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MARCH 05, 2019

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MacArthur Foundation Chooses Andover Academy Leader as President

By Alex Daniels



PHOTO BY DAVE WHITE

Palfrey has been a professor at Harvard Law School and is an expert in the use of technology and digital transparency.

The MacArthur Foundation has picked John Palfrey, the head of a prestigious prep school and chairman of the board at the Knight Foundation, to serve as its new president.

Palfrey has led Phillips Academy Andover, his alma mater, for the past seven years and is a great-great grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt. He is an expert in the use of technology and has written extensively on online access and digital transparency.

"The MacArthur Foundation is a famously mission-driven organization, just as Andover is," Palfrey, who is 46 years old, said in an interview. "I've been most excited in my career to work for institutions that have strong sets of values, which are open to and eager to change with the times consistent with those values."

Palfrey will replace Julia Stasch, who announced last year that she would step down from the foundation, which made \$256 million in grants in 2017, the most recent year for which figures are available.

He starts on September 1.

More Money, Fewer Causes

Under Stasch, who began in 2014, MacArthur continued to run well-known programs such as the MacArthur "genius" fellowship and maintained its support of programs in its home city of Chicago. But Stasch winnowed its program areas to pump more money into fewer causes, including criminal justice, journalism, climate change, nuclear arms, and civil society in Nigeria

Perhaps Stasch's signature contribution to the foundation was 100&Change, a \$100 million grant competition that allowed the grant maker to move beyond its prescribed program areas with a large investment.

Stasch will chair the board of Lever for Change, a spinoff nonprofit that will hold smaller grant competitions.

Diversity Author

Before taking the job leading Andover, whose graduates include Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, as well as actor Humphrey Bogart, Palfrey was a vice dean and professor at Harvard Law School. He has written four books on education and diversity in the digital age and served as founding board chair of the Digital Public Library of America, which uses technology to connect people with museum collections, archives, and libraries.

Palfrey said he was impressed by the extent to which MacArthur is a "learning organization" that has been willing to question its own practices, even as it puts tens of millions of dollars on the line in a new program.

"I don't come at this with prior expectations to make big changes," he said. "When you're deploying a large amount of capital and committing to change, you obviously need to give it time to occur. But I also think you ought to be honest about the impact one is having, and if there's going to be continued investment at that level, you've got to have a sense that you've built traction."

Inclusive Style

Alberto Ibarguen, president of the Knight Foundation, credits Palfrey's open mind and inclusive decision-making style with getting Knight's board to "unanimously and enthusiastically" endorse a \$300 million grant-making plan to support local news outlets. Some of the grantees, like the American Journalism Project, which will receive \$20 million, are starting from scratch.

Half of the program will be funded by Knight's expected endowment returns over the next several years, meaning the Miami grant maker doesn't anticipate growing its assets unless the market performs exceedingly well.

"That's a lot of money, and it required a board willing to make a very big leap," Ibarguen said.

But Palfrey, he added, was willing to face the risks that come with experimenting. "It's very hard to scare this guy," he said.

'Radical Disrupter'

Observers shouldn't box Palfrey in given his lineage and his leadership of an elite boarding school, which has produced American leaders since its founding two years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, said Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation. Walker has worked on projects with Palfrey over the past 10 years, including the Grand Bargain, in which a group of foundations helped Detroit emerge from bankruptcy, and NetGain, a foundation collaborative that works to ensure that technology helps society.

Walker called Palfrey a "white ally" in the fight for racial equity.

"What you see may not be what you get," Walker said. "Some of the most radical thinkers don't present themselves as radical. Part of John's genius is he is a radical disrupter, and he's committed to justice."

Leader of Leaders

Palfrey was originally a consultant for NetGain, which included the Ford, Knight, MacArthur, Mozilla, and Open Society foundations. When he took over as chairman of the Knight Foundation's board five years ago, Palfrey was a "mentor" to other foundation leaders who couldn't see the connection between technology and inequality, Walker said.

When initial calls were made to a number of foundation presidents, "their response was, 'We don't do technology,'" Walker said. "John is one of the people in this country who understands the intersection of technology, media, and justice. He'll be a tremendous leader not just for MacArthur but for all of philanthropy."

Every foundation operates differently, Palfrey said. But overcoming those differences is key to making lasting impact.

"We have to get past those divides," he said. "There's so much more we can do with better collaboration."

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