

You don't know Dick

The hard-right face candidate DeVos isn't showing voters

By Curt Guyette
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Even though he was under the gun, facing the pressure of an impending deadline, Russ Bellant agreed to meet for a talk about Dick DeVos. Bellant's been tracking America's arch-conservative movement for more than 30 years, producing three ground-breaking books that reveal how the leaders of the far right maneuvered this country's political agenda in their direction. And he knows the story behind the DeVos family as well as anyone.

On the morning we met at a Royal Oak restaurant over a breakfast of Western omelets, Bellant was putting the finishing touches on an article delving into donations made by the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation, a multimillion-dollar philanthropy controlled by the Republican candidate for governor and his politically active wife.

Although he's written for this paper in the past, Bellant's piece this time out was for another publication. I, too, was looking at spending by DeVos' foundation, and wanted to tap into Bellant's expertise. Hooking up with me as a deadline loomed didn't provide him any personal benefit, in fact it was a real hassle, but he freely offered to help.

"This is too important," he explains. "People need to know what Dick DeVos is really about."

Bellant has been watching the gubernatorial race unfold with growing dismay. The GOP candidate has kept his campaign relentlessly focused on Michigan's sorry economic plight and incumbent Gov. Jennifer Granholm's inability to stop our slide to the fiscal bottom. The state's airwaves for months have been blanketed with DeVos commercials that talk about only one

thing: the potential of DeVos the savvy businessman to bring those skills to government and revive the state's flagging economy.

DeVos, who was president of Amway from 1993 to 2002, has so far spent \$17.9 million on his TV campaign, according to an analysis released last week by the nonpartisan Michigan Campaign Finance Network. That campaign has been "80 percent self-funded," the watchdog group noted. Gov. Jennifer Granholm has spent \$2.5 million on TV ads, while the state Democratic Party has spent \$5.5 million on "issue" ads supporting the incumbent.

DeVos has been focusing on the economy because that's the No. 1 issue facing a state that's in last place economically, and that's what voters want to hear about, says campaign spokesman John Truscott.

But there's another side to Dick DeVos, the hard-right face of a social and economic conservative who, not all that long ago, would have been considered extreme even among Republicans. But his views have largely become part of the political mainstream; many of the causes supported by DeVos are championed by the man currently sitting in the Oval Office, and he is there, at least in part, because of the financial support provided by the DeVos family. (If that sounds like hyperbole, consider that DeVos was offered the ambassadorship to the Netherlands as his reward for the role he played in the 2000 presidential campaign.) This political shift is testament to the quiet efforts undertaken by the DeVoses and other extremely wealthy right-wingers for more than three decades. Using donations from private foundations they control, as well as personal contributions and money kicked in from their companies, these people have been funding conservative think tanks, activist groups and fundamentalist Christian organizations in an attempt to direct America's political mainstream further and further to the right.

It is an effort that's been undeniably triumphant, according to the nonprofit National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP). In a 2004 report titled "Axis of Ideology," the group noted: "The success of these organizations is not something that NCRP or its members would necessarily celebrate. But the manner in which foundations on the right support, fund, and relate to their grantees is certainly to be admired. With resources that pale in comparison to centrist and liberal foundations, conservative funders have supported public policies that now impact the entire nation."

The agenda has been clear-cut: tax cuts that primarily benefit corporations and the wealthy,

industry deregulation, school privatization, militarism, the promotion of so-called "traditional values" that cover everything from undermining the rights of gays to re-criminalizing abortion to breaking down the wall separating church from state, opposition to the environmental movement and organized labor and affirmative action, and cuts in funding to social services.

The DeVos family has been at the epicenter of this movement. It started with Richard DeVos Sr., the candidate's father and co-founder of Amway (now renamed Alticor), a direct-marketing company decried by its many critics as a scheme that enriches those at the top while providing little to the legions of independent contractors who peddle soap and such, but more importantly, sell the supposed virtues of the company itself as they attempt to recruit even more people into the fold.

