

Just Like Jonah Said

Helping the Riskiest of Grantees Is Routine for the Windom Fund, Whose Belief in Community and Women's Groups Is Vindicated by the Results

By Richard J. Margolis

One day last summer William King, a black community organizer in rural Tennessee whose normal range of acquaintances did not extend much beyond Memphis, found himself driving through the countryside with two women from Washington, Lael Stegall and Ellen Malcolm.

Creators of an ingenious grantmaking enterprise known as the Windom Fund, the visitors had come South to check out the progress of JONAH (Just Organized Neighborhoods Area Headquarters), a group they had been supporting with small grants since 1981.

Behind the steering wheel King was shaking his head. "Who would have thought," he mused aloud, "that I'd be ridin' down the road today with these two wonderful women?"

Mutual Appreciation

To Malcolm and Stegall the words seemed extra-sweet. King and his co-workers were precisely the sort of gutsy, grassroots activists with whom the two women had hoped to go riding when they'd started the Windom Fund some three years earlier—the people, in Stegall's words, "who have the least access to traditional funding sources."

JONAH got its start in 1978 when two Dominican sisters from Adrian, Michigan, Attracta Kelly and Pat Siemen, settled in a poor neighborhood in Lexington, Tennessee, and started going door-to-door hoping to drum up support for a new community organization.



FUNDER ELLEN MALCOLM, above, executive director Lael Stegall: challenging long-held perceptions via bold experiments.

"We called it JONAH," says Attracta Kelly, "because if there's one thing you learn from 'The Book of Jonah' it's that there's nobody who can't be changed or moved by God. Also, Jonah was very reluctant to do what he had to do—and so, dear Lord, were we."

Over the years JONAH, whose members are mainly black and poor, has won many a concession from a hierarchy that is chiefly white and affluent: new parks and playgrounds, affirmative action programs and improved roads, to name a few.

In Humboldt, they registered 1,500 voters in less than a year and proceeded to throw out a mayor who, by Kelly's testimony, had been "rude and arrogant" to poor people. "The whole organization just blossomed," she says.

Nurturing Fresh Blossoms

JONAH's blossoming satisfies the Windom Fund's fondest hopes. Relying on Malcolm's money—about \$350,000 a year—and Stegall's humane direction, the Fund is providing aid and comfort to scores of JONAH-type organizations throughout the country.

Most are short of cash and far removed from the centers of power; a good many represent unschooled women just beginning to reach for a slice of the American pie. "We're as much interested in the process as in the substance," says Stegall. "We keep asking how we can help people come together—and make a difference. Doing that gives us enormous pleasure."

Stegall's and Malcolm's idea of a good time is to find a small but imaginative grassroots group—preferably one suffering from acute neglect—and to nurse it along with a few dollars and lots of tender loving care.

The lucky grantee finds it has acquired more than money: it has gained a friend at court. "Lael clears the way for us in Washington and New York," says Maryann Gillespie, a JONAH staff member. "She's been wonderful at spreading the word about us to people in a position to help."

Genuine Risk-Takers

All things considered, Windom's grantees need all the help they can get. Often unwise in the ways of the world, they tend to shrink from contact with big-city foundation officials in their slick offices. "Many of them come to us scared," says Stegall. "We try to give them a safe place here, one that puts them at their ease."

If to most foundations the proposals these jittery initiates submit spell "high risk," to the Windom Fund they as often spell "high hopes." Among the 18 groups to whom the Fund made grants last June, for example, no less than half were either "just organized" or about to launch entirely new programs.

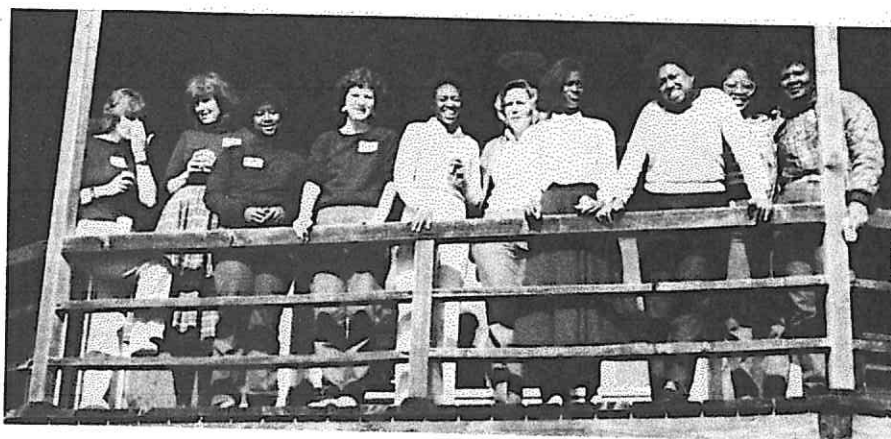
The foundation's own written thumbnails of those June recipients pretty much tell the story. They also bespeak the "enormous pleasure" Malcolm and Stegall derive from being present at the creations. Among them:

Citizen Alliance for Progressive Action (\$3,000): "Start-up funding for a new statewide public policy coalition that is determined to see that Idaho is known for more than potatoes and conservative politics."

