The Skees Family Foundation — family helping families — supports self-help programs for youth and families worldwide to advance education and promote job creation and economic development. We value love in action to create equal opportunity for all.
Radical Collaborators: Co-Designing Grants WITH Nonprofit Partners

By: Suzanne Skees, Founder and Board Chair, Storyteller

Our family believes that if you’re going to collaborate, you ought to begin by asking how you can help. We’ve restructured our entire grantmaking program to adapt to changes requested by the changemakers we’re privileged to support.

Unfortunately, we hear from our nonprofit partners that designing grants with rather than for them is as radical and rare as it is welcome.

In case our “radical” methods might prove useful to others, I’ll share how we elicit blunt feedback from our partners, change the way we do philanthropy, and rally our family to debate ways to end poverty. . . All with nearly $0 administrative cost. (See section 5, below.)

1: Using Stealth and Surprise in Partner Selection

Since we’re too small and understaffed to review grant proposals, we’ve adopted a grantee-partner selection process that’s virtually all behind-the-scenes. Thus, until a nonprofit receives a happy email from us, announcing our incoming multiyear, unrestricted grant, they don’t even know we exist.

Here’s how we do it:

- **Landscape survey:** Year-round perusing of industry trends (see what we’re reading here) culminates in a springtime gauge of methodologies that have been tested, proved, or debunked in global efforts to reduce poverty through education and employment.
- **Potential grantee database:** We keep a database of nonprofits that could be a good match for our next grant cycle, sourced from social-enterprise and nonprofit incubators and contests, news and blogs we read, and most importantly, referrals from current partners.
- **Due diligence:** We DIY due diligence. Rather than commanding long forms and reports from nonprofits, we conduct an efficient online search of their mission, impact, people, and financials.
- **Staff selection:** Our small family staff, in conjunction with objective social-impact professionals, culls our list to around fifteen finalists, whose solutions to social inequity and poverty seem especially fresh, viable, sustainable, and scalable.

- **Board consensus:** Our board studies the finalists, weighs our options against a matrix of ten values (such as targeting ultra poor and using technology to extend reach), reaching for geographic and population (all ages and genders) balance.
- **Grant investments:** We select 5-8 new or nascent “Seed,” 2-3 stable and scalable “Catalyst,” and hardworking “Partner” grantees (read more about all types of our grants here). And then, the real work of being their partner begins.

2: Eliciting Blunt Feedback That Helps Us Grow

We keep asking: How can we improve our side of this partnership? We elicit feedback from all around us:

- **Partners:** Annual feedback loop from annual, 30-minute conversational surveys (conducted by an outside strategic consultant and a cornerstone of our programming), anonymous reviews on GrantAdvisor, and ongoing, open conversations with partners.
- **Clients:** Site visits to programs and client interviews for stories, to deepen our own understanding and advocate through storytelling.
- **Board:** Annual retreats at which we evaluate our progress as individuals and a team, review feedback from partners, and implement these findings into concrete changes.

3: Adapting Our Grants

When our board receives the results, we pore over them; and each year, we make adjustments based on this feedback. For example, we restructured our entire grantmaking structure from single-year to multiyear grants purely based on this feedback.

Over time, our partners have begun to trust that we really want to know them better. So, more and more, they tell us what they’re really thinking.

Also, traveling with and to our partners’ U.S.- and global-based offices, conversing with staff and clients, has made an enormous difference.

4: Remaining Hands-Off, Yet Available

As we note with each grant we send: “We are honored to continue to support you, and we require nothing of you but that you continue your worthy work. Please don’t hesitate to reach out if we can assist you in any other way—listening, offering feedback and moral support, co-creating stories, matching you to colleagues, or anything else in our capacity.”

We believe our role is to INVEST, THEN TRUST.

When asked, we’ve provided programmatic and strategic advising, sharing stories of partners’ innovations and impact, matching grants, and industry matchmaking. We also advocate for our partners in other grant contests and applications.

5: Counting Every Dollar

Given our minuscule size, we maximize our grants by giving to smaller startups and moving more of our corpus into social-impact investments, while shrinking our already-low expenses. How?

- **By not paying rent for offices or retreats,**
- **Offering substandard pay for our two part-time staffers,**
- **Extracting ongoing volunteer work from our board members,** and
- **Using distance technology for staff and board meetings—and even site visits.** Our fiscal discipline has allowed us to give almost as much as we currently hold: We’ve given $1.86 million in grants and manage a current corpus of $2.4 million.

6: Adapting Family Engagement

Using feedback from our family and board, we also redesigned our family grants this year:

- **We phased out our “Local 2 Global!” individual discretionary grant based on volunteer hours logged, in favor of . . .**
- **Expanding our “family grant” program to include “aging-in” members of our third generation and a more expansive, inclusive definition of “who is family?”**
- **And, we invented a new “Generational Grants” program (see page 2) that gets peer members of each generation working together to research, debate, and select on-mission grants.**

We end up inspired by each other’s passion and amazed over our partners’ accomplishments.

7: Re-Checking Our Compass

What motivates our family has remained consistent over time. We’ve discovered that it’s the same in 2017 as in 2004 (although this was completely unintentional):

We believe all humans are created equal and deserve equal opportunity to build lives of prosperity and choice. Our compass will always be this core value, which is reflected in our mission statement to support self-help programs in education and job-creation to youth and families to end poverty worldwide.

