



# A legacy of environmental advocacy



Heinz Endowments President Grant Oliphant traces the foundation's commitment to a cleaner and healthier environment from Chair Emeritus Teresa Heinz's creation of an environment grantmaking program in the 1990s to the Endowments' current initiatives and hopes for the future.

## Not far from our offices in Pittsburgh, whose monikers include the City of Bridges, is a span named after one of our region's legendary native daughters, environmentalist Rachel Carson.

Renowned for her groundbreaking book "Silent Spring," she disrupted the prevailing narrative that scientific and technological innovations such as organochlorine pesticides like DDT would allow humanity to conquer nature. Instead, she posited that our species and the world as we knew it could only survive if we coexisted with our environment. Her work formed the basis for all the environmental achievements that have followed.

Ms. Carson grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania during a time when the region's economy relied on heavy industry. Although her rural hometown of Springdale was a nearly 40-minute drive from Pittsburgh's steelmaking powerhouses, there were two coal-burning power plants in her community by the time she left the region for graduate school at Johns Hopkins University in 1929.

In her last major speech, "The Pollution of Our Environment," which she delivered in 1963 to the Kaiser Foundation, Ms. Carson insisted that underlying the many problems of introducing contaminants into the world was "the question of moral responsibility — responsibility not only to our own generation, but to those of the future... the threat is infinitely greater to generations yet unborn; to those who have no voice in the decisions of today, and that fact alone makes our burden a heavy one."

Those words she spoke nearly six decades ago reverberate today. She was intimately familiar with the motivations and justifications that drive people to ignore the impact of their actions on the world around them. And her assessment applied not only to the pesticide industry but, we realize now, also to the decades of pollution from oil, gas, petrochemical, coal and steel production, all of which have contributed to health crises affecting millions and a climate crisis affecting all of us.

Each year we see the accumulating consequences of this arrogance and ignorance as the death and destruction from catastrophic hurricanes, fires, heat waves and ice storms not only increase but also become more unpredictable because of climate change. Responding to the moral responsibility of being good stewards of the environment for current and

future generations requires both study and discipline to learn what the problems are and what's at stake, and then to search for solutions and implement them.

Back in 1994, the Endowments' environment program was established under the leadership of Chair Emeritus Teresa Heinz, who was then chairman of the Howard Heinz Endowment. Mrs. Heinz was clear-eyed about the foundation treading where few others dared to step in the country's industrial northeast.

"Most Americans want to preserve the environment... but they also want to work. And too many of them have been sold a bill of goods that they cannot do both," she said at that time. "As much as we know about people, and as much as we think we know about the natural world, we still understand little about the nature of our connectedness. It eludes us dangerously... the issues facing us today can no longer be treated as intellectual curiosities. I am convinced that we cannot see solutions only because the problems are broader than our focus."

Those sentiments put this foundation on track to invest in ways to study and address environmental problems with a broader focus so that possible solutions could come into view.

Under Mrs. Heinz's leadership, the Endowments launched programs to improve air and water quality through initiatives such as green building design, green stormwater infrastructure and green space development, including tree planting. The foundation also delved into finding ways to build up regional, social and environmental sustainability and to address pernicious environmental health problems such as childhood lead poisoning.

Then as now, the Endowments understood not only the moral but also the economic flaw in the argument from industry that environmental harm and its impact on human health was a necessary cost of doing business and providing jobs. Externalizing those costs and making them the public's problem was just a convenient, short-term business model that protected industry from having to account for the real costs of its activities. A more honest accounting of those costs



would inevitably demand new ways of doing business — and, indeed, new industries — but it would ultimately make for a more competitive economy that provided more jobs in the future.

The Endowments was an early advocate for regional and statewide climate strategies to seize the economic benefits of a more sustainable economy. These commitments and others led to our foundation taking tough, sometimes unpopular and often prescient positions on issues such as insisting that local industries be held accountable for the pollution they cause and raising questions about the impact of fracking and petrochemical development on the region's environment, economy and health of its residents.

