

## BEGINNINGS

The Blackstone Ranch Institute funded its first gathering in November 2006 in partnership with the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) in Boulder, Colorado. It remains to this day the most significant of all our grants because of the catalytic role it played in the development of the urban sustainability movement.

Michael Kinsley of RMI had been tracking the emergence of what he referred to at the time as ‘green czars,’ city officials who were adapting various ecological agendas to the urban-planning sphere. None of RMI’s funders at the time seemed interested in bringing these officials together nationally, and there were not really that many of them. Once Michael understood what role we wanted to play as funders, he suggested this might be a good way to start.

BRI was unknown at the time, but we saw the gathering as a good way to establish ourselves by funding something new, on the leading edge of systemic change, and with the potential to transform an early meeting of professionals into something that might become a national effort. While we are often remembered as the ones who orchestrated the convening, largely because we continued to fund new initiatives in urban sustainability, it was Michael Kinsley and RMI that had the foresight, had been tracking the emerging network, and facilitated the retreat. It became a model for how we could partner with a leading organization to launch something new and likely to have a major impact.

“A private foundation named the Blackstone Ranch Institute convened one of the first meetings of municipal staff working on these issues in 2006,” note the authors Sadhu Johnston, Julia Parzen, and Steve Nicholas of that meeting in their 2013 book *The Guide to Greening Cities*. “Green city leaders from Portland, Chicago, and other cities were able to share their experiences, eventually forming the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN), which continues to meet and collaborate.”

“At the time,” wrote Steve Nicholas, who was then the sustainability director of Seattle, “we were part of a very small and largely invisible club — there were maybe a dozen or two of us across the country. Until the Blackstone Ranch Institute brought us together in 2006, we barely knew one another. The Urban Sustainability Directors Network — which under the servant leadership of co-author Julia Parzen has quickly become a high-impact learning and doing community of sustainability directors from about 120 local governments throughout North America — was not even a glimmer in anybody’s eye.”

## THE FIRST GRANT

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– Steve Nicholas, from *The Guide to Greening Cities*, 2013

At the time, the scattered officials in cities around the country were working on plans to make cities more sustainable. They focused on making buildings more energy efficient, on introducing hybrid and early electric vehicles into city transportation fleets, and on encouraging city inhabitants to lead more ecologically responsible lives by using public transportation, conserving water, or switching to renewable energy in their homes. But many of those early sustainability directors were in marginal or advisory capacities in their municipal governments. A few had supportive mayors who recognized the importance of the work they were doing. The urban sustainability movement we now know was still in embryonic form, and that 2006 gathering in Boulder led to and became a key part of a cascade of developments that has moved various urban sustainability agendas closer to the center of city planning around North America and the world.

Now, in early 2016, the network is one of the most dynamic in a growing global galaxy of efforts to make cities more ecologically responsible in their use of resources, more habitable for their residents, and better able to keep pace with the rapid developments in technology and social media that are changing the way we live.

“I can call 120 different cities in North America and get a return call that day,” notes Sadhu Johnston, co-founder of USDN, in a book about pioneering networks, titled *Connecting to Change the World*, that was published in 2014. “I have access to leaders in each of those cities. I can get on our website and ask a question and get multiple responses. We all have access to each other and to information. This is a game changer for how we do our work.”

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## **MIDWIFING THE NEW CULTURE**

Pat and Susan Black founded Blackstone Ranch Institute in early 2006. Pat is a venture capitalist and philanthropist from Erie, Pennsylvania. His bio-diesel plant on Lake Erie has been a pioneering company in the transition away from fossil fuels. Both Pat and Susan have had an abiding interest in transformative change.

At the time of the institute’s founding, we formed a small planning team. Within the first year, we developed a mission statement and cultivated a way of operating that has guided us solidly ever since. Over time, the wisdom of a number of the insights and operational prescriptions that emerged from the work of the planning team would prove critical in defining not just how we operated but who we became.

