

## Honoring Gary L. Yates

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When I first started Architecture school, way back in 1970, we were given a list of books to read over the summer before classes began. It says something about my frame of mind then that I can still remember every book I read. Three of them were from a series entitled “The Master Builders,” and they were illustrated biographies of Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, three giants of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. I was transfixed by their stories, and it was only much later that I understood the subtle irony implicit in the title of the series. “Master Builder” is the title we now attribute to the architects of the great cathedrals and other early masterpieces of architecture, because we have no way of knowing their names. They didn’t sign their work. It’s only in recent times that “brand name” architects have emerged and become the standard for the field.

But there are still Master Builders in every field of endeavor, who put the creation of institutions ahead of their own egos and personal agendas. One of the most important Master Builders of philanthropic foundations in California is Gary Yates. Only a handful of us will ever know the story of the early days of The California Wellness Foundation. But suffice to say, they were turbulent, to say the least. As one of the original hires, Gary not only endured that turbulence but also acted with true personal courage to bring about changes that set the stage for the organization we know today. Those moments will never be recorded in the official history of philanthropy, but they were truly instances of a Master Builder at work...even though he might not have felt like it at the time.

Gary took the structure that was established by the original board and transformed it to craft five multi-year grantmaking initiatives that had wide-ranging impact, not only in California but also around the country. He and Crystal Hayling played a critical role in the development of the nation’s first major philanthropic initiative devoted to the prevention of youth violence. It was a breathtakingly bold step for a new foundation to take, and TCWF continues to provide much needed leadership in that field today. As an expert in Adolescent Medicine, Gary put his personal reputation on the line as a public spokesperson for prevention at a time when the public sentiment was “lock ‘em up.” He also played a key role in funding and shaping ten years of major public education campaigns on violence prevention and teen pregnancy prevention that were truly groundbreaking for a large foundation in their candor and scale.

Another media campaign educated voters about a deceptive ballot initiative financed by the tobacco industry that would have pre-empted local anti-smoking ordinances. The initiative was resoundingly defeated. The campaign drew national attention. It also attracted the interest of California’s Attorney General, who launched an investigation, which was subsequently dropped. It was something new and bracing to hear the president of a major foundation say publicly... “we’re non-partisan, but that doesn’t mean we’re *neutral* when it comes to protecting the public’s health.”

Throughout the years, Gary has been an atypical foundation president. He has spoken out on issues and has been uncompromising in his commitment to a core set of values. He hasn't hesitated to ruffle the feathers of his colleagues at other foundations, which is almost unheard of in this business. But he's also maintained an open door to those who wished to meet with him. He's always felt it was an important part of the responsibility he was given to stay directly connected to what folks are thinking outside the foundation "bubble." There's no question in my mind that he's been the most accessible major foundation president in the country.

Another leadership stance that has endeared him to the grantseeking community is his strong and continuing endorsement of grants for core operating support. After carefully listening to voices from the field, he presided over a total paradigm shift from foundation-initiated programs to devoting the majority of TCWF's resources to responsive grantmaking in the form of multi-year core support. It's not a popular stance in the field of philanthropy, where in many circles it is considered the antithesis of "strategic" grantmaking. But it has led to a whole different level of partnership between the foundation and its grantees. Grantseekers don't have to pitch an innovative project to get funded. They're allowed to be honest about the challenges their organizations are facing, knowing that the foundation is likely to ask "so what do you *really* need?" and "how can we help?"

Gary has also played a key role in the development of innovative programs such as the California Peace Prize and the Champions of Health Professions Diversity, which annually honor (often unsung) individuals who are on the front lines of change across California. Under his watch, TCWF has also sponsored a sabbatical program for experienced non-profit leaders, which has had multiple positive ripples across the field.

I could go on. How do you adequately do justice to the legacy of a true Master Builder in just a few minutes? Very few individuals to my knowledge have approached what Gary has accomplished. He took a fledgling organization from chaos to national prominence, and he did it with integrity and with class. He ensured that TCWF's Board was one of the most ethnically diverse in the country. He also hired and nurtured one of the most diverse foundation staffs in the country, and never sought any special recognition for doing so. Several of his former staff members have gone on to play major roles in other foundations.

On the personal side, not many would guess that beneath that mature professional demeanor lies the heart of a true Rocker. How else do you think he survived all those early-early morning drives from Irvine to Woodland Hills? He had his main men Neil Young and Bob Seger cranked up to maximum volume on his car stereo. As old Neil would say "Keep on rockin' in the free world, dude!"

So, thank you Gary for being the Master Builder of The California Wellness Foundation. In your hands, it has become something much greater than anyone could have predicted at its inception. And it wasn't about you. That's the essence of true Stewardship in my book, and it's why we celebrate you tonight!

**Tom David**