It was only a matter of time before addressing the global threat of climate change became an organizing principle for the Endowments' environment work. Early investments that predated the terminology have found their places within our foundation's framework for combatting climate change while newer grantmaking targets the causes of the global crisis more directly.

This evolution in our approach, for example, reinvigorated our early support of air quality groups such as GASP — Group Against Smog and Pollution — and led to the creation of the Breathe Project, which includes a coalition of air quality organizations that use their combined networks and advocacy to educate local residents about the region's air quality and provide opportunities to take action. Such citizen engagement has contributed to greater regulatory accountability and enforcement that has included getting more local industries to complete Title V operating permits, which contain pollution control requirements under the Clean Air Act, and vigorously backing the Allegheny County Health Department's proposed coke oven regulations that would lower emissions of hydrogen sulfide, a gas that produces a rotten egg smell, at U. S. Steel's Clairton Coke Works, the largest coke producing plant in the country.

Reaction to these and a variety of other environmental health requirements — along with the community activism supporting them — has included U. S. Steel's efforts to

block the regulations it faces while other firms opted to close their local industrial plants rather than deal with additional enforcement. Among those were the Shenango Coke Works, which operated on Neville Island northwest of Pittsburgh until it was shuttered in 2016, and FirstEnergy Solutions Corp.'s Bruce Mansfield coal-fired power plant in Beaver County, which had been the largest in Pennsylvania until it shut down in 2019.

Also, as was the case with origin of the Endowments' environment program, our updated commitment has meant backing up our work with scientific research and facts, along with highlighting the potential for improved quality of life, from healthier communities to the job creation potential of green energy and conservation initiatives.

During the past decade, the Endowments funded extensive scientific assessments that included work by the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health; projects by Pitt's Center for Healthy Environments & Communities, such as the "Pittsburgh Regional Environmental Threat Analysis Report"; pollution reporting technology by Carnegie Mellon University's CREATE Lab; analyses by the Clean Air Task Force; and asthma tracking by allergist-immunologist Dr. Deborah Gentile, medical director of Community Partners in Asthma Care.

In addition, the Endowments was one of the first foundations in the nation to recognize and support work to address the impact that a burgeoning oil and gas industry was having on the environment, public health and the climate. Early grants supported scientific inquiry that would provide numerous and seminal contributions to a now substantial body of peer-reviewed and published reports associating oil and gas operations with adverse outcomes for aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems; respiratory, reproductive and other health metrics; air quality; and community well-being and economic performance.

These investments also included the creation of the Environmental Health Project (EHP), which is a nonprofit public health organization that assists residents in the region who believe their health has been or could be affected by fracking. The organization's health evaluations and air quality monitoring devices

have provided the scientific guidance to equip individuals with the information they need to act and to advocate for changes to protect their communities.

EHP's work has served as the basis for investigations by policymakers such as Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, who relied on the organization's findings for a grand jury report released last year that examined shale gas operations in the state. Both the report and Mr. Shapiro's comments during its public release contended there was evidence that shale gas development damaged public health, and credited EHP for playing a role in protecting the public that, regrettably, government agencies failed to do.

To further plant our stake within the movement to combat climate change, the Endowments partnered with the Climate Reality Project, led by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, to bring the 36th Climate Reality Corps activist training to Pittsburgh's David L. Lawrence Convention Center in 2017. Nearly 1,400 people from around the world attended, which at that time made it the largest convening since Mr. Gore, along with former Republican Congressman Sherwood Boehlert and others, founded the initiative in 2006. Scientists and other experts instructed participants on how to organize their communities for action on the climate crisis, and the Climate Reality: Pittsburgh & SWPA chapter was established, led by fully certified Climate Reality Leaders who received their first training at the 2017 conference.

The local Climate Reality chapter is just one of the many examples of our support of community and grassroots organizations, along with our funding of the latest science and research, to address environmental challenges. The Endowments has long supported frontline, marginalized and vulnerable groups and communities affected by the causes and realities of climate change. This, in turn, led to our support of advocacy networks borne from those communities that have pushed much of the change in attitude and actions forward, and prevented the scientific findings from being dismissed, ignored or forgotten.

