

Special Report: Charitable Foundations

The fortunes' favorites

Foundations spend more on culture than on the poor, but some are rethinking their priorities
(First of three parts)

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When the Salvation Army of Buffalo needs money, volunteers join staff in braving the cold and snow, asking shoppers for their loose change.

When the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra needs extra cash, the symphony turns to its wealthy friends in Buffalo's foundation community.

So does the Darwin Martin House. And the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. The Burchfield Penney Art Center, too.

Buffalo's private foundations, created by wealthy entrepreneurs — the Oisheis, Wendts and Knoxes from Buffalo's Gilded Age to the Rich, Tower and Koessler families of today — come through for their favorite causes, drawing on some \$1.7 billion in collective assets.

That bodes well for the cultural icons of the community, many of which have personal connections to foundation leaders, as well as sophisticated fundraising efforts. But it doesn't always bode as well for agencies that serve the poor or fight crime in distressed neighborhoods.

"For crime prevention and youth, it's very difficult to get dollars," said Marlies Wesolowski, who runs a community center in the Broadway-Fillmore neighborhood. "I'm not sure why. If the kids were in the youth programs, they wouldn't be out on the street corners and getting into trouble."

Next to the University at Buffalo, with its vast research program, the Buffalo Philharmonic was the single biggest beneficiary in 2006 of the area's foundations. The orchestra received more money than the total given by foundations to the United Way, United Jewish Fund and Catholic Charities combined, a Buffalo News analysis of giving found.

"This is a huge systemic problem in philanthropy. Too little money goes to benefit those that need it the most," said Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, an independent organization based in Washington, D. C.

"Unfortunately, many donors practice patronage giving. They support institutions they themselves benefit from. If they like the symphony, they give to the symphony, and they give to their alma mater. Those may not be bad things to give to, but it's certainly not my vision for what philanthropy should be about in this country, and I don't think it's what most people think philanthropy should be about."

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