

Walk of Life

Harold Grinspoon Makes Philanthropy His Business

By JACLYN C. STEVENSON

Harold Grinspoon has worked virtually his whole life, first making money, and now, giving it away. When he's not working on one of his many philanthropic endeavors, Grinspoon loves the outdoors and a good hike through the mountains.

Wherever he may roam, however, charity is never far from his mind.

Harold Grinspoon is an avid hiker, who loves the peaks of Colorado as much as he does the hills of the Berkshires.

He made his fortune as a real estate entrepreneur, founding Aspen Square Management 45 years ago and watching the company bloom into a nationally recognized housing group managing more than 15,000 properties across the country.

That success undoubtedly afforded him the time and resources to enjoy one of his favorite pastimes as frequently as he'd like. But 'retirement' does not do much to describe his post-career activities. While Grinspoon can often be found taking day trips in Aspen, walking some of his favorite



Harold Grinspoon stands near a favorite painting in his West Springfield office.

trails, and having long talks over lunch with trusted friends, more often he's in his office in West Springfield, from which he continues to envision and manage initiatives for his new passion of philanthropy in many forms.

In 1993, Grinspoon established two foundations: the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, focused on enhancing and improving Jewish life and culture, and the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation, which raises funds

and awareness for a number of educational and entrepreneurial activities in the region, and most recently has turned its collective attentions to energy conservation. Collectively, the organizations have operating budgets of about \$17 million, and have funded countless projects ranging from assistance for Jewish overnight camps (viewed as one of the best ways to keep young people "in the fold," as Grinspoon says) to regional health and wellness

grants for research, activism, patient care, and more.

In addition, Grinspoon and his wife, Diane Troderman, also a philanthropist, are founding partners in the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) and serve together on the board of governors of Hillel: the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, and are trustees of the Washington Institute, in addition to several other affiliations with charitable groups of all kinds.

In a wide-ranging interview, Grinspoon talked with *BusinessWest* about some of the reasons why he decided to put so much of his energies in charitable work, why philanthropy is important to the region and the world as a whole, and what issues he'll be tackling next.

What life experiences led to your active involvement in philanthropy?

"In 1958, I bought my first two-family house on Springfield Street in Agawam. As I worked my way up in real estate, I developed a great sense of appreciation for the average blue-collar worker and feel a real responsibility to give back to society. America is a great country, and has been very good to me. It has given me the opportunity to make something of myself, and to succeed beyond my wildest dreams. I feel it is my duty to give back to both my country and to my people, who have helped make me who I am. I always knew, if I made it, I was going to give it away. I didn't want to spend the entirety of my life making money. I also had cancer once, and that could have been it — I could have been gone.

When I came out of it, I realized that in my younger years, I was very serious. Philanthropy has, in many respects, set me free.”

Some people with the means to enter into philanthropic work choose not to. Why did you?

“People with wealth have options, one of which is social responsibility to give back. I put a lot of energy into making my fortune. When you’re an entrepreneur, you pride yourself on what you do, and make, and on being a creative thinker. However, the end result is that you make money. It seems right to devote no less thought and energy in how to spend the money I give away.”

Do you have any mentors or role models in this vein? Is your family equally involved?

“My wife has partnered with me on many projects and has been extremely involved philanthropically. She helped me understand that I had all this wealth, and needed to set up a model to give it away. I essentially hired her to do that for me.”

What types of broad issues do you and your wife feel are important to fund and call attention to, and why?

“I have taken an active part in promoting education through a variety of our foundation’s programs, as well as fostering entrepreneurship among young people and encouraging energy conservation. I set up two foundations: the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, focused on enhancing the vitality of Jewish life locally, nationally, and in Israel; and the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation, which focuses mostly on strengthening

the local community through programs to encourage education, promote entrepreneurship, and increase home energy conservation — that is our newest initiative.”

What is the energy conservation initiative, and how does it fit into the Grinspoon Foundations’ charitable work?

“The program is called ‘energy-save.’ It helps people save money on their heating bills by encouraging them to make use of free audit services from their utility companies, and the rebates they are entitled to. The state will give up to \$1,500 in grants to homeowners for energy upgrades, but this is a program few people are aware of. It’s unmarketed because there are no funds to market it. So, we have just launched a marketing campaign to educate homeowners about the resources easily available to them.

“Most people, for example, don’t know that if the free audit shows that insulating their attic is needed, they are entitled to a rebate of 50% of the cost, up to \$1,500, from their utility company. If they let us know that they have insulated their attic and send us the paid receipt, we will send them an award of \$50 for insulating their attic, conserving energy, and encouraging others to do so, too.”

Why did you get involved in this new line of work?

“I got involved in this because it is clear to me that we have to get proactive in doing something not only about global warming, but also about wasting energy. So we launched this easy-to-do, very cost-effective campaign that is a win-win for homeowners and the environment. We would really

like to get more partners involved in this philanthropically. There are lots of ways to strengthen and expand a program like this if people in the business community wanted to take it up.”

Are there any other programs of the Grinspoon Foundations that you’re particularly proud of, or active in today?

“There are so many of them! We are very proud of our participation in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program. This is a program to encourage literacy among inner-city kids. We have supported the program, which sends a book every month to preschool kids in Springfield, at the cost of about \$30 per child per year. Some 3,000 kids in Springfield have participated in the program for the five years that we have been funding it in the Springfield area, and we’d love it if other funders would join us, since there are a lot more children who could use the books and learn to love reading.

“Actually, we liked the program so much that we have adapted it for the Jewish world, where it is used not to focus on literacy in the sense of reading, but more on cultural literacy. That program, The PJ Library, sends books and CDs every month to Jewish families with young children so they can learn about Jewish traditions and customs from an early age. We provide more than 16,000 books per month in more than 55 Jewish communities throughout the country.

“I’m also proud of our Pioneer Valley Excellence in Teaching Awards Program, which honors more than 150 outstanding teachers a year in our region. It’s very exciting. Teachers are so underappreciated, and so important, and we wanted to acknowledge

the ones who are doing a great job. MassMutual and the [Irene E. and George A.] Davis Foundation are our main funding partners, with about a dozen others also involved.

“And, I also love our entrepreneurship program; now, there are 13 local colleges and universities involved and encouraging young people to become entrepreneurs. Awards are given to students that excel in the program.

“Two additional programs that have been very inspirational to me are a program offered in Cambodia, where 200 children are part of an educational opportunity that would otherwise not be available to them, and a project led by my wife Diane, which includes a \$200,000 donation to an African community experiencing extreme poverty.

How has philanthropy affected your own life, both personally and professionally?

“My life has been enormously enriched by both helping and meeting fascinating people all over the world through my philanthropy. As we speak, there are 40 people on our team strategizing and planning our future, and by following our mission and vision, we will continue to grow and make a difference in our community and beyond.

“And every summer, I invite a network of friends to a summit in Aspen to hike, bike, and have fun while trying to inspire them to become philanthropic. The idea is that we go off and do some nice hiking, and we get to be free spirits out there, enjoying each other and the wilderness. Many ideas have been a direct result from these walks.”❖

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