That company spawned a vast fortune for its founders since it began in 1959. As of 2005, Richard DeVos Sr. was estimated by *Forbes* magazine to be worth \$3.4 billion. In 2004, the Richard and Helen DeVos Foundation distributed \$34.5 million to about 175 civic groups, churches, medical associations, activist organizations and other nonprofits.

The foundation controlled by Dick and Betsy DeVos, though not as richly endowed, is nonetheless substantial, and its list of beneficiaries largely mirrors those receiving contributions from the foundation controlled by the elder DeVoses.

Both are generous contributors to a range of causes, a number of which are completely within the mainstream. The American Cancer Society, museums and symphony orchestras are all recipients. For the past several years, the single largest recipient has been the Education Freedom Fund, which provides scholarships that allow needy kids to attend private schools.

But of the \$3.2 million doled out by the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation in 2004 - the last year for which financial statements filed with the IRS are available - the vast majority of recipients were overtly Christian groups.

And mixed in with them are high-profile organizations that pursue a staunchly conservative agenda. You won't find any contributions to the Sierra Club or the ACLU or the pro-gay Triangle Foundation.

Going through the foundation financial reports - known as 990 forms - Bellant points out the groups those on the left consider part of the hard right. Nationally there's the Heritage Foundation, Federalist Society, American Enterprise Institute and the Council for National Policy among others. Closer to home, there's the Michigan-grown Acton Institute, Mackinac Center for Public Policy and the Traditional Values Coalition.

As Craig Ruff, a senior policy fellow at the for-profit Public Sector Consultants in Lansing, pointed out, it is easy to take an individual's contributions out of context. As an example, he said if a Democratic politician wrote a check to the ACLU, and the ACLU defended the rights of someone accused of being a child pornographer, that wouldn't mean that politician advocated pedophilia.

Truscott also says that its unfair to draw inferences on how DeVos will govern based on donations made as a private citizen.

"On a lot of issues, you cannot impose your personal beliefs," says Truscott. "What you believe as a private citizen doesn't transcend into elected office."

"The job of governor," he adds, "is turning around Michigan's anemic economy."

Asked about the preponderance of giving to Christian groups, Truscott assures that "Dick believes in separation of church and state. He believes in freedom of speech. He believes in protecting the sanctity of the Constitution."

Truscott says, too, that DeVos may often disagree with individual positions taken by a group but continue to provide support because of its underlying principles. It's in those philosophical underpinnings, though, that there is agreement among many of the nonprofits and politicians DeVos funds. There's a broad consistency to these groups that transcends individual issues.

And examining a candidate's beliefs based on that giving is, as Ruff says, "fair game."

Setting an agenda

Don't try to convince Sean Kosofsky that DeVos will leave his belief system at the door if he makes it into the governor's office.

As director of the political arm of Detroit's Triangle Foundation, which advocates for issues affecting the gay community, he sees DeVos as "zealot" committed to a "right-wing political agenda."

Kosofsky points to the ballot measure last year to ban gay marriage in the state, and the money DeVos personally contributed to help it pass.

"He spent a \$100,000 to beat up on us with that when he didn't have to, because there were already five or six different laws on the books preventing us from getting married," Kosofsky says. "He's a demagogue."

"If a candidate has a history of personal beliefs, and he's not going to act on those beliefs, then what will he act on?" asks an incredulous Bellant.

As far as the candidate's belief in separation between church and state, Bellant asks why is it he supports an organization like Michigan's Foundation for Traditional Values. That group, according to its mission statement seeks to return America to "Judeo-Christian principles" embraced by our Founding Fathers. The group received more than \$136,000 from the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation between 1996 and 2004.

"It sounds to me," says Bellant, "like he's not being honest."

Keeping focused

Although DeVos has released a list of 449 charities he's contributed to - including both personal and foundation contributions - when pressed to reveal how they reflect his beliefs, and how those beliefs would affect his agenda as governor, the candidate has remained mum.

For example, regarding the issue of abortion, DeVos has said only that he's "pro-life." When pressed by an AP reporter for the details of that position, DeVos campaign spokesman John Truscott said, "We're not going to get into parsing this a thousand different ways."

