

Inside Philanthropy

A Rising Force: On the State of Black Philanthropy

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Thanks to a few hundred years of slavery and Jim Crow, followed by decades of economic exclusion, African American households have far less wealth than whites. In fact, according to a [recent study](#) by Demos and the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, the typical black household now has just 6 percent of the wealth of the typical white household.

This deep racial wealth gap wouldn't seem to bode well for black philanthropy. In fact, though, black Americans have a long history of philanthropic commitment. A [report](#) by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation a few years ago found that African Americans give away 25 percent more of their income per year than white Americans. With the cohort of people of color growing in size and assets, these populations will likely be even more important down the line. As we recently reported, a number of African Americans, as well as Latinos, are already giving at a substantial level.

This rising philanthropic muscle has been on display in fundraising for the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), set to open later this month after years in the making. Aside from established foundations like Mellon, Gates and Atlantic Philanthropies, the museum's top donors also include black Americans like billionaires Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and Robert F. Smith, as well as Shonda Rhimes, Kenneth Chenault and Richard Parsons.

To get a better sense of the state of black giving, I recently spoke with the three architects of the [Black Philanthropy Month](#) (BPM) campaign. They are Jacqueline Copeland-Carson, who founded BPM in 2011 and is alsoalso the co-founder of Pan-African Women's Philanthropy Network; Tracey Webb, who's the founder of Black Benefactors, a giving circle in Washington, D.C.; and Valaida Fullwood, a writer and consultant and author of *Giving Back: A Tribute to Generations of African American Philanthropists*. BPM, which just happened in August, is "an annual, global celebration of African-descent giving."

One point that the trio stressed is that the story of black philanthropy isn't just about a wealthy elite, but the masses of people committed to giving back whatever they can. Sayings like "don't forget where you came from" have long been part of the black lexicon, they reminded me. This tradition is also rooted in the black church, a defining institution which has served not only as an important site of organizing and social change, but also of giving.

The populist nature of black philanthropy underscores the need to look beyond foundations and major donors in thinking about how to spur greater African American giving. Because there are fewer big pots of wealth available, as is the case for white America, efforts to elicit higher levels of mass giving and better-targeted giving are key to nurturing black philanthropy as a rising force.

The main aims of Black Philanthropy Month are to inform, involve, inspire and invest in black philanthropic leadership to strengthen African-American and African-descent giving in all its forms. Each year, BPM has a new theme. This year's theme was "Elevating A Culture of Giving." An[event](#) at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco called "Giving Arts" featured keynote speaker Danny Glover. It examined the critical role of art in the black community and the state of philanthropy and community giving; research suggests that only

about 5 percent of the multi-billion-dollar black philanthropy economy gives to the arts.

Other events took place in less obvious regions, like Portland, Oregon, which has a black population in the low single digits. The [MRG Foundation](#), a social justice funder, hosted "Giving Back: The Soul of Philanthropy Reframed and Exhibited" for BPM.

MRG Foundation Major Giving Director Carol Tatch echoed the idea that giving often tends to be baked into the African American experience. Certainly, that was the case for Tatch, who said:

Philanthropy wasn't a late-in-life idea or practice, but it was a foundational way of being, that existed in my childhood, and in my mothers' childhood, in my community and our collective ancestors. From my mother's feet, in my church's pews, at my grandmother's picnics, at school events, I was shown how to be a philanthropist. We never used big fancy words for it—we simply called it giving back because that is exactly what it was.

There's an international dynamic to BPM, as well, which makes sense, given the growing number of blacks in America with recent roots in Africa. One of the BPM events took place in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul area, a region with the most ethnically diverse black community in the U.S., with a population that includes Nigerians, Somalis, Ethiopians and Liberians.

This year's Black Philanthropy Month came at a moment when quite a few foundations are thinking harder about racial equity and how to do more around this issue, as we've reported. The California Endowment and the California Wellness Foundation partnered in the BPM campaign, while other foundations spread the word.

Now that August has come to a close, BPM's leaders tell me that next steps include launching a website called Black Giving United, an information clearinghouse and chat room to get people in touch with resources. BPM also aims to collaborate with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. You can see more about its doings by following hashtag [#BPM365](#).

