

Hot for Safe Energy

Unabashedly Involved in Its Grantees' Activities, The Levinson Foundation Parlays Small Grants into Big Impacts

By Richard J. Margolis

When the Levinson Foundation gave some money to a sex education "hotline" in San Francisco 10 years ago, Carl A. Levinson, the foundation's president, decided to find out what it was like to handle hotline inquiries. He was doing just fine, he recalls, until a mother with a dauntingly broad agenda telephoned him. "I'm putting my 11-year-old daughter on the line," she told Levinson. "I want you to tell her all about sex."

Levinson, 54, says he did the best he could—which happens to be a fair summation of the foundation's *modus operandi*. The incident, in fact, tells much about the way this remarkable little philanthropy conducts business. Arm's-length relationships are not its strong suit.

While most foundations can be categorized as "cool," maintaining a correct distance between themselves and their grantees, the Max and Anna Levinson Foundation remains resolutely "hot," which is to say it stays emotionally and intellectually connected with the projects it funds. Much of the time it can be found in the thick of its grantees' battles, cheering them on and helping them to win friends and influence policies.

Scattered But Serious

It is characteristic of this far-ranging philanthropy that its president lives in San Francisco while its executive director resides in Brookline, Massachusetts, where the foundation is now



NEW BREED OF SCIENTISTS. *The trio of physicists, all energy experts, who form the core of the Program on Nuclear Policy Alternatives at Princeton includes, from left, Harold A. Feiveson, Frank von Hippel and Robert Williams. The Levinson Foundation has nurtured the program, which focuses on bringing nuclear policy questions into the public arena for examination and debate, since 1973.*

headquartered. The other five board members, four of them also members of the Levinson clan, are scattered far and wide.

Nonetheless, the board gets together twice a year for intense, three-day deliberations. "That's when we select grantees," says Carl. "Sometimes we bring in speakers to background us on pertinent issues, and sometimes we hold discussions with people who have sent us proposals. We always have a lot to learn. We take our jobs seriously."

The grants tend to be small—about \$12,000 on average—but the consequences have at times been notable. With about \$400,000 at its disposal

annually, the foundation has managed to inspire many a new public debate and also to annoy many a certified miscreant, including the late Shah of Iran. When the International Commission of Jurists, a distinguished group created with \$20,000 of Levinson seed money, pressed the U.S. State Department to withhold aid to Iran because of that nation's human rights trespasses, an alarmed Shah sent the Commission a telegram in which he denied the charges and promised to right the wrongs posthaste.

"That was my first clue as to how bad things were in Iran," recalls Sidney Shapiro, who has been the founda-

tion's executive director for more than a decade. "If the Shah could make that promise—if one man had all that life-and-death power over the people—Iran was in deep trouble."

Breaking Barriers

Some of the groups Levinson has funded began as lonely pioneers in the political wilderness, and survived to help lead a movement. Indeed, a list of Levinson Foundation grantees over the years reads like a Who's Who of the oppressed, the committed and the socially daring. A few examples may suggest the whole:

- Women's Action Alliance: In pursuit of civil liberties for women.
- Musicians United for Safe Energy: "For a mammoth concert series" to raise money for groups working on anti-nuclear and safe energy issues.
- National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy: "To challenge . . . policies and practices of the United Way campaigns of America."
- National Gay Task Force: For program development.
- New Jewish Agenda: First national Jewish membership organization organized in 40 years. One of its slogans: "Israel yes, Begin no."
- Physicians for Social Responsibility: To encourage doctors' participation in nuclear safety issues.
- Tribal Sovereignty Program (Shoshone): Support of Native American anti-MX missile program.

In all, the foundation awards about 40 grants each year, more than half of which are related to nuclear and energy issues. "We're in the business of trying to effect social change," explains Shapiro in what may be the understatement of the year. "We don't like to give up, and we don't like to abandon our projects."

Focus On Energy Alternatives

A case in point is the Program on Nuclear Policy Alternatives, a scientific-activist research program attached to



THE FOUNDER: Max Levinson, who started a self-service gasoline business during the Depression and built it into the Merit Oil Company, created the Levinson Foundation in 1956, chiefly as a vehicle for Jewish charities. Levinson combined a strong sense of justice with a keen business mind throughout his career.

Princeton University's Center for Energy and Environmental Studies. The Levinson Foundation has been nurturing the program with funds and encouragement since 1973.