Ganados Del Valle/Tierra Wools (\$5,000): "Start-up funding for an innovative project in rural northwestern New Mexico that involves the processing, production and marketing of unique wools by Hispanic and Native American women."

Southern Woodcutters Assistance Project, Greenwood, Mississippi (\$5,000): "This grant will fund a new organizing effort with women of the woodcutter families in this rural co-op."

Southern Rural Women's Network, a



WHERE IT ALL BEGAN: Leslie Lilly, executive director of SWEC, at historic corner in Seneca Falls, New York, below. At top, SWEC members meet at Highlander Center near New Market, Tennessee.

subsidiary of Rural America (\$5,000): "General support for this new effort to form an effective network of rural black women who are committed to joint programs in economic development, voting rights, political leadership development and children's issues."

Empowering Women

"Leadership development" and "networking" are words that loom large in the Windom Fund lexicon, as are "democratic process" and "empower-

ment." Malcolm and Stegall were among the first to see the value of encouraging the Women's Vote Project, a year-old coalition that now operates in nine states with a six-figure budget. The Windom Fund gave the organization its first \$10,000.

Windom was also an early supporter of the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC), a Kentucky-based group that helps women find work in highway construction and other "non-traditional" fields. Since SWEC's inception in 1979, according to the executive director, Leslie Lilly, employment of women by Southern private contractors has risen 500 percent.

"That first \$5,000 grant," Lilly recalls, "was a real shot in the arm. It represented 20 percent of our annual budget."

Awkward Anonymity

Yet at the time Lilly had no way of knowing the name of SWEC's benefactor. "I was exceedingly anonymous in those days," says Malcolm. "I gave the money to Lael and she passed it along, without telling anyone the source. Sometimes at cocktail parties my friends would ask me if I knew where Lael was getting all that money to give away. They had so many theories. Some thought it was Rockefeller money. Others claimed it came from 'six rich ladies in New York.' I'd pretend ignorance. It was embarrassing."

Malcolm did not come out of the philanthropic closet until 1982, when she revealed her donor identity to Ju-





IN A RURAL PARISH HALL near Brownsville, Tennessee, Ellen Malcolm chats with JONAH members during lunch break at meeting last June.

dith Lichtman, director of the Women's Legal Defense Fund and one of Malcolm's favorite grantees.

"You have no idea," Malcolm says, "how liberating it's been to get out of my anonymous role—and to claim my inheritance." At the Windom Fund the blessings of empowerment appear to flow in both directions, benefiting donee and donor alike. Certainly a part of the story here concerns the emancipation of Ellen Malcolm and her modest fortune—how she "empowered" herself to spend her money as she chose.

They Called It IBM

The story begins with Malcolm's great-grandfather, A. Ward Ford, founder of a firm that manufactured adding machines and other tabulating devices. The company in 1911 changed its name to International Business Machines—and the family reaped the IBM harvest, a portion of which eventually landed in a Boston trust fund earmarked for Ellen Malcolm.

The patrimony did not make Malcolm a conspicuous spender. A 1969 graduate of Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia (she majored in experimental psychology), Malcolm chose a low-profile career in Washington, working for people and organizations like Representative Morris Udall (D-Ariz.), Common Cause and the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC).

In the late seventies, while press sec-

retary for NWPC, Malcolm struck a tentative toe into her trust fund, making small, anonymous grants to some of her favorite political causes. "But I was very cautious," she says now. "I was looking for a way to be a donor without its dominating my life. Besides, I think I shared a perception with most other women that using vast sums of money was men's work. Women don't always feel the money is really theirs; and they don't know how to operate with big sums."

Now, at age 37, Malcolm is finishing up studies at George Washington University for a Master's degree in Busi-



HENRIETTA WINDOM, as "discovered" by Stegall, who paid \$3 for her portrait at a flea market.

ness Administration. "It's another way of taking control," she says. "One of the real issues is learning how to think big—knowing it's all right to give out \$300,000 without flinching."

Delicate Balance

In her first days of philanthropy Malcolm faced a career issue as well. "I was giving money," she says, "to the National Women's Political Caucus, and that was a bit awkward. You see, I worked there, and I didn't think they'd appreciate having some middle-level person in their organization as one of their biggest donors." The solution, of course, was anonymity.

