Women's Philanthropy: Why Knowing General Trends Is Not Enough

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Women’s Philanthropy: Why Knowing General Trends Is Not Enough

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Mellon Scholars Program

Overview:

Women’s philanthropy has been around for over two centuries, yet women’s personal contributions have often been masked because donations were given under their husbands’ name. I argue that to fully understand a person’s actions, it is important to know the historical context because each time period has its own set of characteristics and challenges. By looking at individual stories of women philanthropists, we can learn more about these women than from general trends.

Method:

Using the life story of Mrs. Margaret Sage, I developed a prototype of a woman philanthropist by extracting three trends from her story that I believe could be generalized to other women philanthropists. These included:

- Influences from religion and education
- The time in their lives when women donated, and
- The effects of societal gender norms on their philanthropy.

Using the Joint Archives of Holland, I researched two women philanthropists, Mrs. Martha Kollen and Mrs. Elsa Prince, both local philanthropists born and raised in Holland Michigan. I then looked to see how they compared and contrasted to my prototype, Mrs. Sage, and the extent to which knowing their individual stories helps one understand them at a deeper level.

Cultural Influences:

Another significant aspect of philanthropy revealed by research into individual stories shows that the culture of Holland, a culture strongly entrenched in the values and teachings of Christianity, had an impact on the extent to which Mrs. Prince and Kollen acted because of their religious views and values. In other words, they felt called by their commitment to religious values to be philanthropic.

Therefore, growing up in Holland had a profound impact on how and why these women donated.

Cultural Aspects Explored:

There are many aspects of culture that can influence philanthropy. Since the two women I researched were from Holland, MI, I concentrated on cultural aspects that I feel were applicable to this city. They are as follows:

- Dutch immigration
- Cultural assimilation
- Religion
- Reform Church in America
- Industry
- Ship building
- Entrepreneurship
- Importance of family

Holland Philanthropist Comparison 1:

Mrs. Martha Kollen
(1867-1960)

Late 19th – Early 20th Century

- Attended Columbia University and Berlitz School of Language in Paris, France.
- Married George Kollen in 1894
- Served as Sunday school teacher at Hope Church for 40 years and was superintendent for 10 years
- Served on Holland Board of Education for 30 years
- George E. Kollen Memorial Park

Holland Philanthropist Comparison 2:

Mrs. Elsa Prince
(born 1932)

Early – Mid 20th Century

- Taught in Holland Public School system
- Married Edgar Prince in 1953
- Established Evergreen Commons
- Extensively remodeled downtown Holland, Michigan
- “The Edgar and Elsa Prince Foundation”
- Takes a group of business and engineering students at Calvin College on an annual trip through Europe

Findings (How Mrs. Kollen and Prince compared to the prototype, Mrs. Sage):

- Each woman philanthropist was raised in a Christian family
- Each believed that being a Christian would influence the person she would eventually become. Both illustrated strong commitments to education
- Each of these women acquired the money needed to be a philanthropist from her husband
- Each of these women donated under her married name

Dutch immigrants had a large impact on the growth of the RCA in America.

The influence of religion in Holland, MI impacted philanthropy by increasing the number of donations made to education.

The shipbuilding and business industry in Holland created many small firms that profited from the gradual increase in leisure time.

Holland was founded by Dutch immigrants who clustered together that resulted in strong family units. This strong sense of family still exists today.

Future Research / Implications:

By understanding how individual stories are affected by culture, one can better relate to people from these different backgrounds. I can see this project helping with the fundraising process. Keeping the background and culture of potential donors in mind could be key to successful fundraising ventures.

A name by itself ironically has no real power; it is the person behind the name who initiates the action that gives the name its strength. General trends are useful, but they are not enough. The knowledge of individual stories can bring life and meaning to people who might otherwise see women as just another name.