

Profiles in Excellence: Trista Harris – a career of giving

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Trista Harris never dreamed of climbing the corporate ladder.

She never wanted to go near it. Since she was just a young child, Harris' drive was to work in the nonprofit sector, devoting her talents to community building – choosing people over personal gain. In doing so, Harris has risen to the top of the nonprofit ranks and now heads the Minnesota Council on Foundations (MCF), an organization whose members represent three-quarters of all grant making in the state, awarding almost \$1 billion annually. For Harris, her life is driven by fighting to stamp out inequality and injustice.

"When I was 8- or 9-years-old, I knew I wanted to work for community-based organizations. My first job was working at a community center at 16," said Harris, whose mother was a costume designer at the Pillsbury House Theatre – a community-based settlement house in south Minneapolis.

This past June it was announced that Harris would take over as president of MCF following the retirement of Bill King, who had piloted the organization for 25 years. Prior to taking over at MCF, Harris was the executive director of Headwaters Foundation for Justice, a nonprofit committed to funding grassroots organizations fighting for economic, environmental, racial and

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social justice. Harris said she plans to continue to fight injustice in her new role at MCF.

"I see my role as being a connector. The reason I was excited to take this role is because we (MCF) have more than 175 organizations and donors that account for 75 percent of the giving in the state. If I can help these organizations be more strategic in their giving I believe we can have a bigger impact on issues important to the people of this state," said Harris.

Harris said the need for strategic giving became more apparent following the severe economic downturn in 2008. And though the downturn impacted nonprofits greatly, she said many in the sector learned a valuable lesson.

"In 2008, nonprofits pulled together in an amazing way," said Harris. "That habit of collaboration has continued and I was proud to see that happen."

One of those coming together instances Harris pointed to is the formation of Generation Next, a broad-based effort of several organizations working to close the achievement gap in Minnesota schools.

"Since the formation of Generation Next, there's been a much more open conversation around the issue," said Harris. "These are some of the transformative efforts we'll look back on 10 to 15 years from now and say that's where we were able to close the achievement gap and that's why Minnesota schools are some of the best in the nation."

For someone who has dedicated her entire professional life to service of others, Harris knows there are many others doing the same thing with their lives, and she knows there is also a potential for burnout – especially for those on the frontlines. The graduate of Howard University in Washington, D.C. and the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs said she hopes in her new role she can help to ease the strain on many smaller nonprofits.

"So many nonprofits are short staffed," said Harris. "These individuals are in a place where the system was already broken before they got there. It's like having a house with a leaky roof. When water is leaking we get a bucket so the water doesn't leak on the floor, but the real hard work is to get up there and fix the roof, and that's what we've got to start doing."

Though announced in June that Harris would become president of MCF, she did not officially take her post until July 29. The co-author (with Rosetta Thurman) of *How to become a Nonprofit Rockstar* and former co-chair of the African-American Leadership Forum, Harris said she hopes to use her new position to end social, economic and racial disparities in the state.

"At the time I grew up here, it was clear that there were huge racial disparities," said the graduate of Minneapolis' South High School. "When it came time to graduate, a lot of my friends did not graduate with me. That's why my whole career has been to try to see why that is and to address the issue so everyone is successful."