Yet DeVos has contributed to the anti-abortion group Right to Life of Michigan Educational Foundation, which opposes abortion even in cases of incest and rape. *The Detroit News* columnist Laura Berman contacted the group and reportedly was told that to get its endorsement a candidate must be "pro-life with no exception other than the life of the mother."

DeVos received the endorsement. And his foundation gave the group \$125,000 from 1996 through 2004.

When the *Lansing State Journal* editorial board asked the candidate about embryonic stem cell research, he reportedly "wouldn't even venture a viewpoint." And columnist Tim Skubick reported DeVos saying the issue was "very complicated" and declined to take a position.

One of DeVos' beneficiaries, James Dobson, founder of the conservative Christian group Focus on the Family, based in Colorado with affiliates across the country, wasn't nearly so reticent on the subject of embryonic stem cell research.

"You know, the thing that means so much to me here on this issue is that people talk about the potential for good that can come from destroying these little embryos and how we might be able to solve the problem of juvenile diabetes," Dobson said on an August radio broadcast. "There's no indication yet that they're gonna do that, but people say that, or spinal cord injuries or such things. But I have to ask this question: In World War II, the Nazis experimented on human beings in horrible ways in the concentration camps, and I imagine, if you wanted to take the time to read about it, there would have been some discoveries there that benefited mankind."

Dobson's Focus on the Family received \$570,000 from the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation from 1996 through 2004.

Among those on the opposite side of the debate is U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz, a moderate Republican from Battle Creek. Last month, at a news conference by a new coalition dedicated to easing Michigan's laws regarding stem cell research, Schwarz, a physician, warned that the state's major universities could suffer as a result of the state's already restrictive policies. He also warned that other states were reaping the economic benefits associated with more enlightened policies.

In regards to the deceptively named Michigan Civil Rights Initiative - which is on the November ballot and would prohibit state and local government entities, including public schools, from using affirmative action programs that give preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity in areas of hiring, contracting and education - DeVos is on record opposing it. But when asked directly by Gov. Jennifer Granholm if he supported affirmative action during a joint appearance sponsored by the Freedom Institute, DeVos, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, responded, "If you define for me what affirmative action means then we can have that conversation. But do I believe that every one of our citizens should have equal opportunities? Yes. And should we assist individuals who can't get to the table by themselves? Absolutely."

Or maybe not so absolutely. Among the groups receiving DeVos largesse is the Center for Individual Rights (CIR). On its Web site it boasts that, in 1997, it "filed two lawsuits against the University of Michigan challenging its use of racial preferences in admission. One lawsuit aimed at U-M's undergraduate college. The second challenged U-M's law school admissions system. Although the court imposed new restrictions on the use of race, the rulings did not achieve CIR's goal of eliminating racial preferences in admissions altogether."

And when liberal activists challenged the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative in Court, CIR defended the initiative and successfully fought to keep it on the ballot.

That group received \$35,000 from DeVos' foundation in 2001.

Only once in the campaign so far has DeVos let his guard down to provide a glimpse of an agenda that has otherwise been kept securely under wraps. That brief insight came a few weeks ago when DeVos, in an interview with the Associated Press, revealed that he supported the teaching of intelligent design in high school science classes. A revised version of creationism, intelligent design advocates claim that evolution is nothing but a theory, and that the development of new species is just too complicated to be explained by anything other than the work of a higher power. In other words, they imply, the hand of God.

"I would like to see the ideas of intelligent design that many scientists are now suggesting is a very viable alternative theory," DeVos told the AP. "That theory and others that would be considered credible would expose our students to more ideas, not less."

The problem is that, other than those on the religious right, there are few who find intelligent design to be credible science. As a federal judge declared last year in a case involving attempts to bring intelligent design to public school science classes in Dover, Pa., "To be sure, Darwin's theory of evolution is imperfect. However, the fact that a scientific theory cannot yet render an explanation on every point should not be used as a pretext to thrust an untestable alternative hypothesis grounded in religion into the science classroom or to misrepresent well-established scientific propositions."