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**FINANCIALS**

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<tr>
<th><strong>2017</strong></th>
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<td><strong>EXPENSES</strong></td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL CORPUS</strong></td>
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[Image: Skees Family Foundation]

[See page 2]
A New Family Tradition: Launching Generational Grants
By Elisabeth D. Tarullo, Vice President of Communications & Grantee Relations

Early one summer Sunday in 2017, my family—three generations—gathered in a hotel conference room in Ohio to start a new family tradition: collaborative generational grantmaking. To understand how we got here, it helps to know how and why we were founded.

The Skees Family Foundation was started in 2004 by my aunt, Suzanne Skees, who wanted a way to share and honor the family legacy of “Midwestern middle-class philanthropy.” Our mission has always been to alleviate poverty through scalable solutions—education and job creation.

She first recruited her parents, my grandparents, to serve on the board. They helped her craft the vision and invest in our original partners. In 2013, she recruited four more board members—two more sisters and two nieces. As a team, we’ve grown tremendously over the last four years.

As the Board gathered for our annual retreat in September 2016, we discussed many family engagement opportunities that would also help reduce spending. I thought how incredible it would be to share what we’d learned about grantmaking with the extended family.

Cut to Summer 2017. We split up into our respective generations and the grantmaking session began. Each “G” had picked four different potential partners, and the healthy debate as to who should receive the grant was off to a running start. After we introduced each organization—mission, budget, impact so far—we had a free discussion of what resonated and what needed clarification. Cousins weighed the benefits of a nonprofit that had already reached multiple continents versus a simple solution that was capable of scaling. In the other room, siblings discussed impact investments compared to grants.

In the end, both generations decided to split the total up and give to two organizations: 2G: Destiny Foundation and Voix & Actions and 3G: Strong Minds and The Education Department of the Pacific Aviation Museum.

There was a feeling of accomplishment in the room. In a few short hours, we had come together to discuss not T.V. or upcoming vacations -- but mental health in Africa, the lack of women in engineering jobs, and human trafficking.

The next time we’ll gather in this way will be 2019. Our youngest will be entering college and it’s possible there’ll be a 4G napping somewhere around. I can only hope that this new family tradition keeps us connected to the themes that really matter as we all grow up and become independent citizens of the world.
**FAMILY GRANTS**

Each year, our individual families have the opportunity to give to an organization that reflects their values. Family grants have become a unique way for Skees generations across the country to engage directly with nonprofits in their communities or support causes they’re passionate about internationally. We’re proud to announce our family grant partners here:

**THE MAERTZS**

The Dragonfly Foundation brings comfort and joy to kids, young adults, and their families enduring cancer and bone marrow transplants.

**THE DIVERSITY CENTER OF SANTA CRUZ**

The Diversity Center of Santa Cruz is building an equitable community where LGBTQ+ people thrive.

**ANSEYE POU AVITI**

22 ambassadors from APA’s 2015 pioneer cohort graduated this year. Many have committed to another year of teaching. This past spring, APA selected 45 candidates from 700 applications to enter the 2017 two-year program.

**SKEES-HINMANS**

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) is a voluntary health organization that gives those affected by suicide a nationwide community empowered by research, education, and advocacy to take action against this leading cause of death.

**SKEES-HELLYS**

NorthStar Church is a non-denominational church committed to serving the community in tangible ways, both locally and internationally.

**SKEES-TALPAS**

Mecklenburg Area Catholic Schools Education Foundation provides essential funds to equip principals and encourage teachers so they can educate students for a life based on Catholic values and academic success.

**SKEES-HELLYS**

Medha has enrolled over 1,500 students across 15 partner educational institutions and have worked with over 6,000 youth. Since their founding, they have placed over 375 students and alumni into internships and full-time jobs.

**THE DESTINY FOUNDATION**

Combats sex trafficking and slavery through the economic empowerment of women.

**VOIX ET ACTIONS**

Is geared toward the development of the Haitian community and the physical and moral relief of the disadvantaged people who live there.

**JAAGO FOUNDATION**

JAAGO is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, expanding to 13 schools serving 2,500 students. We recommend watching this video that explains their mission, their model, and what they’ve accomplished over the past decade.

**CATALYST PARTNER HIGHLIGHTS**

**Est. 2007 | BANGLADESH**

**JAAGO FOUNDATION**

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**Est. 2007 | HAITI**

**ANSEYE POU AVITI**

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**Est. 2011 | INDIA**

**MEDHA**

**MY JOB BOOK UPDATE**


One Amazon reader’s wish will soon come true: “I’ve heard that in fiction empathy for other people is learned, but this is more than any one fictional story could provide. I hope there is another book waiting now that I finished reading this one :) .” Stay tuned for *MY JOB: Book 2*, next spring! Sneak-peek video [here](#); fresh stories and updates [here](#).
**CURRENT GRANTEES PARTNERS**

### SEED

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<tr>
<th><strong>Organization</strong></th>
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<td><strong>African Entrepreneurs Collective</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Educate Lanka</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Resonate</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Tomorrow’s Youth Organization (TYO)</strong></td>
<td>Palestine</td>
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<td><strong>Women LEAD</strong></td>
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### CATALYST

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<tr>
<td><strong>Anseve Pou Ayiti (Teach for Haiti)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Medha</strong></td>
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### PARTNER

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<td><strong>Global Press Institute</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The School Fund</strong></td>
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### GENERATIONAL

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<tr>
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<td><strong>The Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor</strong></td>
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<td><strong>PBMR</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Voix et Actions</strong></td>
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### IMPACT INVESTMENTS

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<td><strong>Beneficial Returns</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Jibu</strong></td>
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