

Liberty Hill's First Decade

1976-1985

Car phones, Pac Man and the Apple Macintosh computer. Punks, Yuppies and Buppies. Tom Bradley in the second of his five terms as mayor; Fernando Valenzuela pitching for the Dodgers.



1982 Supporters at the annual fundraiser, a picnic barbecue.

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In 1975, four young people who'd inherited wealth met for a picnic in Topanga Canyon to discuss better ways to donate to progressive causes. In conversations continuing into 1976, Sarah Pillsbury, Larry Janss, Win McCormack and Anne Mendel—inspired by two already active alternative foundations—agreed to hire Mary Jo von Mach to see if there was a need for a similar foundation in Los Angeles. Mary Jo visited 150 organizations.

"Poor Mary Jo," Pillsbury remembered in a later speech. "She went around Los Angeles in her VW van saying she represented a bunch of rich people who wanted to know if there was a need for a foundation that provided seed money to groups working for social change. Some thought the question so ludicrous, the answer so obvious, that she must be from the LAPD."

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1981 Community Funding Board; (top) Abby Sher, Sylvia Patton; (middle) Margarita Ramirez, Barbara Cohn; (bottom) Richard Parkey, Elizabeth Fragoa Lloyd.

The so-obvious answer was the birth of the Liberty Hill Foundation, named after a speaker's platform erected by striking port workers in San Pedro in 1923. On that Liberty Hill, the famed muckraking writer Upton Sinclair read out Article One of the Constitution to the rallying workers and was promptly arrested and thrown in jail.

The new Liberty Hill was just as anti-Establishment. The founders believed that charitable institutions devoted to treating the symptoms of society's ills were, in fact, often simply maintaining the status quo, and that the root causes of social injustice need to be addressed. Influenced by the resurgence of community organizing, Liberty Hill's grantmaking would be informed by organizers and grassroots leaders, who would serve as members of a Community Funding Board which would also include two donor representatives.

Money for a copy machine

At first the grants were small. Most often, seed money was given to small grassroots groups that stood no chance of receiving grants from traditional foundations. Liberty Hill's checks paid for basic needs, from a copy machine or the budget for organizing a rally to a modest salary for a lone staff member. Community concerns at that time included school integration, immigrant and refugee issues, affirmative action, health care, police brutality, apartheid in South Africa, housing, and the energy crisis. Antinuclear activities were also a major theme.

Liberty Hill was set up as a public foundation and the founders realized that to sustain the work, they would have to fundraise. The base of supporters swiftly grew to include donors of all ages, some with earned wealth, some who could afford only small gifts, but all believers in Liberty Hill's progressive approach.



Sarah Pillsbury at Liberty Hill's office in the attic of the Church in Ocean Park.

"In Los Angeles at that time," Sarah Pillsbury remembers, "Ninety percent of giving was bricks and mortar. Donors wanted to see their names on things. We felt that money should be used to help people." In 1978, Liberty Hill and five other community-based progressive foundations came together as the Funding Exchange, which eventually grew to include 16 foundations, and continued through 2013.

Liberty Hill was often the first source of funding for organizations on the cutting edge of social change. GAIN (Grassroots Action Information Network) used a Liberty Hill grant to organize antinuclear teach-ins. In 1977, more than 2,000 people gathered at the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant, an event that led to the creation of the Alliance for Survival and its 40 community chapters. Liberty Hill provided grants to the

Alliance as well as a loan for "Survival Sundays," massive antinuclear gatherings at the Hollywood Bowl. Alliance for Survival became so strong that it in turn donated to Liberty Hill.

Excluding families with kids

Another early victory was set in motion by a \$2,000 seed grant to the Fair Housing for Children Coalition. Thanks to this group, housing options for renters in L.A. have changed dramatically since 1980, when 71% of all rental units in Los Angeles were closed to families with kids. This woman-led group made a national case (via "60 Minutes" and other means) against discriminatory landlords who also routinely excluded families headed by single mothers.

Liberty Hill was an early supporter of the Coalition for Economic Survival, which worked to build a strong union of tenants using tools such as weekly seminars on "How to Organize Your Building." The movement initiated by CES resulted in L.A.'s rent control laws and requirements that apartment buildings be inspected regularly.



Among those pictured at this 1989 meeting:
Michele Prichard, Win McCormack, Mark
Masaoka, Larry Frank, Enrique Delacruz;
(standinal) Paula Litt.

During this first decade, Liberty Hill also began offering training for grassroots organizers. In 1978 and 1979, the series included training in management, fundraising and media outreach. Liberty Hill's Media for Impact conference held at USC, was cosponsored by the Media Alliance, Neighborhood Media Services, the Western Center on Law and Poverty and the Annenberg School of Communications. In 1981 and 1982, Liberty Hill's Technical Assistance Program, designed to equip grassroots leaders with basic skills, featured Jackie Goldberg teaching "Public Speaking for Activists," Tim Brick on "Making Meetings Work," and Ginny Andrews teaching "Developing Media Relations."

Disarmament and dinner

Liberty Hill was in the vanguard of early 1980s philanthropy, awarding grants to organizations working to end U.S. covert action in Central America's civil wars and to the Minority AIDS Project, as well as to antinuclear and disarmament organizations. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 had a significant impact on the lives of the poor and people of color in Los Angeles. Homelessness was rampant, and the crack epidemic dealt South Central Los Angeles a severe blow. Liberty Hill grantmaking went to organizations fighting for affordable housing, for workers' and civil rights, and to blue-collar groups working to stop local plant closings.



Member of CARECEN

Liberty Hill was the first foundation to fund CARECEN, the Central American Resource & Education Center, which was founded by Salvadoran refugees and has since grown to become the largest legal and social service agency for Central Americans in the nation. In 1982, Citizens for a Better Environment, one of the earliest environmental justice organizations, was awarded what was a large grant for the time, \$12,500. Another grant went to the White Lung Association, founded by two Long Beach shipyard workers after they witnessed friends struck down by asbestos-related diseases. The association quickly went national and was successful in winning lasting policy changes for regulating asbestos in the workplace.

In 1983, the first Upton Sinclair Awards dinner was held. Actor and activist Mike Farrell received the initial award, presented by "MASH" costar Loretta Swit. The dinners became a successful fundraising event and drew added attention to Liberty Hill from members of the entertainment industry. Honorees have included a Who's Who of celebrities, activists, philanthropists and grassroots leaders.