True, grants have amounted to only about 10 percent of the project's total expenditures, but other forms of assistance have literally been lifesavers. When the Ford and Rockefeller Brothers Foundations completed their support in 1979, Shapiro helped the project explore possible replacements. Grants soon came from the Stern Fund, the CS Fund, the New Land Fund, The Rockefeller Family Fund, Needmore, Kendall, Bydale, Ruth Mott, HKH and

many other smaller foundations.

"Sid is both a strong advocate and a critical advisor," says Frank von Hippel, the senior member of a trio of gifted physicists who manage the project. "We send him all our draft proposals; he helps us come to the point and get the marbles out of our mouths."

The other two members of the Princeton triumvirate are Robert H. Williams, who specializes in energy problems, and Harold A. Feiveson, a nuclear weapons researcher. In searching for words that precisely describe their affinity with Shapiro, the three scientists unwittingly reflect the foundation's "hot" mystique. Says von Hip-

pel, "He's on our wave-length, calling with a good idea for an op-ed piece or an energy tutorial."

With the benefit of hindsight, one can see that the Program on Nuclear Alternatives was an ideal candidate for joining the Levinson lovefest. For one thing, Carl Levinson began his own protean career as a nuclear physicist at Princeton. That was before his father Max's death in 1971, after which Carl took hold of the foundation reins.

For another, the project embodies nearly all of the social values that the foundation holds dear, including peace, freedom, democracy, conservation and community. "We always begin with facts," says Shapiro. "But the facts are assessed in the light of our values."

Finally, the program's focus on outreach and education parallels the foundation's own agenda. Shapiro again: "We don't fund classical research—we look for policy, action-oriented research. The first thing we ask a prospective grantee is, 'How will you inform the public about your findings?'"

Spreading Nuclear Knowledge

For Frank von Hippel and his colleagues, informing the public has long been the name of the game. The cover blurb on *Advice and Dissent*, a book von Hippel co-authored in 1974, tells the story: "The dangers of mixing technology and politics behind closed doors—and how a new breed of scientists is taking the issues to the public."

One of the new breed whom von Hippel encountered in the course of his literary explorations was Robert Williams, then chief scientist of the Ford Foundation's Energy Project. The two wound up together at Princeton, later to be joined by Feiveson.

In the project's early years, the three concentrated their research efforts on nuclear weapons proliferation abroad and its attendant dangers, and also on the perils of being careless with nuclear energy at home. One of their goals, they noted in a proposal to foundations, was to "stop the Nuclear Reg-

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ulatory Commission from thinking of the public's concerns about catastrophic nuclear accidents as a public relations problem." (In this they got some unsolicited assistance from the Three Mile Island disaster.)

Another goal was "to wake up the scientific community to its responsibilities to inform the public" and to figure out ways to protect scientists "against retaliation when they are driven by their professional ethics to become responsible dissenters and whistleblowers."

Ready With The Whistle

For the sake of keeping their own whistles at the ready, the Princeton physi-



LEARNING. Levinson staff and directors analyzing an issue together include, clockwise from left, president Carl Levinson, directors Donald Bean and Charles Hunt, executive director Sidney Shapiro, administrative assistant Nancy Higgin and director Helen Doroshov.

cists have chosen to operate as outsiders, publicly challenging official analyses (“when we find them to be incorrect”) and publicly offering alternatives for consideration. In consequence, the project has become a virtual cornucopia of articles, reports, speeches and legislative testimony. A recent listing cites 87 works generated by the project in the last five years.

