

Our Guest Editors

Talk about
philanthropy and aging



ROSE DOBROF

Throughout the history of the United States, private charitable organizations have contributed in myriad ways to the well-being of individuals and families and, more recently, of an aging society. The development, achievement, and potential of the relationship between philanthropy and the field of aging are reflected in the careers of this issue's guest editors. Rose Dobrof has had a long and distinguished career as a practicing social worker and academic, was the founding director of the Brookdale Center on Aging, and remains a leader in philanthropy. Donna Regenstreif earned a doctorate in anthropology, managed hospital financing and care, and then became the senior program officer at the John A. Hartford Foundation, where she developed one of the first and most influential philanthropic initiatives in aging and healthcare.

Rose Dobrof earned her doctorate in social welfare from Columbia University, where she later taught for many years, and also went to work for the Hebrew Home for the Aged in New York City. "I fell in love with aging," she says. "Here were all these wonderful old people—I loved listening to their stories?"

From then on, aging was the main thread through Dobrof's work. She is now Brookdale Professor of Gerontology at Hunter College at the City University of New York and was a long-time member of the faculty of Hunter's School of Social Work. She was codirector, with Robert Butler, of the Hunter College/Mount Sinai School of Medicine Geriatric Education Center and served until 2005 as codirector of the Consortium of New York GECS. She has been

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editor and chief of *The Journal of Gerontological Social Work* and is a fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine. She also served on the National Advisory Council on Aging of the National Institutes of Health.

In the course of raising money for the Brookdale Center on Aging, Dobrof was introduced to the world of foundations, and philanthropy became the second thread. "Melding the two seemed natural to me," she says. "I knew that voluntary organizations—as funders and as service agencies—are the backbone of the social work profession, which really began in Hull House and the charitable organization societies. It's a historical link that's been essential. We would not have the social agencies or the profession without the philanthropies." These days, Dobrof is a trustee of the Burden Center for the Aging and a member of the Board of the American Federation for Aging Research. She is a trustee emerita of the New York Foundation and a member of the Advisory Committee of the Helen DeKay Foundation.

"In my work with foundations, I was for a long time the only person who had roots in aging," she says. "My goal was to bring attention to the needs of the agencies serving older people.

"I've seen two major shifts in funding priorities in my time: First, attention began to be paid to the needs of elders. But the focus was

only on the problems of aging. Later has come the view of older people as a strength as well.

“From my long-term perspective, I can see that these are good days in the field of aging, with the many advances in care and quality of life. But we have such a way to go—the problems of poor elders and the challenge of Alzheimer’s are the most important examples. If we are to meet these challenges, the partnerships between service agencies, foundations, and government are crucial. We’ve got to nurture them.”

In 2006, shortly after **Donna Regenstreif** retired from the Hartford Foundation, she received the American Geriatrics Society’s Solomon Award for distinguished public service for her dedication to the improved health and well-being of older adults. At Hartford, she had overseen a long list of programs to support geriatric and interdisciplinary education and training as well as healthcare delivery and policy. “She has demonstrated remarkable vision in anticipating future trends and fostering collaborations among foundations, governmental agencies, and professional societies,” AGS said. “Her influence on the field has been enormous.”

Regenstreif is currently president of Gero-Concepts, Inc., which offers consultation in health services for older adults, education programs in geriatrics and gerontology, and philanthropy. She has testified before Congress and at special meetings of the Institute of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health and was president of the board of the Medicare Rights Center and a board member of Grantmakers in Health.

When she began at Hartford, looking over the landscape of aging and health, how did Regenstreif choose a focus? “I had actually worked in the healthcare industry—where the rubber meets the road—so I knew there were some small things that really needed to be changed, and if that could be done, it would work toward big changes,” she says.

“One was integration of services. A lot of people were fixated on hospitals or doctors’ offices or community-based care. All were essential elements, but we decided to focus on a continuum of care. Hartford was one of the first to look at the continuum of care and the older old.



photo: Don Battershall

DONNA I. REGENSTREIF

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“Second, the professionals that were caring for these old people didn’t know much about aging. How were they to learn? This was the impetus for our education and training programs for geriatricians. Now geriatrics awareness is ubiquitous.

“Some foundations like to think they can tackle major problems, solve them, and then move on. But what Hartford has actually done over the past twenty years is create a baseline—showing how things have worked to tackle the problems. The attention of foundations to aging has taught the field a great deal. Geriatrics and gerontology capacity has improved enormously. Still, more efforts are needed to extend aging content in schools of medicine, nursing, social work, and other key fields and to encourage partnerships among foundations and the public and private sectors to address major issues.

“Foundations can’t just deal with the general—they must get to where the older people are, where the health and service professionals come together. To these professionals I say, don’t give up. You are not alone, and you cannot do the job by yourself. Have a broad vision about all the organizations and institutions that can help you. And remember the power of the stories you can tell.” ☪

—Mary Johnson