CONNECTIONS

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OUR HISTORY

Journeys in KF Research
How Kettering Discovered Democracy
David Mathews

Key Events in KF History
Collette McDonough

The Issue Guide and the Issue Forum: Political Inventions
Brad Rourke

A Treasure Chest about to Open
Nicholas A. Felts

From Public Policy Institutes to Centers for Public Life: Transforming People and Communities
Alice Diebel

At Franklin Pierce, Learning to Make a Difference
Joni Doherty

Town versus Gown? Not Here
Sara A. Mehlttreter Drury

Kettering’s Evolving Understanding—and My Own
Ray Minor

Two Decades of Learning with Communities
Phillip D. Lurie

Public Education as Community Work
Connie Crockett, Phillip D. Lurie, and Randall Nielsen

Listening for, and Finding, a Public Voice
Bob Daley

Informing or Engaging: What Is the Role of Higher Education in Strengthening Public Life?
Derek W. M. Barker

Scholars and Scholarship with Ties to Communities
Ellen Knutson and Ileana Marin

KF and Journalism: On Again! Off Again! On Again!
David Holwerk

From Civil Society to Civil Investing, and Beyond
John Dedrick

Creative Acts as Democratic Work
Paloma Dallas and Melinda Gilmore

The Dartmouth Conference
Harold Saunders and Philip Stewart

Kettering and China: Thirty Years and Counting
Maxine Thomas

Kettering’s Archives Hold a Quarter-Mile of History
Maura Casey

Kettering Campus Vignettes
Brian Cobb, Mindy LaBreck, and Terry Nichols
The windowless, basement room that houses the archives of the Kettering Foundation is out of the way for most of the foundation’s visitors. But, in many ways, the records it holds serve as the silent sentinels of the organization. They tell a tale of where the foundation has been and hold clues as to the path ahead.

The room contains a little more than a quarter-mile of material nestled in towering, rolling shelves. There’s an estimated 1,250 feet of paper files, 25 feet of photographs, and more than 100 feet of other materials.
of audio-visual material. The foundation thrives on conversation and discussion, and the archives make certain that all those words, and the research supporting them, leave records behind.

I learned just how valuable a resource the archives are while reporting a story for the Kettering Foundation last year on Mobile County education reform. Some of that area’s public schools are now among the best in Alabama, where once they languished among the worst. Despite top-down attempts to improve matters, change occurred slowly, through scores of kitchen-table conversations and deliberative forums. Yet reporting the story posed challenges, and the task of reporting fully events that took place decades ago seemed daunting.

“Until, that is, foundation president David Mathews suggested I “poke around” in the foundation archives. I might find something interesting, he said. Did I ever.

When I asked Kettering Foundation archivist Collette McDonough if the archives held anything relating to the Mobile County school reform, I expected a file or, perhaps two. She produced hundreds of records, some 30 years old, including newspaper articles, Mobile Chamber of Commerce financial statements, records of Mobile organizations’ repeated campaigns to persuade voters to approve four referenda over more than a dozen years to raise education taxes, and even a copy of a 1987 condolence letter from David Mathews to a Mobile resident involved in the schools campaign whose grandmother had died. The trivial and the fascinating were all here—a reporter’s treasure trove.

McDonough wasn’t surprised at the range, and neither was program officer and archivist Libby Kingseed, who also joined in this interview. The two are intimately familiar with the archives. The foundation hired Kingseed as a writer/researcher/archivist as a contractor in 2000. In the beginning she concentrated on the archives, which then was a room of filing cabinets whose records had little organization or identification. “I spent a lot of the first year reading,” she said.

McDonough joined the foundation in 2005. Both have master’s degrees. Kingseed’s is in history with a certification in museum studies. McDonough, a certified archivist, has a master’s degree in public history.

“The breadth of information that we have traces the research and follows various ideas relating to citizen roles involving community, government, and education and how to make citizen ideas visible,” Kingseed said. “We do a lot of work by talking, but those conversations leave traces. This is the place that backs up the stories we tell.”

McDonough agreed. “You can’t know where you are going, unless you know where you have been,” she said. “For example, if you want to do work in public education, it’s always a good idea to see what we learned 20 years ago. As much as people like to think that in 20 years America has changed a whole lot [concerning education], well, it really hasn’t. All you have to do is examine our NIF issue guides from the 1980s: the things they talked about we are still dealing with today. And if you don’t save it, you won’t have it in the future.”

Are the archives in danger of getting filled? Not for awhile, said McDonough.

The foundation thrives on conversation and discussion, and the archives make certain that all those words, and the research supporting them, leave records behind.

The archives room is only about half-full. The foundation began to scan reports in 2010, but digitizing records won’t necessarily mean more room, as the originals are retained. Publications, such...
as the Kettering Review, Higher Education Exchange, and Connections, will be scanned and become .pdf copies, searchable through the foundation’s computer network.

Changing technology, however, presents challenges of its own. McDonough keeps a floppy disk drive reader handy for accessing old files and will keep a DVD drive to read compact discs that are already being replaced by newer technology.

According to McDonough, materials related to Kettering’s Citizens and Public Choice program area take up the most files in the archives, followed by materials related to public education and higher education. Kettering’s archives are primarily organized by program area. Some materials are organized by a single foundation staff member, such as with the multinational/international program area. “Hal Saunders had it so well organized, I just kept all the files the way he had it,” McDonough said. When staff members prepare for retirement, McDonough starts working with them months in advance of their final day to get their files organized for inclusion in the archives.

The oldest item in the collection is a copy of the 1927 document from the state of Ohio recognizing the Kettering Foundation as an organization. What’s the most interesting item? Arguably, a photo from the first Dartmouth Conference in 1960. “Kettering’s work is quiet, and in the background, but it helped end the Cold War,” McDonough said.
Kettering’s Archives Hold a Quarter-Mile of History

There are gaps, Kingseed said. Some pre-1987 material was sent to the Hoover Institution in California, but still intact are some of the first NIF surveys done in 1982, giving a snapshot of what concerned Americans decades ago. Although in general the archives aren’t open to the public, McDonough helps people doing research, and there’s an interest in making some material available to scholars.

“This is a check on memory. Sometimes it is a stimulus for memory,” Kingseed said.

McDonough nodded. “Like [a research exchange week] participant list,” she said.

How much attention to detail must an archivist possess?

“Attention to detail is a trait that archivists share with accountants, and people like [foundation vice president] John Dedrick, who never forgets anything,” Kingseed laughed.

“Having a little bit of obsessive-compulsive disorder is not a bad thing,” McDonough agreed.

So, do the archives hold any dark secrets?

The two were silent for a moment.

“There may be dark secrets, but for better or worse, we haven’t found them yet,” Kingseed said.

What happens in the archives, stays in the archives.

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Cherry Tree

Close to the Cousins House is a beautiful cherry tree. Longtime senior associate John Doble gave it to us in honor of the National Issues Forums 25th anniversary in 2006. According to John, he has been a part of the foundation’s work in one way or another for most of his career. The tree blooms every spring and is a great reminder of the hard work so many in the network put forth in order to continue the work of citizens.