It was at NWPC, where Stegall held forth as director of development, that the two women became friends, and also where they made a pact that in due course led to the establishment of the Windom Fund.

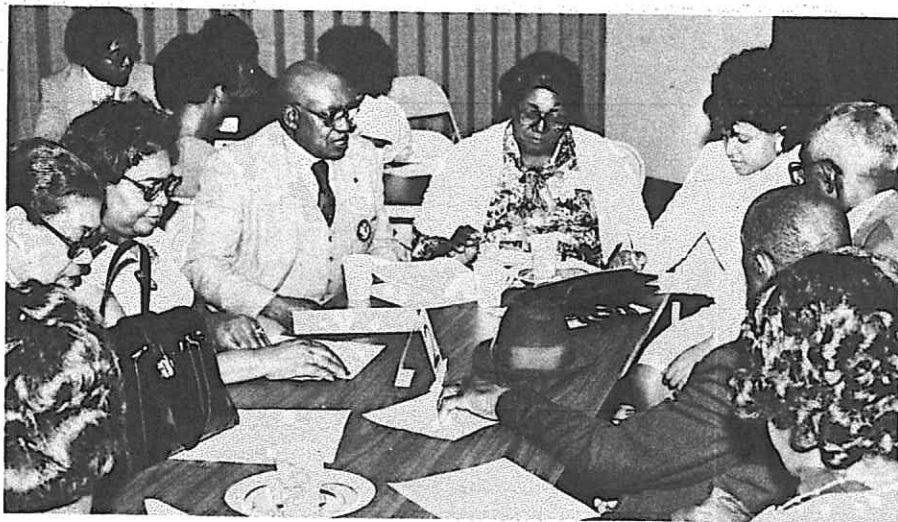
One day at lunch in the fall of 1979, Stegall said she was looking for new professional challenges. Malcolm asked, "Why don't you work for me?" The idea appealed to Stegall. She had a previous commitment in Asia, but on her return early in 1980 she began investigating philanthropic possibilities for Malcolm.

"I talked to about 200 people," Stegall recalls, "—both the givers and the askers." She and Malcolm also consulted a number of distinguished lawyers, all of whom advised them—for the sake of taxes and other protections—to form a corporation. But, as Stegall has remarked, "the lawyers didn't understand. We were looking for the simplest structure possible, and it soon became clear that we could do what we wanted to do without incorporating."

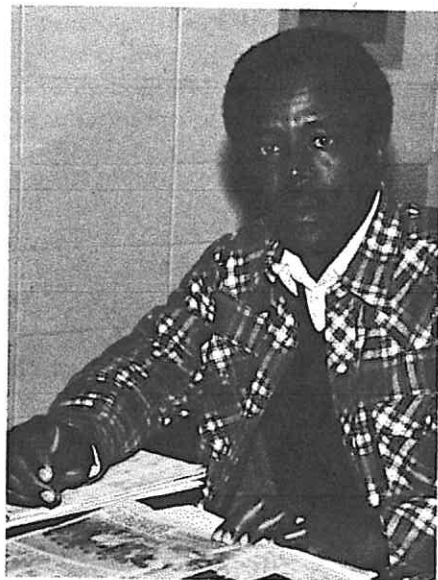
Unorthodoxy Unlimited

The "Windom Fund," as things turned out, does not exist in any legal sense. It is simply a public contrivance for Malcolm's and Stegall's private convenience. "I'm the staff," says Stegall, "and Ellen's the board. We're probably the most efficient organization in Washington."

Even the name is pure invention. "We wanted a name with no political baggage," Stegall says. "It had to be clear, unambiguous and easy to spell." "Win-



AT A BUSINESS MEETING to plan strategies for several projects, JONAH members exchange ideas. William King, left, living proof that leadership training grants work.



dom," which happened to be the name of a street in Washington on which Ellen once lived, seemed to fill the bill.

It gave rise to a minor problem, however, when people began asking who Windom was. Stegall found a suitable answer in an antique print shop: a striking portrait of an anonymous Victorian matron, whom Stegall and Malcolm promptly christened Henrietta Windom. "She outlived her husband by many years," Stegall gravely assures visitors.

Helps Womens' Rights

The lessons to be learned from the making of the Windom Fund have not been lost on feminists, including women of means who are seeking outlets for their own charitable impulses. "One of our unexpected roles," notes Malcolm, "has been to help other women get into

philanthropy." "And to show them," adds Stegall, "that you don't have to follow traditional paths."

In Nevada, Stegall and Malcolm helped Maya Miller, who had run for the U.S. Senate in 1974, to start the Nevada Women's Fund. Initial donations from Miller and her colleagues ranged from \$2,000 to \$5,000 each. In addition, the Windom Fund has contributed \$5,000 in seed money to the Women's Foundation in San Francisco and another \$4,000 to the Women's Funding Coalition in New York City. Women in Texas, Florida, Illinois and elsewhere are drawing on Windom's wisdom, learning how to join financial means to philanthropic ends.