From our early support of grassroots organizations such as GASP to our coordination of the Breathe Project as a coalition

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of local advocacy groups, the Endowments has recognized the importance of partnering with communities, especially those most vulnerable to environmental harm. Today, the community and grassroots groups that we seek to empower and work with also include Valley Clean Air Now, Allegheny County Clean Air Now and the Black Environmental Collective.

The Endowments has never shied away from making big bets — strategic and well-informed “bets,” but big nonetheless. Looking forward, we are, in part, betting on science and reason prevailing over division and politics when it comes to the environment and our collective health. Beyond that, we are devoting time and energy to telling stories that elevate the potential of a more sustainable environmental future with opportunities for a clean, innovative and effective economy, and that focus on promoting healthier human lives and communities.

To do this, we have been calling out false narratives such as the failed promise of hundreds of thousands of jobs from natural gas development and fracking in parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. A study that the Endowments-supported Ohio River Valley Institute released earlier this year found that instead the industry yielded just 5,660 net new jobs in the region. At the same time, we are supporting the work of groups offering alternative economic visions, such as ReImagine Appalachia, which has issued reports showing how investments in modernizing the electrical grid, upgrading manufacturing to be cleaner and more energy

efficient, and developing more sustainable transportation systems could create more than 500,000 jobs in those three states and Kentucky.

That’s why we feel a sense of urgency in our efforts to encourage leaders and residents in our local communities to support diversifying the region’s economy away from fossil fuel extraction and toward increased use of clean energy. We believe this transition will generate jobs through energy and equipment production and the emergence and expansion of local businesses that will thrive in growing local economies.

Yet, we are always mindful of the concerns that laid the foundation of our environmental efforts: a desire to improve the health, quality of life, and well-being of the region and its families. For example, our support of Dr. Gentile’s work included providing funding for her research on children in the Pittsburgh region who have been exposed to industrial emissions. Among her findings were that 22.5 percent of the more than 1,200 schoolchildren in her study had asthma — far higher than the 8.5 percent national rate reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We have also supported research by Dr. Nicholas Muller, a professor of economics, engineering, and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University, and his colleagues that linked air pollution from the fracking industry to 1,200 to 4,600 premature deaths across the northeastern United States between 2004 and 2016. They calculated that those deaths came at a cost to society of about \$23 billion.

Of course, the human loss is the weightier burden, adding to the incentive to switch to clean energy to reduce cancer, asthma and premature death.

Nearly three decades ago, when Teresa Heinz launched our initial environmental agenda, skepticism abounded that a still-industrial region like ours could have any role in a green future, let alone benefit from it. Moral and social goods such as protecting public health were routinely and often dismissively pitted against economic goods such as jobs. Yet, within a decade, Pittsburgh was on the map nationally for its innovations in green building and design, its reinvention of its riverfronts, and the rise of its technology and innovation-based industries.

Fast-forward to today and even the most vigorous skeptics, including many who just two years ago criticized the Endowments for publicly questioning the wisdom of staking the region’s future on petrochemicals, and who for the last decade argued that fracking was our region’s last best hope for economic prosperity, are suddenly engaged in a very different conversation about decarbonization. The regional spin to that dialogue is still tinged with a mournful nostalgia over fossil fuels, especially the role of natural gas as a source for blue hydrogen, and that’s to be both expected and respected in a region where many people still associate extraction with jobs and opportunity. But suddenly there can be no doubt that a transition is coming, and that the future, economic and otherwise, will belong to regions and countries that dare to lead it rather than waiting to be run over by it.

Today, with the support of Chairman André Heinz, The Heinz Endowments is continuing its legacy of working to improve the environment for the sake of our children, families and communities. Our work in this arena has taught us one very clear lesson: We can and must do this, and we can and must do it together. We can create a cleaner, healthier and more just future for ourselves and generations yet to come. We just have to decide it’s important and then keep pushing, despite the setbacks and obstacles, to ensure that the world and our corner of it are truly inhabitable for us all. **h**