



## ***“To Promote the Well-Being of Mankind”: A Brief History of the Danforth Foundation***

*After 84 years, the Danforth Foundation plans to close its doors at the end of its current fiscal year, on May 31, 2011. The private, independent Foundation was established by William H. Danforth, the founder of the Ralston Purina Co., and his wife Adda, their son, Donald, and their daughter, Dorothy, in 1927, when Calvin Coolidge was President and movies were just learning to talk. As the country changed over the years, the Foundation evolved with it, but its history basically fell into two phases. From its inception through 1996, the Foundation concerned itself primarily with education, on a national scope. Beginning in 1997, the Foundation narrowed its geographic focus to the region where it was always based, St. Louis, and eventually chose three main areas there in which to concentrate its efforts: the development of the plant and life sciences, neighborhood redevelopment, and downtown revitalization.*

*Over its long history, the Danforth Foundation awarded more than \$1.2 billion in more than 4,700 grants. More importantly, it directly touched the lives of tens of thousands of Americans, and, through its efforts in the plant and life sciences in its second phase, held out the prospect of touching millions more around the globe.*

*In short form, here is the story of this organization, whose one consistent goal over the years was to help make a better world.*

### **The Early Decades**

When William H. Danforth established his family Foundation in 1927, he did so “for charitable and humanitarian purposes and to promote the well-being of mankind.” The goal, he said, was to help people be at their “very best, all the time.”

Achieving one’s best had been Mr. Danforth’s lifelong preoccupation. Growing up in the small, southeast Missouri community of Charleston, he had suffered from chills, fevers and general ill health. One day, he later recalled, a teacher dared him to become the healthiest boy in his class. Looking him straight in the eye, the teacher said, “I dare you, Will Danforth, to chase those chills and fevers out of your system. I dare you to fill your body with fresh air, pure water, wholesome food, and daily exercise until your cheeks are rosy, your chest full, and your limbs sturdy.”

Mr. Danforth essentially never looked back, building his life on the premise that one must “take a dare” and live to the fullest. He improved his health, earned degrees at the Manual Training School and Washington University, both in St. Louis, and, in 1894, with two colleagues, founded a horse and mule feed company. He was 24.



Only a few months later, a tornado roared through downtown St. Louis and demolished the company. Mr. Danforth assumed leadership, invested the remainder of his resources, and, over the next several decades, created an international corporate giant in the animal and pet food business — Ralston Purina Co.

As he built the company, he also developed a simple but profound philosophy, captured in the slogan, “Stand Tall, Think Tall, Smile Tall, and Live Tall.” This approach, he believed, would foster a “four square” life balancing the physical, mental, social and spiritual.

It was perhaps predictable, then, that when Mr. Danforth and his family established the Danforth Foundation — with Ralston Purina stock and other securities valued at \$100,000 (more than \$2 million in 2011 dollars) — its first programs and grants were aimed at helping young people develop the “four square” life and emerge as leaders. The Foundation offered scholarships to summer camps that Mr. Danforth and three others had established two years earlier through the St. Louis-based American Youth Foundation. At Camp Merrowvista in New Hampshire and Camp Miniwanca in Michigan, young people from around the country participated in leadership programs and recreational activities. Showing a clear preference for helping individuals rather than organizations, the newly minted Danforth Foundation also offered many of these young people college scholarships.

With Mr. Danforth serving as the organization’s hands-on chairman, the Foundation began in the 1940s to donate seed money to build chapels — nearly two dozen of them, eventually — mostly on public university campuses. One, at Florida Southern University, was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Later in that decade the Foundation pioneered the development of what became known as “the foundation-administered program.” Instead of awarding grants to existing organizations, the Foundation began developing and operating its own programs, initially to help individuals with their education. Often these programs included leadership training and emphasized moral, spiritual and religious development. The “Danny Grad Program,” for example, placed women on college campuses for a year to help Christian religious groups. Later the Danforth Fellowship Program provided scholarships for Ph.D. candidates of high ability and dedication to teaching. And the Danforth Associates Program sought to improve the quality of college teaching by fostering personal student-teacher relationships.

### **The 1950s**

With the death of William H. Danforth on Christmas Eve, 1955, the chairmanship of the Foundation passed to his son, Donald. In 1956, Adda Danforth also died, and at about the same time Dr. William H. Danforth, Donald’s son and the founder’s grandson, joined the board.

Changes ensued. The board opened itself to non-family members for the first time, and added three renowned college presidents. In 1957, the Foundation’s new leadership decided that the organization should not support individuals only, but appropriate institutions as well. The Foundation thus began to give directly to colleges and universities, often to strengthen religious studies.



At the same time, the Foundation began helping universities and colleges improve education for racial minorities — an effort that would continue over the next five decades. The Foundation also showed a new interest in secondary education and for the first time began to support education abroad — in India.

