

# THE PARKER FOUNDATION MARKS 50 YEARS OF GIVING LEADERSHIP IN SAN DIEGO

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For decades, The Parker Foundation has worked under the radar to make tens of millions of dollars in impactful grants to a wide diversity of nonprofits throughout San Diego County, from arts organizations to homeless providers. October marks the Foundation’s 50-year anniversary since the estate of Gerald T. and Inez Grant Parker was turned into one of the region’s leading funders of local charities.

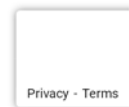
The Parker Foundation has been generous, providing transformative capacity-building grants to Forever Balboa Park’s predecessor organizations, Friends of Balboa Park and the Balboa Park Conservancy, including a just-announced \$40,000 grant to support our merger process. We are grateful to Ray Ellis, Board President of The Parker Foundation, for taking the time to speak with us about the Foundation’s history, giving philosophy, and the future of philanthropy in San Diego. *The following interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

### What can you tell us about the Parker Foundation’s support of the Soul of San Diego study, which resulted in the establishment of the Balboa Park Conservancy?

The Parker Foundation has been very supportive of the park. I was part of the taskforce that recommended forming the Balboa Park Conservancy, and I was one of the founding board members. We all saw the need for this because of the study we did at the taskforce level. Judy McDonald from The Parker Foundation along with Pete Ellsworth from the Legler-Benbough Foundation and Bob Kelly from The San Diego Foundation pulled together funds from the three different entities to facilitate the startup once we had gotten the blessing from Mayor Sanders.

### Over time, The Parker Foundation has invested deeply in San Diego’s beloved park resource. What continues to be a driving theme in your support of Balboa Park?

In addition to funding other initiatives for the Conservancy since its inception, the park in general is a very high priority. We’ve literally funded — I don’t know how many institutions — but all the major institutions in the park, including the Zoo. So there’s been a lot of philanthropic investment in the park because we think it’s



such an important part of our region and actually the state. It's such an iconic park.

**San Diego has a number of foundations. What makes The Parker Foundation unique?**

First of all, we've been at it for 50 years. It's volunteer driven. We haven't specialized like some foundations have, in a geographical area or a certain cause. And we revisit this topic every year when we do our retreat. We feel it's very important to keep our flexibility. We also feel it's important for us to continue the legacy and strike that balance by growing our corpus, which is now well over \$45 million, and we've given away well over \$56 million over the 50 years. So we feel like we can still have an impact.

**The Parker Foundation is one of the few organizations that seems to really understand capacity-building grants. Was this driven by the Parkers, or something that evolved with the foundation over time?**

It was an evolution. The Parkers were very generous in San Diego, having moved here from Kansas City, Missouri. They formed the Foundation in 1971 and shortly after that Mrs. Parker passed away. Mr. Parker had already passed. And then the balance of the funds from their estate came in, so it was started with about \$5 million, give or take. They were confident in the board at the time, that they would do the right thing. They had some areas of interest: the arts, Boy Scouts, and YMCA were some of the initial areas. They were very supportive of The San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park, so we've honored that. Their only overarching criteria was that it was for the betterment of the residents of San Diego, and we defined that as San Diego County. We don't do any funding outside of San Diego County.



**What is the Foundation's most significant accomplishment or area of impact?**

I think the Balboa Park Conservancy is one of them where we took a risk; we are not risk averse. We've funded a number of startups. We were very involved with Voices for Children. We're willing to fund things that some funders aren't interested in doing. We want the organizations we work with to have long-term sustainability, so we are willing to make those grants that facilitate that and make them stronger, healthier organizations to have a better impact on the folks they serve.

**How has the Foundation changed over the years?**

We became a little more sophisticated in our investing over the years and that's paid great dividends. We've cycled through a number of board members over 50 years, but at the same time, Judy McDonald has been on the board for 30 years [taking one-year breaks as required by the bylaws]. We have a lot of longevity and institutional knowledge on our board about the philanthropic landscape in San Diego, and we think that's really important.

**Have you seen any changes in the philanthropic landscape in San Diego?**

Certainly over the years there's been a focus on immigrants coming to San Diego and the City Heights area. We do a lot of work with the Somali community and Sudanese. And the whole issue around equity—we jumped in early when the AIDS crisis hit and supported and tried to mitigate that through our influence. Other things have come up too. For example, food instability for a lot of folks in the region is another area that I've seen grow in the last 5-10 years. We've tried to be as reflective and responsive to the community as possible.

**It sounds like you were responsive during the COVID-19 pandemic as well.**

We stuck to our normal process, but we did a lot of support around that for organizations, especially the arts. We participated in a special fund for some objectives laid out by the arts collaborative. We like to work with the other foundations and donors. I actually chair Funders Together to End Homelessness, which is a collaborative catalyst. We've been involved in military issues. San Diego Food Funders is another one we are involved in. Collaboration is a way we can compare notes, see who's funding what, and whether we want to pool our funds for a larger impact. That was a change or a natural progression on that type of work.

**How might San Diego strengthen its philanthropic resources and approach to giving?**



That's what we are hoping to communicate through the anniversary. We want to show the community what's possible. When you look at this organization starting with \$5.5 million and over a 50-year period being able to put back into the community well over \$55 million and impact people's lives, that's significant. There are a lot of families and folks in San Diego and organizations that have that capacity. And we'd like to use this opportunity to share with others what's possible and the impact they can have and continue to have. Our goal is to say, "Here's a model; please take a look at it and what you and your family potentially can do."

**Was that one of the goals of the 50-year anniversary, to get that messaging out?**

Absolutely, that's our number-one priority. We haven't done it perfectly. Everybody does it a little bit differently. But we feel how we've done it is certainly worth looking at, and we would be happy to help anybody along the way and talk about the things we've done right, and the mistakes we've made along the way.

It's important for the philanthropic community to fill gaps that aren't being filled by government or corporations. Philanthropy is the gap filler. And it's very important to literally all the organizations we work with. My wish is that more folks would look at philanthropy as an opportunity. In the final analysis, you get a lot more out of it than you put into it. I've been at this for 13 years, and I love doing what I'm doing.