When things started, we had little more than intent and an idea. We knew that we wanted things to develop organically, and we knew that we wanted to provide seed money and serve as a catalyst for meaningful action in response to global environmental challenges. We started with no immediate or fixed idea of how that objective would be realized or what form it would take.

Those of us who worked with Pat to develop the early vision brought with us our own set of attributes and assumptions. But none of us were specialists in any environmental domain, although some of us had experience working internationally or with nonprofit organizations. Because of this lack of expertise, we were able to proceed with what one early colleague referred to as ‘beginner’s mind.’ We were excited to be able to create something that was, to us, new and open to possibility, and which honored Pat’s intent.

Our understanding of the world’s environmental challenges at the time was that they were universal enough in their impact that everyone was affected in one way or another. They were also daunting enough in their implications that broad, holistic change was going to require the contributions of every social sector. It was clear that environmental work was no longer the domain of a minority of activists and early adopters, and that the challenges transcended the limitations of political partisanship, socioeconomic class, and professional affiliation.

Much had happened by the time we started in 2006 to develop an agenda aimed at creating the social and technological bases for a different kind of society, one that would manage resources more sustainably and build an ecological ethos into the fabric of human society. Early Blackstone advisor Oriane Lee Johnston said of our work that we were “midwifing the new culture,” a phrase that aptly characterizes, as well, the efforts of all whom we have funded.

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By the time we launched the institute in 2006, a number of developments in previous decades had provided a context for the work we would support. While public concern for the environment as a priority has fluctuated over the years, and developments have followed a zigzag course rather than a steady trend, awareness of environmental challenges has increased among virtually all social sectors and is now perhaps higher than ever. The past decade has been an opportune time to influence the birth of a wide variety of meaningful initiatives.

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## THE BROADER CONTEXT

Back in 1972, the Club of Rome commissioned what became the *Limits to Growth* study. Written by Donella Meadows and colleagues, the study was based on computer-generated scenarios. It advanced the notion that continued global economic growth patterns of the time would lead to resource depletion and potential economic and social collapse sometime during the 21st century unless steps were taken to restrain such growth. The report was controversial, and criticized by those who found its conclusions too apocalyptic or speculative, but it has continued to serve as a reference point for many over the years. Contemporary assessments of the scenarios generated by the original study suggest that many of its warnings were quite prescient.

Twenty years later, in 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), generally referred to as the Rio Conference, was the first global conference for heads of state that focused on the relationship between economic and social development and the environment. It established sustainable development as an operational paradigm and global environmental agenda for the next twenty years. A number of global conferences followed in the years to come, including a succession of climate change conferences and Rio 2012. These gatherings have drawn not just heads of state but a diversity of civil society organizations trying to get support for their concerns from national governments and heads of state. Such gatherings — which often highlight disagreements between cultures and governments, as well as the more subtle points of agreement — have become major reference points for many engaged in the work of environmental change.

Shortly after we started the institute, United Nations demographic projections revealed that for the first time in history a majority of humanity now lives in cities. “In 2008, for the first time, more than half of the world’s population will be living in urban areas,” according to the *2007 State of the World’s Population* report by the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). “By 2030, towns and cities will be home to almost 5 billion people. The urban populations of Africa and Asia will double in less than a generation. This unprecedented shift could enhance development and promote sustainability — or it could deepen poverty and accelerate environmental degradation.”

At about the same time, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment revealed the extent to which human beings impact the world’s ecosystems. The assessment was a global initiative that engaged more than 1,300 experts and had a major impact on how many institutions understand the world.

“Humans have made unprecedented changes to ecosystems in recent decades to meet growing demands for food, freshwater, fiber, and energy,” note the authors in their summary of key findings. “These changes have helped to improve the lives of billions, but at the same time they have weakened nature’s ability to deliver other key services such as purification of air and water, protection from disasters, and the provision of medicines.

“The pressure on ecosystems will increase globally in coming decades unless human attitudes and actions change. Better protection of natural assets will require coordinated efforts across all sections of governments, businesses, and international institutions. The productivity of ecosystems depends on policy choices on investment, trade, subsidy, taxation, and regulation, among others.”