Closer to home, the Foundation found two institutions it wanted to support with unrestricted grants: St. Louis University, which received \$150,000 in 1959, and Washington University, which received \$300,000 the same year.

Expenditures on programs and grants increased, resulting, from time to time, in capital depletion — an indication that the trustees did not intend the Foundation to extend into perpetuity.

### **The 1960s**

In 1961, the Foundation's top leadership changed with the retirement of its executive director, Kenneth Brown, and the hiring of Merrimon Cuninggim, an ordained Methodist minister who served for the next dozen years. In 1964, John C. Danforth, a son of Donald Danforth and Dr. William H. Danforth's younger brother, joined the board; five years later, however, he stepped down to pursue a career in politics. In 1965, Donald Danforth retired as chair, succeeded by his elder son, Dr. William H. Danforth.

As the Foundation's interest in secondary education grew, it focused on citizenship education and young people's moral/ethical development; professional growth and development of school administrators and teachers; and new ways of organizing high schools. Eventually, assistance to secondary education superseded the Foundation's longstanding support for higher education; pre-collegiate education became the main funding objective until the 1990s.

As the decade unfolded in turmoil, the Foundation responded to rising national concerns about urban decay and racial disparities. Urban affairs became an important area of grant-making, with support eventually focused on educational and professional growth opportunities for urban leaders.

### **The 1970s**

After 46 years of service to the Foundation, Donald Danforth, the founders' son, died in 1973; his sister, Dorothy Danforth Compton, a trustee for 26 years, died soon thereafter. Donald's son, Donald Danforth Jr., a grandson of the founders, joined the board of trustees, and Gene Schwilck succeeded Merrimon Cuninggim as president.

As community and junior colleges began to expand around the nation, the Foundation undertook its first programs in that area. The Foundation also began to administer a program that had been created in the 1960s, the St. Louis Metropolitan Fellowship Program, which later took shape as a



separate organization called Leadership St. Louis. Major matching grants were awarded to Washington University — \$60 million over five years — and St. Louis University — \$20 million.

### **The 1980s**

Responding to increasing involvement by other national foundations in higher education, the board shifted its focus early in the decade to pre-collegiate education, a field it had entered on a smaller scale in the 1960s. The Foundation's increased emphasis on this area reflected the trustees' growing concern that the quality of pre-collegiate education had deteriorated, both in St. Louis and across the nation. As the decade continued, the Foundation gained a national reputation for its programs in this area.

The Foundation thus provided initial support for a Missouri program called Parents as Teachers, which recognized that children's first and most important teachers were their parents and which eventually became a state, national, and international model. Later in the decade, in another prescient step, the Foundation established the Danforth Program for the Preparation of School Principals to help selected colleges and universities prepare principals. As these programs were established, longstanding higher education initiatives such as the Danforth Associate Program and the Danforth Graduate Fellowship Program were redesigned or discontinued.

Meanwhile, the Foundation continued to support urban affairs and education projects in metropolitan St. Louis, with about 15 percent of its budget allocated for those purposes. The Foundation gave support to the St. Louis public schools; to Confluence St. Louis, a citizens group that addressed important regional issues; and to Saint Louis University.

### **1990-1996**

After a thorough study of the nation's needs in public education, the Foundation reaffirmed its support for national and local K-12 public education. It focused on three main areas — parent education and a good beginning for every child; school, family and community partnerships; and leadership for schools. These areas reflected the Foundation's belief that the environment in which young people are raised profoundly affects the culture — and effectiveness — of the schools they attend.

Meanwhile, the Foundation's last programs in higher education, including the Dorothy Danforth Compton Fellowship program, drew to a close. The latter had helped 273 minority scholars complete their doctorates and assume teaching careers. By the time it was dissolved, many national scholarship programs were in place to serve promising minority students seeking doctorates.

Locally, the Foundation began in 1996 to provide assistance to St. Louis 2004, which over the next eight years engaged the community in developing and, in some cases carrying out, a 13-point action plan to improve the quality of life in the metropolitan area.



With the retirement of Gene Schwilck after 17 years, Bruce Anderson became president in 1991. John C. Danforth, having retired from the Senate after 18 years, rejoined the board of trustees in 1995.

### **1997 – 2002**

By the late 1990s many philanthropic organizations as well as government agencies had begun targeting the pre-collegiate area that the Danforth Foundation had, years earlier, found underserved. At the same time, the Foundation's hometown — St. Louis — faced critical needs in economic development, housing, health, the environment, physical infrastructure and education. As a result, the Foundation undertook another of its periodic assessments of its priorities.

The upshot was a fundamental pivot. On May 31, 1997 the trustees voted to maximize the Foundation's impact by devoting its limited resources exclusively to metropolitan St. Louis. The goal would be to seek lasting benefits for the region, in part through partnerships aimed at leveraging other resources also dedicated to the local area. Consistent with that decision, the Foundation also moved its offices to the region's hub, downtown St. Louis.