"More and more women are coming to us for advice," says Stegall. "It's growing very fast."

Meets Increasing Demand

The Windom Fund, meanwhile, grows apace, with grant-dollar totals having all but doubled in three years. "There is never a shortage of good proposals," says Stegall. She gets about 300 a year, from which she and Malcolm choose between 70 and 80 grantees.

Among the many requests Stegall has studied, surely the one that arrived in the fall of 1981 from Lexington, Tennessee, ranked near the top in appeal. JONAH's membership, a covering let-

ter explained, "is composed of low-income minority families who are struggling together for a greater measure of social, political and economic justice. . . ." Furthermore, "JONAH is the only poor people's community organization in rural west Tennessee."

All of this seemed manna for Windom, which within three months sent \$5,000 to the group for a "leadership development" program in which two interns would receive extensive training in the mysteries of community organizing.

College Equivalent

One of those interns was William King, the man whom Malcolm and Stegall later astonished simply by getting into his car. King and fellow intern Rosemary Derrick are now full-fledged members of the JONAH staff, but in the beginning they had much to learn. "It was like going to college," King recalls. "I learned that there are things we can do together—things that will help change all our lives."

As King remembers his pre-internship days, however, he had been an especially reluctant learner. He'd been working in a Piggly Wiggly food-freezer factory, and "I thought I had it made: dollars in my pocket, a nice house, some money in the bank—and the hell with everything else. I didn't care about politics or about the community. I was mindin' my own business."

Then the factory closed—it had been going for 60 years—and King began to have second thoughts. "There are things that make you turn around and look at your life," he says. "The same day I lost my job my third child was born—a son. I started to change, to look at what was going on around me."

Political Awareness

One thing going on around him was all too noticeable: the town had recently designated his residential street as a truck route, thereby posing a health and safety hazard to the neighborhood. King attended a meeting called by JONAH, and to his surprise was named spokesperson.

"That scared the heck out of me," recalls King. "I was supposed to make

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a public speech before the mayor and the commission. I didn't even know how to dress. What I did was put on my best suit.



"Well, when we got there, I saw that the mayor was only wearing a turtle-neck sweater, but he seemed just about as nervous as I was, 'cause I had about 20 folks behind me. That's something I'll never forget: it's not how you look but what's inside you that counts."

JONAH got the trucks rerouted, and for good measure the town consented to put in a stop sign, something the neighborhood had been wanting for years. For King, it was an astonishing victory. "I said to myself, 'Well I'll be doggone!'"

Priorities. Continued from page 49.

sitively, you can issue a reminder about maintaining the priority.

- Lastly, as I stated earlier, the priorities must be communicated internally and externally for them to be maintained. If they are the best kept secret in the company, you indeed will not be able to maintain them on your own. I and our company endorse an annual report as well as full disclosure of policies, grant review process, timing and other factors to enhance understanding of your programs.

The organizational structure can also be important to you. It is, of course, complicated to establish a board committee or consider restructuring the function management level. But once you have reaffirmed priorities or identified other issues in the corporate public involvement arena that senior management should deal with, you may be able to influence this.

Memorable Visit

The site visit to west Tennessee that Stegall and Malcolm made last May was memorable for guests and hosts alike. "Lael and Ellen were an inspiration to all of us," says King, "especially me. I know that if I call Lael and ask her to do something, she'll try her darndest."

"They gave us lunch at Willow Grove School," Malcolm recalls. "Everybody was waiting for us there. They had all come to testify about our support and what it had meant to them."

Months after the two women returned to Washington, Malcolm presented Stegall with a Christmas gift—a portfolio of snapshots taken on their journey through JONAH-land. "On the Road," Malcolm had written on the front cover: "Travels to the Cutting Edge of Social Change." It seemed a fair summation of their itinerary. □

Richard J. Margolis, a Connecticut-based free-lance writer who contributes regularly to these pages, is spending the current semester as a Fellow at Harvard University's Institute of Politics.

I have been direct, more pragmatic than philosophical and as you can sense, anxious to have your companies recognize the advantages the organization gains from setting and maintaining priorities.

After all, the issue is not whether we do society's business; rather, the corporation has been and will continue to be used as an instrument of social change. The question before us is what role to take in doing *our* business well on terms beneficial to all the parties.

Alison Coolbrith is vice-president, Corporate Public Involvement at Aetna Life and Casualty. She is also executive director of the Aetna Life and Casualty Foundation. This article is based on several speeches Ms. Coolbrith has given during the past year.