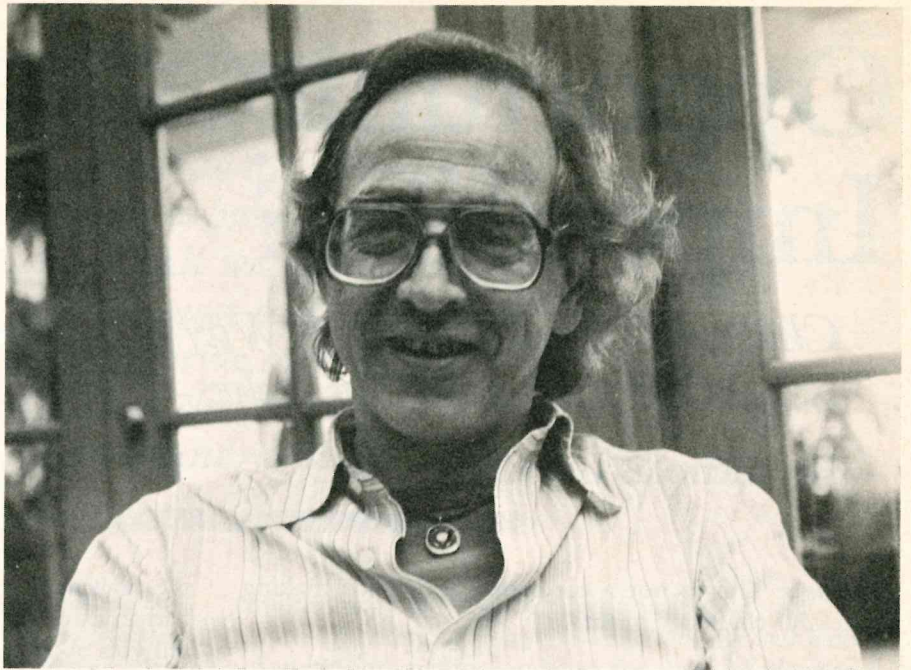
By keeping the debate within everyone’s earshot, the trio has been able to score some impressive successes. For instance, their research has cast considerable doubt on the Pentagon’s seemingly paradoxical concept of “limited nuclear war.” And their studies on energy conservation have helped compel the U.S. Department of Energy to retreat from its original claim that our growing energy needs will require construction of hundreds more nuclear power plants.

It is Williams’ position that *no* additional nuclear plants will be needed, so long as Americans are willing to take certain energy-saving measures. “The challenge,” he says, “is to get consumers to adopt the new, super-energy-efficient technologies.”

Conserving Energy

For example, new gas furnaces now on the market can achieve 95 percent energy efficiency, compared to the older furnaces’ 60 percent level. Similar reductions in energy use, says Williams, can be gained from newly designed hotwater heaters, refrigerators and air conditioners. Finally, the introduction of low-cost, “super-insulated” housing can bring a family’s consumption of heating oil down from 1,000 gallons a year to 50 gallons.

With the price of fossil fuels currently declining, Williams concedes, “it’s hard to get widespread adoption of these new technologies. But the energy problem isn’t going away, and when the next emergency comes along, we want to be ready with some answers. In public interest science, it’s important to have staying power.”



PRESIDENT. Carl Levinson, son of the late founder, began his career as a nuclear physicist at Princeton. After Max Levinson’s death, Carl and sister Helen L. Doroshov began the foundation’s expansion into many new issues.

Combining Business With Justice

The Levinson Foundation, a key actor in Williams’ scenario, has considerable staying power of its own. Max Levinson created it in 1956, chiefly as a vehicle for Jewish charities. “My father,” says Carl, “was your real, all-purpose, self-made man. He cut loose from home early on. I don’t think he got past the fifth grade.”

In the early 1950s, Max started a self-service gasoline business, the Merit Oil Company, which is still going strong and on whose board Carl now sits as a director. After that, according to Carl, “my father made about six different fortunes for himself and various relatives. He had a keen sense of business and also a very strong sense of justice. His foundation reflected his values. When he thought of charities, he would think mainly of hospitals, schools and Jewish institutions.”

When Max died, leaving additional millions to the foundation, Carl and his sister, Helen L. Doroshov, began to nudge the philanthropy in new directions. “It was a time of reformation,” Carl recalls. “We got into all kinds of things—children’s school breakfasts, artists and photographers, solar energy . . . you name it.”

They also hired Sidney Shapiro, an intellectually-inclined social worker

from Philadelphia who, among other things, had spent time in Israel and Germany working for Jewish agencies. Shapiro soon became Levinson’s indispensable (and indefatigable) comrade-in-arms. Each seemed inspired, *ex post facto*, by Max’s sense of justice, and each seemed driven by an enormous curiosity about practically everything.

The upshot has been an unusually productive partnership, with plenty of mutual admiration thrown in. “Carl’s a prodigious reader,” confides Shapiro, “and he’s amazingly open. He’s the type of guy who’s not afraid to let you see him struggling with an idea. He thinks things through out loud.”

Levinson’s way of paying a compliment is more matter-of-fact. “Sid,” he says, “keeps sending me books to read and people to interview. He never gives up on me or the other board members. Actually, he’s our camp counselor.” □

Richard J. Margolis is a senior editor of Working Papers and a free-lance writer based in Connecticut. This article is the third in a series called “Small Wonders.” The series focuses on noteworthy projects supported by smaller foundations, whose work sometimes fails to receive the recognition it merits.