Even when disguised as science, attempts to bring religion into public school classrooms in that way would violate the constitutional principle of separating church from state, declared the judge.

The fact that DeVos holds a contrary view comes as no surprise if you listen to the talking his money does. His foundation contributed \$65,000 to the Thomas More Law Center from 2000 through 2002. The Ann Arbor-based organization, begun by Domino's pizza founder Tom Monaghan, describes itself as "a not-for-profit public interest law firm dedicated to the defense and promotion of the religious freedom of Christians, time-honored family values, and the sanctity of human life. Our purpose is to be the sword and shield for people of faith, providing legal representation without charge to defend and protect Christians and their religious beliefs in the public square."

The center represented the Dover school board pro bono as it attempted to convince the court that teaching intelligent design wasn't unconstitutional.

Civil rights and wrongs

The Dick and Betsy DeVos foundation also provided support to the Institute for Justice, based in Washington, D.C. The liberal group People for the American Way had this to say about the nonprofit:

"Litigation groups such as the Landmark Legal Foundation and Clint Bolick's Institute for Justice have eagerly sought out potential court challenges in lower-income urban communities and loudly claim the mantle of supporters of education for the disadvantaged. In the past, Clint Bolick's Institute for Justice was better known for his vehement animosity towards virtually every proposed civil rights bill. He even opposed those bills supported by Presidents Nixon and Bush. For example, he branded the 1991 Civil Rights Act as a 'quota' bill, even after it was supported by President Bush and 90 percent of the Congress."

Bolick was also "one of the leaders of anti-affirmative action litigation work defending California's Proposition 209 in court." That measure, which was passed by voters, was the initial foray into the culture wars for Ward Connerly, who has become the nation's most visible anti-affirmative action activist.

According to the A Job is a Right Campaign (AJRC), a Milwaukee-based, all-volunteer organization of labor and community activists, in 1998 testimony before a congressional subcommittee on the Constitution, Bolick "criticized attempts by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department to challenge employment discrimination in police and fire departments, to ensure bi-lingual education for Indian and Spanish-speaking students, as well as proportional representation."

But sometimes a group's goals aren't so clearly defined. The Institute for Justice is an example. It has attempted to portray itself as a champion of minorities and the poor by representing them in a series of deregulation cases. But, as AJRC points out in a briefing paper, "In pursuit of its goal of a radical laissez-faire capitalism, the Institute has initiated a number of lawsuits aimed at ending government regulation of business. While the lawsuits generally involve small businesses, often in communities of color, the goal is to set a legal precedent for the deregulation of big business in general."

"Activist groups like the Institute for Justice and the reactionary foundations that fund them have succeeded to a great extent in defining the public debate over issues of social policy as a choice between a racist status quo and a collection of 'reform' schemes designed to open the doors to widespread privatization and deregulation," argues AJRC. "As a result, organizations and individuals with histories of opposing every effort of the black and Latino communities to win basic civil rights have been able to project themselves as defenders and advocates of these same communities. If they succeed in winning their ultimate goal of a society with no restrictions at all on the corporations, those who do not control those corporations will be vulnerable to the same kind of exploitation and oppression that existed until relatively recently in this country's history."

One of the more interesting of the groups supported by DeVos is the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids. According to the group Media Transparency, a nonprofit based in Wisconsin, the Acton Institute's central mission is to counter what the Institute calls "the clergy's disturbing bias against the business community and free enterprise," principally by convening three-day conferences for seminarians and divinity students in order to "introduce them to the moral and ethical basis of free market economies." The group Center for Media and Democracy describes it as a "libertarian think tank ... that promotes laissez-faire economics and public policy within a Christian framework."

The institute argued mightily against America signing the Kyoto Protocol addressing global warming, saying in a commentary posted on its Web site, "Religious leaders are right to remain skeptical of this effort to transform unsound science and policy into a moral crusade ..." and contending that the free market will help ensure "that the good environmental steward is properly rewarded for his efforts."