Now climate change, debated about for decades, has moved to the foreground as a major cause for concern, a phenomenon the impact of which is quickly shifting from a distant hypothetical to a daily reality for increasing numbers of people. It also has become a unifying umbrella and an enabling platform for a diversity of priorities on the environmental change agenda that have been with us for years. Concerns about climate change have escalated in the minds of many and provided a holistic context in which to connect the dots between disciplines and objectives that have often existed quite separately from one another. Most of the actions taken under the climate change umbrella possess their own intrinsic imperatives.

Societal factors, too, have had a major impact on how people organize themselves, and how information is exchanged, in ways that have had a determining influence on how environmental challenges are addressed. Those born in the decades immediately following World War II may be the first generation to have a general appreciation for environmental concerns as social and political issues. Many are now in positions of executive leadership in society and have enough knowledge to appreciate the nature and magnitude of the challenges. The founding of BRI also coincided with the advent of social media, which has given organizations and individual citizens ways to transform local or personal concerns into regional or global efforts within months. New initiatives can be scaled up rapidly to have a broad impact that might have taken years to realize a few decades ago, or not have happened at all.

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– Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

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## CONVENING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Pat and Susan initially wanted to host groups in the environmental change and human potential movements at their ranch property in Taos, New Mexico, and use it as a headquarters for the institute. Given some of our experiences with conferences and other gatherings that produce much talk and little action, we decided that if we were going to use philanthropic funds to bring people together, they were going to be people who would use the gathering as an initial step toward meaningful action. The institute was designed from the start to be results oriented.

Over time, we would come to see these early gatherings as major philanthropic leverage points, at which relatively modest grants could catalyze the development of new networks, campaigns, and organizations that would go on to have impact at national or global levels.

Thousands of conferences and seminars every year are devoted to building network connections, raising money, exchanging information, and educating particular constituencies. Many of those conferences play an important role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem of dedicated organizations and philanthropists, but they are not themselves intended to launch particular initiatives that will need management and funding over time. In 2011, we asked Susan Reeve, who had managed special projects for the National Geographic Society and worked on an initiative that we had funded, to conduct an informal web search to see how many conferences were actually designed to be action oriented or with particular results in mind. She found very few.

We have come to understand convenings as initiation points at which people who might not otherwise know one another or work together must come together to launch a new initiative. Almost all new social change efforts start this way. Over time, we would come to see these early gatherings as major philanthropic leverage points, at which relatively modest grants could catalyze the development of new networks, campaigns, and organizations that would go on to have impact at national or global levels. This understanding has helped us see our role as one of funding leverage points and transformative moments, not organizations or particular issue areas.

Convening means more to us now than it did when we started in 2006, partly due to the development of social media. We have expanded our understanding to include online collaboration and other forms of ongoing joint efforts. This has given us increased flexibility in the range of leverage points we can support without abandoning our original commitment to support early-stage collaboration focused on action.

“The role Blackstone Ranch Institute plays, then, is more profound than simply providing financial underwriting for a work session. That financial support is unquestionably valuable, particularly for bringing together group members scattered about. But the contribution carries with it a potent message and the most precious of opportunities – a chance to bring something to life.

“The message is validation. For those putting time and passion on the line, knowing that someone external from the organization, and more than a peer, believes enough in the group’s vision to provide such a gift, and is allowing them to contribute as they long to do, is genuinely uplifting and highly motivating.

“In addition to intrinsic confidence, you make possible invaluable face time. As with any crucible, it’s the mixing and intermingling that forms something new. That time together forges bonds, and allows a shared vision to at last coalesce into something real and true. It allowed us to bring our organization to life.

“Very few provide such critical help when it’s most needed, when an organization is struggling to define itself, and when the risk of imploding or being brought down by external forces is exceedingly high.”

**Joanne Marino, Slow Money, 2011**