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## GUEST EDITORIAL

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

Irwin Elman & Fred Mathews

IT IS A COMMONLY HELD BELIEF THAT CANADA'S FUTURE RESTS IN THE hands of our children and youth, and that, as they learn, grow, and become active participants in Canadian society, they will shape our values and determine our future social and economic course. If it is true, then the care we demonstrate, the investments we make in young people's development, and the connections we create for them to become civically engaged will have great long-term impacts on society and the common good. By extension, maintaining the common good requires creation of strong bonds of trust, acknowledging the interdependence between the generations, and having the resources sufficient to meet the needs of all members of society.

However, in the current climate of fiscal constraint, those involved in policy- and grant-making in the public, private, and philanthropic sectors who want to help young people, families, and communities forge those bonds are forced to confront more difficult choices every day. How can new investments be made in our communities when it's a struggle to sustain what we have now? When immediate needs seem so pressing, should we put planning for the longer term on the back burner? Can we afford to act out of short-term interest when what is at stake are the conditions that affect our social safety net, positive youth development, and the wellness of our communities?

In discussions with adults and youth knowledgeable about the not-for-profit sector, it became evident that conventional ways of thinking about philanthropy and civic engagement may not work for many young people in the contemporary context. It seems reasonable to believe that it would be challenging for young people to think about "giving" or "volunteering" when they are struggling to find a way to participate in the economy, pay for their education, or establish independent lives. Young people today regularly hear media stories about the remarkable instability of the economies of the developed world and the levels of government debt that are leading to cuts to the services we need to protect and preserve our social capital and keep our communities strong. Many young people we meet through our work feel caught in this squeeze and want and need things to change and an opportunity to contribute to the debate about solutions. Their frustration at being left out is apparent, though they are far from being acquiescent.

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If what we heard in our discussions is true – that young people may not be giving money or volunteering the way their parents’ generation did – examples also abound of how they are creating their own organizations, promoting activism, and engaging in social movements that are transforming their schools, communities, and immediate social environments. They demonstrate passion and a willingness to get involved. What they need is more opportunity to contribute, resources to help them organize their efforts, and working alliances with supportive adults who are open and receptive to sharing power and decision-making in the spirit of active citizenship. The challenge for the philanthropic sector – indeed all organizations interested in encouraging children and youth to become more actively involved in civic engagement of any kind – is to seek out or create ways they can make this happen. We need to bring young people into conversations about transforming philanthropy as equal partners so that we can tap into their ideas about policy, leadership, civic engagement, and how to revitalize the philanthropic sector to keep it relevant to the times in which we live.

This special edition of *The Philanthropist* had its origins in discussions between The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and Members of the Editorial Board of *The Philanthropist* about the state of affairs highlighted above. The intention was to open a dialogue about how to transform the philanthropy sector so that it may better serve young people.

After some initial discussion, we worked with May Wong from the Omega Foundation to create an outline of potential topic areas we felt would help open the dialogue. We realized quickly that the task of transforming the philanthropy sector is complex and there are many places to begin the discussion. After several attempts we arrived at a list of suggested topics to help kick-start the discussion. Suggested topics included barriers preventing young people from being involved as equal partners with adults at the tables where issues that affect their lives are discussed; what young people need from the sector to help them achieve their dreams, realize their potential, and build strong supportive communities; examples of successful partnerships between young people and adult supporters that lead to positive social change; how social media could be used to further the aims of a more inclusive philanthropy sector and greater youth civic engagement; making philanthropy more relevant to young people; and examples of youth-led self-advocacy.

Two versions of a Call for Papers were prepared for dissemination via email to stakeholders through The Advocate’s Office’s contacts and networks, one version directed toward young people and a second toward adults. The response we received, mostly from young people or youth writing with an adult co-author, was overwhelming. We made the first cut at selecting proposals to write an article based on how closely the submission matched the topic areas in the Call for Papers and reflected diversity. We sought writers who were interested in sharing their lived experience concerning the topics, stimulating thought provoking discussion, and providing ideas about how to transform how we think about philanthropy to make it more relevant, accessible, and appealing to young people. All completed

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articles were sent to the Editorial Board of *The Philanthropist* who made the final decision about which ones to publish.

We see this discussion as a modest beginning, and it is our hope that the conversation started on the pages of the journal will continue in Board and meeting rooms of not-for-profit organizations, private foundations, government offices, local neighbourhood and youth action groups, and perhaps future editions of *The Philanthropist*. We hope readers will find food for discussion and many practical ideas in the pages of this special edition of *The Philanthropist*. More importantly, we hope that the voices of the young people who shared their thoughts, insights, ideas, and experiences will reach a receptive audience open to bridging the generations to create a more open, vibrant, relevant, and inclusive philanthropy sector.