It is pro-SUV and concerned about "the cozy relationship developing between radical environmental groups and Christian churches. ... Investing the anti-human environmental agenda with ecclesiastical authority is very dangerous, even when it is done unintentionally."

The Institute received \$200,000 in grants from the ExxonMobil Foundation from 2001 to 2005. Betsy DeVos is the institute's treasurer. The foundation she and her husband control gave \$269,000 to Acton from 1996 through 2004.

Birch sprouts

Between bites of omelet and hash browns, Bellant and I go through the DeVos foundation's 990 economic reports, focusing attention on the recipients. It's an exercise Bellant has gone through countless times with a host of foundations as he attempted to figure out the connecting threads of the right-wing web he's been investigating since the 1970s.

Asked how he got involved in this, he says it started while covering a campaign appearance by racist Alabama Gov. George Wallace during the 1972 presidential election. Bellant, on assignment for his college newspaper, was surprised to see Wallace's advance team passing out literature from the John Birch Society, a zealous anti-communist group whose heyday came during the early 1960s. He began looking into the group, which led him to explore organizations Richard Nixon was working with to bolster support for the Vietnam War.

"I never imagined I'd be at it this long," says Bellant, punctuating his comment with an ironic laugh.

Now 57, his day job involves running a union skilled-trades apprenticeship school.

Among the first groups to attract Bellant's attention all those years ago was the Council for National Policy, headquartered in Fairfax, Va.

He wrote about the secretive council in his book *The Religious Right In Michigan*, published by the group Americans for Religious Liberty. He describes it this way:

"The Council for National Policy (CNP) is not an organization many have heard of. Unlike many self-promoting groups in the religious right, the council wants to keep it that way. Although the fact of its existence is acknowledged, everything else is held secret: its meetings, political activities, and membership. Its membership comprises the elite of the radical right. Many CNP members would prefer that their participation not be known.

"The Council's creation was inspired by business and political leaders of the John Birch Society."

And that's the way it works - investigation of one group leads to another, and the threads are pieced together until the web takes shape.

Richard DeVos Sr. has been "a member of the CNP almost since its founding," Bellant wrote. He twice served as its president, and was "one of the earliest backers of behind-the-scenes efforts in the mid-'70s to stimulate the religious right and make the U.S. a 'Christian Republic.'"

Also members were the late Edgar Prince and his wife, Elsa, the parents of Betsy DeVos. Edgar Prince owned Prince Corp., an auto parts manufacturer he sold in 1996 for \$1.35 billion.

Betsy DeVos, former chair of the Michigan Republican Party, sits on the board of the foundation that bears her parent's names. Also on the board is Betsy's brother Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL who formed Blackwater, a company that supplies mercenaries to the U.S. government, with the company's hired guns sent to Iraq, Afghanistan and even New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

According to a recent article in *The Virginia Pilot*, Blackwater has "won \$505 million in publicly recorded federal contracts since 2000. ..." About two-thirds of that was in no-bid contracts.

The Prince Foundation supports many of the same groups receiving grants from the foundation Betsy DeVos and her husband control, as well as the foundation run by the elder DeVos.

My exposure to the DeVos world first came in 1996, when I was assigned by this paper to look into then-Gov. John Engler's support network. What I found, among other things, was that the DeVos and Prince foundations were quietly funding an effort they hoped would culminate in changing the Michigan Constitution to allow public funding of religious and private schools through the use of vouchers. The plan was to first create a system of charter schools, and then build on that success to institute a voucher system. They did succeed in changing state law to allow for charter schools but, despite spending heavily, failed to sell voters on vouchers. A 2000

ballot measure they pushed went down in flames, garnering only 31 percent of the vote.

At the time that was going on, I wrote that the privatization of education was a natural desire for the DeVos family because the effort entwined both threads that define the far right: strident social conservatism and an unfettered marketplace.

The Prince and Devos foundations supplied funding for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, which provides an academic grounding to arguments calling for privatization; at the same time, the foundations funded religious groups like the Michigan Family Forum, which drummed up support for the measure among Christians.

