

Catalyst For Change

Long Beach Community Foundation Serving City Needs

■ By **THYDA DUONG**
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Jean Bixby Smith is a name synonymous with Long Beach. But, while her family was instrumental in the development of the city, it is another element of Bixby Smith and her family's contribution that makes this name one to be recognized.

Jim Worsham, meanwhile, has lived in Long Beach since he was 10 years old. During his time in the International City, Worsham has seen the area evolve significantly, in both good and bad ways.

The two individuals share not only a link as Long Beach natives but also, more importantly, a common vision.

"This is my home, and I look around and I see the needs and I think that not only myself, but a lot of people are in a position to make changes here that would benefit our children, and our children's children," Worsham says. "The alternative is to ignore it, forget it or give up on it. Change is inevitable, and we would like to be the catalyst for positive change as opposed to just watching it deteriorate or turn into [something] that we have no control over."

Worsham is president and CEO of the Long Beach Community Foundation (LBCF), while Bixby Smith serves as board chair.

Community foundations generally operate on three basic premises: assist individuals and donors with their philanthro-



James Worsham is president and CEO and Jean Bixby Smith is chair of the board of directors of the Long Beach Community Foundation, which manages philanthropic giving from community members and awards grants to local organizations. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

py; make strategic grants to the local community by negotiating grant agreements with non-profit service providers; and manage philanthropic funds.

LBCF does not compete with other nonprofits, however, and instead pays for its operations by assessing a small fee on each of the funds that it manages. "Our challenge in the near term is to get our portfolio of philanthropic funds large enough so that [the small] fee . . . will pay for all of our operations," Worsham notes.

"We're very fortunate in Long Beach that we have a few pockets of great wealth and some of those people are already passionate about philanthropy, [but] a lot of them aren't," he adds. "It's quite unfortunate that so many people die without making a philanthropic provision in their will or their trust when they could be saving a lot of taxes and doing something for the community that they grew up in."

LBCF was initially founded as the Greater Long Beach Foundation as an affiliate of the California Community Foundation (CCF) in 1996 by the Estate Planning & Trust Council of Long Beach and an advisory board of local community leaders who recognized the need for a foundation to address the needs of the community. Since its inception, the foundation has awarded more than \$500,000 in grants to more than 40 local nonprofit organizations.

LBCF spun off from the CCF in April 2006 and began operating as an independent charity in July 2007. It is now exclu-

sively devoted to supporting the needs of Long Beach and its citizens. “We regard ourselves as the primary stewards of endowment for a lot of nonprofits in town, and it’s our goal to someday be looked upon as the preeminent steward of endowments here in Long Beach,” Worsham says.

Through its strategic grant-making approach, LBCF addresses the most current and pressing needs in the community, including public safety and elderly issues. The recurring theme, however, relates to youth projects aiming to “help them find productive ways in which to utilize their energies and their talents so that they are in a position to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered to them,” Bixby Smith explains.

About three years ago, the foundation shifted from competitive grant-making to a strategic approach. The death of a young man across the street from Cabrillo High School spurred LBCF to become more strategic in its response to identified needs and therefore developed programming for youth in West Long Beach, an area often underserved by community organizations. LBCF engaged the YMCA of Greater Long Beach, which developed the Stephens Middle School Youth Institute, a program that trains students in the digital media arts. LBCF also funded the Peace Mentors Project, an after-school safety program at Cabrillo High School.

The year following the West Long Beach projects, LBCF awarded a grant to The Children’s Clinic and the Boys & Girls Clubs to develop programs about nutrition and exercise that targeted both youth and their parents.

“Childhood obesity and diabetes seems to follow poverty around the country. And it’s almost like an oxymoron, but that’s the way it works,” Worsham says. “What we’re trying to do, by starting with the youth, is to change their mind about their lifestyle. By the time they’re middle-aged, they’re already either having the problems or they’re stuck in their habits, [so] we feel like we could really make a difference working with the youth.”

As the appointed local administrator for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s “Transformation Initiative” in Long Beach, LBCF was responsible for distributing more than \$550,000 grants in 2007 to local programs.

One major project is the Connected Corridor, which is managed by Leadership Long Beach and serves to create connectivity and empower stakeholders along the Atlantic Avenue corridor, beginning with the North Long Beach community.

“We have chosen to start in North Long Beach because we just all see that [it’s] been the most neglected area of the city.

. . . But the people who live in those communities are really dedicated, special, a lot of them have lived in those communities for 50 years and more, raised their families there, and they didn’t move out,” Worsham says. “We want to make sure that it’s still a nice place to live when their kids grow up and they don’t move away. So we’re doing some rather innovative things there, working with neighborhood groups and directly with the people.”

The idea, Bixby Smith adds, is to avoid deciding for the community what it needs, but rather connect the individuals in the community and respond to the concerns they have identified.

“One of the things that we believe we can do as a community foundation is to act as a catalyst for change, and by creating things that bring resources into this community to address some of the problems,” Bixby Smith says. “Our resources are still fairly limited, so the only way in which we can have real impact is by working in a collaborative effort with local community agencies to fund a really good idea. And then we hope . . . that will attract funding from outside the community and they will be able to continue on.”

LBCF also administers and collects donations for the Press-Telegram Send-a-Kid-to-Camp campaign, providing grants to the YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and Camp Fire USA to send disadvantaged children to summer camp. Since 1999, the program has raised more than \$600,000 and so far this year has received donations from more than 300 donors, mostly individuals.

Donations range from \$5 and upward, and are an example of how one individual can give back to the community. Combined with other gifts, the donations can make a real impact, Bixby Smith says.

Having grown up in a family that routinely gave back to the community, both in terms of service and dollars, Bixby Smith personally understands the importance of every donation, big or small.

“I remember going with [my mother] near the end of World War II and helping put kits together to send to Europe for the Red Cross . . . for servicemen and for the people in Europe who were suffering from the ravages of war,” she recalls. “I can’t remember a time when, in a sense, I wasn’t involved in giving back to the community and recognizing that, as someone who was privileged enough to live comfortably, . . . it was our obligation to give back and to see that, as best we could, that kind of environment was nurtured for other people as well.”

For more information about LBCF, call 562/435-9033 or visit www.longbeachcf.org. ■