Over the next three years, the Foundation made several major grants and loans to St. Louis area organizations. They included:

- Washington University
- Saint Louis University
- The St. Louis-based American Youth Foundation
- Forest Park Forever, for the restoration of St. Louis's premier park
- The Missouri Department of Natural Resources, for the development of a new, 1,100-acre state park at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, and
- Downtown Now!, for its development and execution of a plan for the revitalization of downtown St. Louis.

The Foundation's giving also included major grants to a new area of interest — the development of the plant and life sciences in the St. Louis area. Toward that end, the Foundation in 1998 committed \$60 million to help launch the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center. This non-profit research center, named for the Foundation's former chairman, is devoted to three main goals:

- Improving nutrition and helping to feed the hungry
- Preserving and enhancing the environment, and
- Making St. Louis the world center for plant science, including commercial development from that science.



Toward similar goals, the Foundation supported the newly established Coalition for Plant and Life Sciences, a group of St. Louis area leaders who help guide development of commercial and economic initiatives to strengthen the region's potential as an international plant and life science center.

In 1997, former Senator John C. Danforth replaced his brother, Dr. William H. Danforth, as chairman of the Foundation; Dr. Danforth became vice-chairman. And in 2000, the trustees established three main areas of focus within the St. Louis area that from that point on would be their primary areas of funding: plant and life sciences; neighborhood redevelopment; and downtown St. Louis revitalization.

### **2003-2010**

In late 2002 the Foundation again asked the fundamental question it had so often asked itself: Given its limited resources, how could it best fulfill its mission — now defined as helping to ensure the lasting economic vitality of the St. Louis area. The result was an announcement in early 2003: The Foundation would pledge 60 percent of its uncommitted portfolio to plant and life science initiatives in the region.

In making this decision, the Foundation's strategy was to build on existing regional assets — the presence of such plant and life sciences powerhouses as Monsanto Co, the Missouri Botanical Garden, Sigma-Aldrich Co., the biological/biomedical science departments at Washington University, the new Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, and many others. St. Louis also had other strategic advantages, the Foundation recognized — for example, a location in the middle of the nation's Midwestern farm belt. As a result, the Foundation was convinced that St. Louis had the opportunity not only to strengthen its position as a national plant science research leader but also to become a vibrant commercial leader, a role that would help anchor the metropolitan area's economic future.

The decision also meant that relatively soon, the remaining portfolio would be spent down — resulting in the Foundation's closure. Foundation executives acknowledged that reality at the time, and said their strategy represented the kind of boldness needed for St. Louis to maximize its plant and life sciences opportunity.

A year after these critical decisions, the St. Louis 2004 effort culminated in a series of civic celebrations. The signal achievement of St. Louis 2004 was its leadership in the passage of the Clean Water, Safe Parks and Community Trails initiative. The voters' approval of this proposal in 2000 led to the establishment of what is now known as the Great Rivers Greenway, which is using the proceeds of a one-tenth of one cent sales tax to build hundreds of miles of bikeways and trails throughout the metropolitan area.

Also in 2004, Bruce Anderson retired after 21 years with the Foundation, 13 of them as president. Peter G. Sortino, who had previously led St. Louis 2004, replaced him on January 1, 2005.

In recent years, the Foundation has continued to pour its resources into the three areas it had selected in 1997. Its work in downtown revitalization helped lead to the redevelopment of the Old Post



Office and the development of Old Post Office Plaza, among other downtown projects. The Foundation's analysis of the issues surrounding visitation to the Gateway Arch and the central St. Louis riverfront helped catalyze the current effort by the National Park Service and local and national interests to redesign St. Louis's front door. And the Foundation's work in neighborhood redevelopment helped fund an effort to revitalize the McRee Town neighborhood north of the Missouri Botanical Garden as well as the St. Louis 4 Kids Initiative, which provides after-school programs for children and youth; and many other programs.

The Foundation also continued to support key St. Louis assets that it has long sought to make even stronger. These included Washington University, where a recent gift established the John C. Danforth Center on Religion & Politics, as well as the American Youth Foundation, Saint Louis University and the City Academy.

But its primary focus has continued to be the plant and life sciences. The Foundation has continued to fund the Coalition for Plant and Life Sciences. It helped fund the BioGenerator, to facilitate the formation of life science companies in the St. Louis area. And, particularly with its final unrestricted endowment gift of \$70 million, it has continued to provide funding to the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, which offers so much promise to St. Louis and the world.

Through 84 years of service, the Foundation underwent many profound changes. There was, however, a constant — the desire to improve humanity's lot. Through the Foundation's final major gift, that goal still shines.

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