Groups like the Mackinac Center - similar state-focused think tanks are part of a loosely affiliated network throughout the country - promote a free-market ideology by advocating measures like right-to-work laws.

Such laws, which can now be found in 23 states, allow workers the option of not paying dues to the unions that negotiate their contracts and protect their rights at work.

Currently, two right-to-work laws, one dealing with the private sector and the other addressing public employees, are languishing in the Michigan Legislature. The bills could pass if brought to a vote because both houses are controlled by the GOP, but Democrat Granholm has vowed to veto them should they come to the governor's desk. If Dick DeVos were sitting at that desk, those bills, say labor leaders, would become law faster than you can say "union buster."

Conservatives argue that such laws help stimulate the economy. Union officials say they drive wages down. But as David Bonior, a former congressman from Macomb County who now heads the pro-labor group American Rights at Work, pointed out at a recent summit on the issue, there's another benefit to corporate America in these laws.

Labor unions, he observed, have a tradition of educating their members in progressive politics. Weaken organize labor, and you will get a workforce that is less liberal.

At the same time, as former presidential candidate and current head of the national Democratic Party Howard Dean pointed out in his book *You Have the Power*, by pushing the social buttons of working-class Christian fundamentalists - attacks on gay marriage, say, or school prayer - the Republicans can win elections and pursue an agenda that benefits the wealthy and the corporations through tax cuts and deregulation.

All in the family

By the time I'm putting toast on my jelly and finishing my third cup of coffee, Bellant is still connecting dots.

Christian activist groups like Michigan Family Forum supported by the DeVoses and others put out "nonpartisan" voter guides that, although not advocating one candidate over another, make it clear which is the "Christian" candidate by saying which one is "pro-choice" or favors vouchers or abstinence-only sex education policies. As a result, they're prompted to vote for those politicians, who also receive campaign funds from the same wealthy individuals.

The DeVos family is also among this country's top contributors to the national Republican Party, state Republican parties and GOP candidates. The family's political contributions totaled more than \$2.3 million in 2003 and 2004, including more than \$1.8 million to party committees in Michigan, according to a report produced by People for the American Way. In the 2000 national election, Amway was the second-largest contributor of soft money to the Republican Party.

No DeVos money goes to Democrats.

But that doesn't seem to have hurt the family on Capitol Hill. In 1997, Molly Ivins of *The Star-Telegram* in Fort Worth, Texas, wrote a column that began:

"My favorite tax break in the new budget package is worth \$283 million to one corporation:

Amway. The company and its top leaders have contributed at least \$4 million to the Republican Party during the last four years, so that's a \$4 million investment in campaign contributions with a \$283 million payoff for Amway."

Ivins went on to report that the break was inserted into the legislation "at the last minute" by then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Confronted with that during Monday's debate, DeVos denied the accuracy of Ivins' report.

Of even greater significance is the payoff DeVos family members would enjoy if the estate tax repeal, which they're reportedly lobbying for, goes through.

A study jointly produced earlier this year by the groups Public Citizen, Congress Watch and United for a Fair Economy reported that "members of a handful of super-wealthy families have quietly helped finance and coordinate a massive campaign to repeal the estate tax." The DeVos family, it's reported, would save an estimated \$1.3 billion if the tax, dubbed the "death tax" by those who want to see it eliminated, is repealed in 2011 as backers of the effort hope.

And so it goes. The DeVoses keep getting richer, giving them more money to fund the think tanks that provide the scholarly reports and position papers that support their free-market economic philosophy, and more money to fund the fundamentalist Christian groups that turn out the voters to support the hard-right conservative politicians whose campaigns the DeVoses also fund, gaining the sort of access and favors those voters can't even begin to imagine.

Given the level of power he already enjoys, why is Dick DeVos even in this race? The noncynical answer is that DeVos is a good citizen, and believes that he has the skills needed to revive the economy of his native state.

But Bellant has been following this crowd for far too long to accept an answer like that.

"The governor of Michigan, it's not that great a job," says Bellant. "My guess is he wants to be president."

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