.”

Farmlab, a project led by artist and Trustee Lauren Bon, is a multi-disciplinary effort in a



downtown Los Angeles warehouse that functions among other things as a community education center, an art production studio, and a cultural performance venue. Farmlab emerged in 2006 from another Annenberg Foundation project, Not a Cornfield, which created a living cornfield just north of downtown Los Angeles.

“Strong leadership is what leads to great impact and change...”

–Wallis Annenberg

Filmmaker and Trustee Charles Annenberg Weingarten spearheads a number of the Foundation’s creative initiatives, including the Annenberg Film Fellows program at the Sundance Institute, the Charles Annenberg Weingarten Program on Online Communities (APOC) at USC, and a multimedia project, Explore, which spotlights nonprofits from around the world and examines the use of the Internet as a means to spur global philanthropy.

“Our mission is broad enough to allow flexibility with our philanthropy so that we can really open our eyes, be responsive and support vision-driven leadership,” states Wallis Annenberg. “Strong leadership is what leads to great impact and change. Whether I’m funding a medical center, Lauren is saving trees, Gregory is supporting the arts or Charlie is spotlighting global issues, we remain open to a wide variety of proposals from Los Angeles and around the world. Moreover, Lee (Leonore) Annenberg’s on-going support of public education and civics education helps us cover the waterfront of societal issues. ”

The board members have a particularly hands-on approach to governing the institution. “We talk with them virtually every day,” Aube reports. “We see them weekly, and we meet with them as a group monthly. So there is an unprecedented level of information exchange going on between our professional staff and the Board.”

The Trustees’ involvement doesn’t end with the staff. According to Aube, “After every single Board Meeting, Wallis Annenberg personally calls the grantees that were reviewed on that docket. That’s a little unusual, but it speaks directly to the Annenberg’s commitment to openness and accessibility.”

While continuing to make large grants to established institutions, the Annenberg Foundation will consider submissions of virtually any size. “The Foundation continues to make very large, significant grants to institutions that over time have demonstrated perseverance and a pattern of success, but we also recognize that solutions or impact can often come from relatively modest-sized organizations.”

The Foundation prides itself on being particularly responsive to its grant applicants. “From the time a qualified nonprofit submits a letter of inquiry, we want to be back to them within four to six weeks with preliminary feedback. If they are invited to submit a formal proposal, we begin work right away once we receive it. Our goal is to work with our trustees to secure an answer in about eight weeks, either yea or nay. We pride ourselves as being among the swiftest large-asset





foundations with quality due diligence. We call it 'high touch' philanthropy.'"

What's the one message Aube feels the Trustees would like to convey to potential grantees?
"You're going to get a really fair shake at the Annenberg Foundation because people here obsess about your nonprofit's success. We want you to be successful, and we want to do everything in our capacity to help nonprofits be successful. So whether it's technical assistance or some discretionary grant, or trying something completely entrepreneurial, bring it on."

